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**Loud Places**

by [greenaleydis](https://archiveofourown.org/users/greenaleydis)

**Summary**

In want of a career change, Hermione finds herself consistently running into healer Draco Malfoy in her quest for knowledge. From academic lectures to crowded restaurants, to polished events where the alcohol is flowing - Hermione is curious to discover this new Draco, bit by bit.

**Notes**

This story centers around the loud places where Draco and Hermione meet - and how those situations change their relationship. It will start somewhat academic but will devolve depending on the situation... happy reading!
See the end of the work for more notes.
"Healing Transfiguration and Sensitive Organs"

The Flamel Center, South London Wizard District

February 14th

Hermione shuffled into her seat, removing her cloak from her shoulders. She’d been unusually excited to attend this lecture, mostly because of the witch who was giving it - Madame Harvey was the foremost expert on both alchemy and transfiguration magic, and had several patents for spells being used in both St. Mungo’s and the Department of Mysteries.

It was unusual for Hermione to be able to attend a lecture like this in the middle of the day, but since the official organizational changes at the Daily Prophet and her promotion to board member of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, she actually had more freedom over her schedule than before. Now if she blocked off time to attend an event, or travel to a conference, or even to run errands, it was respected.

Opening her program, she scanned the syllabus for the lecture. The sensitive organ that she was interested in - the brain - wasn't a main focus, but she was interested in hearing what the famous witch had to say on the subject of healing regardless.

Even though the presentation was likely to be more technical than Hermione would be prepared for, she enjoyed being overwhelmed with unfamiliar knowledge. She would decipher it all later; it was one of the things she enjoyed about translating and deciphering Ancient Runes back in school.

Transfiguration in regards to the brain was rather new territory, not just to Hermione, but to the magical community in general, and so she didn't feel as nervous as she normally would have. It was likely that others in the room wouldn't know much about this subject either.

Hermione closed her program and took her notebook and quill from her leather bag. Once she settled, she glanced around, taking in the tall ceilings, booming acoustics, and endless rows of threadbare velvet seats.

Since the lecture wasn't due to start for another fifteen minutes, there weren't that many people around yet - most of the crowd was in the reception area, enjoying a coffee and a conversation. There were only a few people already seated.
Letting her eyes wander, she looked at a man sitting a few rows ahead; he was also holding a small notebook, skimming a page, his finger presumably following lines of notes.

She watched the movement of his hand for a few seconds before she studied him; his dark blue sleeves were rolled up to sharp elbows, and he sported shockingly light blond hair that seemed almost translucent, tapering and dipping regally into a stiff, undone collar. She could just make out the side of his face in the curved theater; there was a hint of dark, thick framed glasses over the top of his ears. She could tell by his silhouette that he was young, well dressed, and desperately attractive.

Hermione shook off this appraisal as attendees began walking between the rows, taking their seats and somewhat blocking her view of him. She had to admit that she was feeling rather untouched, what with it being Valentine's Day and not having any plans beyond this lecture, but it was no reason to stare at random people. Readying her quill, she tried to remember what she had intended to do with her notebook before she had gotten distracted.

She sighed and wrote down the questions she'd meant to concentrate on answering as the room began to fill. Soon the seats next to her were both claimed, and she smiled at the occupants in greeting.

Just as the room was beginning to quiet down, she craned to look at the young man again. He turned just as she looked - almost as if he had been looking her way a second before - he was no longer reading, but was leaning back in his seat, twirling a quill in his fingers.

Despite only seeing a flash of his face, Hermione was struck with his familiarity. She knew the wizard, but from where?

Before she could do more than furrow her brows, Madame Harvey walked onstage to thunderous applause, and Hermione tore her gaze away to clap with the audience.

The presenter began her talk with a speech about the importance of transfiguration to the study of diseases - Hermione was speechless with anticipation.

"Transfiguration has long been the foundation for magical advancement," the witch began. "To understand anything in our world, we simply isolate it and use transfiguration to determine its makeup."

It was incredible to hear the common magic framed in such a way - Hermione wrote this quote down earnestly.

"When it comes to the magical human, one of the most complex living creatures in our world, healing transfiguration is the most important tool we have, our bread and butter." The witch raised her wand to start her slides.

As the blue light from the projector filled the room, Hermione glanced over at a particularly bright part of the audience. The man she had noticed earlier was still lounging in his seat, his hair practically glowing in the dark. He ran a hand through it, mussing the effect and releasing the stiffness of his product.

She was once again struck with his familiarity - the shape of his head, the particular look of his jaw, the slope of his shoulders -

Her stomach did a flip when she finally recognized him.

This was the last place she had expected to see Draco Malfoy after more than seven years, but... that was definitely him.
She was briefly disoriented at the earlier recognition of his attractiveness; it contradicted the image she'd internalized of him, his lips curled in an ugly sneer, his hair greased back, his form dark, expensive and uninspired.

This Malfoy was straight backed and calm, clean and - ostensibly - quiet. His posture was engaged, since he was concentrating on something he deemed important; it betrayed a focus she hadn't expected.

It seemed odd that he would be interested in healing transfiguration, but she knew vaguely that he was employed at St. Mungo's. She remembered scoffing at that bit of information - it had been comical to think of him training to be a healer - and shook her head. He looked content, sitting there, twirling his quill. She had never seen him looking so comfortable, so confident, so... normal. She tried to remember the last time she had seen him out; it must have been during the cleanup, when hundreds of wizards had descended upon Hogwarts to do their part in restoring the battered grounds. Though she knew he would never have cleaned a thing in his life, he had been there, repairing the broken desks and chairs, assisting Madame Pomfrey, and sorting and replacing the spilled potion ingredients. He'd been withered and dirty, just like everyone else.

Hermione realized that she was looking at him steadily and looked away determinedly, concentrating on the images now illuminating the room.

Madame Harvey was talking about the brain now, and Hermione listened, readying her quill.

"When it comes to understanding the brain, transfiguration has not, until recently, been considered. Given the volatile nature of other methods, however, we are now at a place, with advancements in microtransfiguration, where we can begin to use this subtle art to better treat brain injuries.

"For your consideration, take the Anatoly experiment." The room shifted slightly as multiple people began scratching away on their pads. "Now, it is known that through transfiguration, Healer Alexandrovna Petrovski was able to contain the disease spreading in Anatoly's brain. But the longterm effects afterward - his sudden change in personality, memory loss, chronic pain - were, at the time, considered an ultimate failure.

"However, Healer Petrovski, from this failure, was able to help us map out the particular centers for certain characteristics - and thus help us understand how to avoid damaging the brain during surgery. And in the process, she uncovered what Obliviate actually does, physiologically, to the brain."

As Madame Harvey went into more detail about the experiment, breaking down the transfiguration techniques used, Hermione sighed; this is what she had been wanting from this lecture - a breakdown of the techniques, and the concepts behind them. The material was still a little dense, especially for someone just attending out of curiosity, but she happily took notes.

It had been a while since she had been in a learning setting, and she missed the structure of being taught in an environment like this. While she appreciated the freedom of a library or the Archives, and did her own learning in her spare time, there was something about the delivery of the information, the excitement of the teacher, and being with other interested individuals that made her happy.

When the presenter finished her talk, the crowd clapped eagerly, and Hermione joined in. As she had expected, the lecture had created more questions in her mind than it had answered, especially regarding microtransfiguration, but she would have fun for the next few days researching on her own, looking up unfamiliar terms and gaining a clearer understanding of the problems currently facing the academics in the magical community.
Once the clapping died down and the people in front of her began to stand, Hermione stretched her stiff muscles, positively brimming with happiness at the amazing things she had learned. She glanced around again, her gaze unwittingly landing on Malfoy once more.

As if he had sensed her eyes, his own eyes landed on hers.

She knew she should look away, but he was holding her gaze with so much power that she found herself incapable. She waited for him to send her a sneer, or at least smirk at her, but his face was motionless as he watched her intently. In his eyes, even from this distance and behind his dark frames, she could see a mixture of emotions that startled her.

After what seemed like an eternity, someone got his attention and he turned to talk to the other wizard.

She looked away, mystified and more than a little annoyed at the odd exchange. It didn't matter. She sidled out of the row, shouldering on her bag and making her way to the exit.
The Book Signing

"True Gold" with Lucas Le Jandre

Flourish and Blotts, Diagon Alley

February 20th

Hermione sighed, happy that she had managed to claim one of the few remaining seats at Flourish and Blotts. She'd had a suspicion that this author was way too popular to appear at a small, local shop like this without filling the establishment to capacity, and was mirthfully correct. Already people were pressed against the shelves, stacked one behind the other, waiting with a heavy anticipation as the seconds ticked by.

She clutched her withered copy of *True Gold: The Secrets of Healing Alchemy* to her chest. She couldn't wait to see the wizard behind the unbelievable research in the tome; it had nearly changed her life.

As she glanced around nervously, noting that there were so many people in the place that the windows were almost completely obstructed, darkening the room, she caught sight of a familiar flash of blond hair.

Her breath caught. He was standing, leaning against one of the tall, ebony bookcases near the back, his grey sleeves rolled up again and his arms crossed over his chest. There was a large book, identical to hers, hanging loosely in his hand. From here she could see various bits of paper poking from between the pages.

He noticed her after a few moments, his eyes passing over the crowd to rest on her. Unexpectedly, his eyes widened in recognition, but then softened as he nodded to her in greeting.

She uncontrollably smiled in response, and mentally kicked herself afterwards; damn her automatic pleasantries. She turned away, trying not to feel nervous about yet again occupying the same space as her former tormentor, and flipped through her book absently.

When the author suddenly appeared from the storeroom and stood behind the large counter, the attendees murmured and clapped. The wizard flashed a dashing smile and walked around the counter, leaning against it and nodding in thanks.

"I had never expected so many people were interested in my techniques," he said in a thick French accent. "I thought, surely no one reads zese things!"

The audience laughed and squirmed in their seats. Hermione chuckled with them.

"Well, now zat I have you, I want to elaborate on my philozophy and perhaps push my other books." A few people chuckled again.

He went into an explanation of his philosophy; he had a rather controversial approach to alchemy, which was loosely a combination of transfiguration and potions. He was constantly in pursuit of raw knowledge, regardless of the methods or moral implications of the particular transmutations he performed.

"It is our responsibility, as academics, to pursue knowledge and pursue understanding. We must do zis, for if zere is no alternative we may forever remain in zhe dark."
Hermione nodded; she didn't particularly agree with this philosophy wholeheartedly, but she did agree with the basic sentiment. Lines always needed to be drawn, even if advancements were in the interest of the common good.

Philosophy aside, he began to break down a particularly challenging part of his research, involving the cultivation of a specific plant and how by understanding the composition, he was able to transmute it into dead human tissue. The difficult part, of course, was: what was missing in order for the tissue to not be dead? Could wizards truly transmute something that was living?

Hermione's eyes sparkled; she loved hearing about the specific methods for scientific magical advancement, and even more enjoyed the philosophical discussions they brought up. Her time at Hogwarts had brought up many questions about not just the how of magic, but the why.

"For example. When we transfigure an animal into an object, is the object alive? Or do we in the process kill the animal, and then resuscitate it when we transfigure it back? And if it is the former, is there a way to apply that logic to plant matter?" He paused. "These are questions that keep me awake at night."

The audience chuckled again.

After more explanations of his methods and the philosophical questions his research evoked, the speaker waved his hand, indicating he was done, and the crowd clapped and cheered enthusiastically.

Hearing his thought process was wonderfully enlightening to Hermione, and she finished her final word in her notebook with a flourish. She would have to look into that particular bit about mandrakes - that seemed promising...

She stood and maneuvered between the chairs to be out of the way of the wizards clearing them away. She ducked as a chair flew over her head, and stood against the bookshelves to avoid the many wizards and witches pushing past to snag a copy of Le Jandre's other books.

When she looked up, she noticed Draco Malfoy staring at her again.

His hair was chiseled into a clean cut, a buzzed fade on the sides and long, golden strands pushed back in the top. He wore angular tortoiseshell glasses, the dark honey brown bringing out the startling blue of his eyes. His top button was undone, and with his rolled-up sleeves and full tuck into dark pants, secured with a brown belt, he gave the air of carefully constructed business casual.

She panicked as she realized that she was able to make this assessment because he was coming towards her; for a moment fear seized her heart, the type of fear she was consumed by whenever she saw him at school, the fear that only a childhood bully could evoke.

But she was different now; she wasn't going to invite torment without consequence. She wasn't just going to allow him to continue to ruffle her feathers after so much time had passed between them.

She steeled herself for whatever was coming, her gaze hardening.

"Granger," he started when he came to stand in front of her. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Whatever she had been about to say dissolved. His tone wasn't tight, or angry, or even sarcastic. He sounded... pleasant.

She examined him; his expression was calm, yet impassive, though she could detect a bit of discomfort in his posture. He almost looked as if he had been preparing for this.
A small part of her mind thrashed, wanting to say something mean to expiate the anger towards him that she knew was still bottled in her heart. It irritated her that he could be so pleasant after the way he had brushed her off in school, the way he had practically tortured her friends. The way he had made it clear, time and time again, that he thought of her as someone lower than dirt; someone not worth even acknowledging.

But he was acknowledging her now, in his pleasant, albeit slightly wavering, voice.

Hermione sighed and pushed down her less than cordial impulses; they were in a crowded bookstore, and the last thing she wanted was to have a public shouting match with the wizard.

She covered the awkward moment by tucking a bit of hair behind her ear, and replied, "Nor you."

He nodded, his eyes dropping down for a moment to take in her appearance.

His subtle, or perhaps not so subtle, assessment of her appearance was not lost on her. "So, uh... what brings you to the signing?"

Malfoy looked back up, into her eyes, and held up the book in his hand. "I was curious about Le Jandre's method to stop the spread of dragon pox. It seemed borderline... unethical."

"Oh?" Hermione murmured. "I actually thought the same thing. It seemed unnecessarily invasive - he could just as easily have transfigured the blood vessels."

"Exactly," Draco affirmed, finally looking slightly less uncomfortable, running his free hand through his hair. "I don't doubt his skill but I didn't see the reasoning."

"You should ask him," Hermione said lightly.

Draco studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. There was a hint of sadness in his eyes, as though he had things to say that he wasn't sure how to bring up. Nervousness tingled in Hermione's hands.

"I should," he finally replied. He glanced at the signing table, which was crowded with people, a queue of eager fans already formed through the remaining chairs.

Hermione noticed his slight pout at the crowd. He seemed so out of place here; his quiet intensity was nothing like the bubbling of the other folks in the room.

For a moment, her heart twinged with sympathy. She'd had many discussions with Harry about Slytherins, and about Malfoy for that matter. They had concluded that even though Slytherins were all ambitious and cunning, the vast majority of them were also complete blunderers at being casual. Well, maybe not "complete" blunderers, but definitely not as adept as Gryffindors. Gryffindors excelled at being social, laid back, and willing to try new things.

It seemed that Malfoy had not escaped the fate of his Slytherin companions. His noisy declarations of superiority, his snarky, sarcastic retorts, all had eventually, over his years at Hogwarts, dissolved. What was left in his final years were depressed, halfhearted insults with little intention or bite. He had still harbored a particular hatred towards Harry, who he had blamed for his father's capture and sentencing. But with his life crumbling around him, back then he could barely lift his head, let alone be casual or friendly, even to his own housemates.

And while it had become clear after the war that he was more than willing to discard the search for power within the Death Eaters - he had given the Ministry enough information to essentially take them down with little effort - he was still unable to really connect with anyone.
It had probably been a difficult adjustment for him. The only thing that had seemed to excite the wizard the last time she'd seen him was helping Madame Pomfrey - Hermione briefly recalled his expression as the mediwitch had praised him for bringing her the potion she'd needed before she'd even asked.

"If you want, my friend in the Department of Mysteries studied under him," Hermione said softly. "I could see if she could arrange a meeting - I'd also like to ask him about his bloodstream spellwork - "

He shook his head and waved his hand, though his eyes sparkled a bit. "That's okay. You don't have to do that."

She nodded, and they fell into an odd silence. He still looked as though he was trying to find the words to say something, and she looked around for relief to the awkwardness, staring around the room as people pushed past them and into the queue.

When she looked back, he was glancing around as well; clearly he didn't know anyone here except for her. She now wondered if he had come up to her as some way to maintain social comfort in this environment; it was hard to be alone in a room full of people.

"I've got to get back to work," she said finally. "It was nice to see you."

He looked back at her, slightly incredulous, as if she had said something funny. "Yes, of course, Granger."

The whole business left her feeling confused and a little uneasy, really. She reached up and tucked another curl behind her ear nervously as she pushed her way to the entrance. She could feel his eyes on her as she stepped onto the bustling street.
These initial chapters will be somewhat dry, but just wait until they run into each other at night... Drop me a review and let me know what you think, or if a particular public situation seems interesting! There are some inevitable ones coming up :)

"Microtransfiguration and the Brain"

The Magical Archives, Reception Center; Warsaw, Poland

March 3rd

It was with some consolation that she was back in Poland at the Archives, one of her favorite research institutions and the biggest library in the magical world. Hermione removed her outer robe, slipping it from around her shoulders and hanging it over her bag.

She was having a rather tough week, so she was relieved to finally take a break. Now she could focus on something other than the problems they were having with MACUSA, the American ministry, agreeing with the education standardizations they were pushing to the Confederation of Wizards. It seemed like she was always at odds with them, as their ambassador was particularly prejudiced against muggles, and by extension muggleborns, and tended to carry that sentiment into his work.

She shook her head, pushing her job out of her mind, and tried to refocus on relaxing and prepping for the mental work-out that would be this lecture.

Even though she had already studied much about brain transfiguration, she was still interested in what the famous healer giving this talk had to say on the subject. It was an incredibly difficult field to break into, because it was incredibly difficult work. The precision that brain healing required meant no room for error, for the consequences were always undesirable at best and fatal at worst.

The presenter was supposed to be one of the best neurohealers, or used to be before his wrist had been broken by a devil's snare. Now he was simply a teacher and a consultant.

Hermione didn't think she wanted to become a neurohealer, but the Hall of Thought in the Department of Mysteries would be an amazing place to work; researching the old magic involved in communication, in the complex properties of the brain... it sounded amazing.

She couldn't help but remember how amazing it had been to be involved in one of their research sprints.

It would be a sharp departure from her position of power within the Department of International Magical Cooperation, but... being an Unspeakable was an incredible honor, as they were the wizards and witches on the cutting edge of magical advancement.

Plus, she wouldn't have to deal with Ambassador Gibbons. She sighed angrily.

The brunette witch glanced around the large room; the space was not conducive to a talk like this,
but the organizers had made do with various mismatched chairs, tables, and desks, practically piled on top of each other in the oddly shaped room. Typically the Archives held awards dinners and fundraising events here, so it was a rather flat space compared to the lecture halls she had been in for other talks.

She didn't realize that she was subconsciously looking for him until she saw him, his dark robe over his chair, reading a book in his seat.

Hermione looked away; she'd actually expected Malfoy to be here this time, as this lecture was about healing transfiguration, but was slightly unprepared now that she had been correct. Perhaps he would not see her, and she wouldn't have to go home again and wonder at their strange interaction.

She sat down, getting comfortable and taking out her notebook.

The healer appeared, right on time, and the audience's chatter died away.

"Good afternoon! Thank you for coming." His smile was so wide that Hermione feared it might split his face in half.

"It has often been said about microtransfiguration that the aggressiveness of the healing process is soothed to a delicate, precise ceremony. That is certainly the case for the patient, but the vigor required on the part of the healer is intense. As aspiring healers, you all know this to be true!"

The crowd of seated individuals murmured in agreement. Hermione nodded with them, not wanting to appear out of place.

He went into an overview of microtransfiguration techniques; Hermione eagerly took notes. Though it was typically used for healing purposes and fine crafts, she knew that the same methods could easily be applied elsewhere. She was eager to soak up any magical techniques, regardless of their immediate usefulness.

Once he finished the section about microtransfiguration, the healer began to talk about the different lobes of the brain and how the healing techniques differed for each; Hermione got lost quickly, between the technical assumptions and foreign terminology, but took notes the best she could. She knew that at some point, if she truly wanted to work in the Hall of Thought, she would need to do a formal degree in neurology, or perhaps cognitive neuroscience, but it was important that she determine if she was even interested in the field before she committed the galleons.

After thirty minutes of deciphering and taking down as much as she could, she gave up and resolved to just listen; dammit, she would have to go over the memory of this event... she wondered if she could bug Neville at Hogwarts to see if she could stop by to use the school's pensieve...

Finally, the wizard took off his glasses and deluminated his slides, and the crowd shifted in their seats.

"Thank you all for your attention; unfortunately, I haven't gotten a good sense of where everyone's expertise lies, so I had to keep this rather general, but I'd love to open up the floor to questions, if you have any."

The room was silent for a few seconds; Hermione had an ungodly amount of questions, but refrained since she didn't want to ask something basic in front of all the academics in the room. She waited for someone to say something, glancing around.

Finally, a witch raised her hand near the front and the presenter gestured to her.
"Thank you for your time, Healer Speltzer." The witch touched her wand to her throat, and continued, her voice now amplified, "Can you elaborate on the risks involved in using magic for endonasal endoscopic surgery?"

Hermione sighed; she wasn't particularly interested in brain surgery, so she tuned out this answer.

"I think the more important question is, not the risks involved in using magic, but the risks involved in not mapping the patient before you perform surgery," he answered. "The magic in and of itself is not the problem; if you are trained in microtransfiguration and precise healing, it should be no problem to use magic. The risk comes when you are under pressure and know very little about who you are healing; therefore, it is the situation, not the wand-wielding."

The witch nodded, though she looked slightly harassed at having her question flipped around on her. The room fell silent again, and the healer glanced around.

"I have a question."

Hermione was embarrassed by the little flicker of fear in her heart; she knew that voice. She clenched her jaw and calmly turned to look at him.

"Our current understanding - and techniques - for brain transfiguration come from a need for surgery, to remove tumors and such. Are these techniques used in psychology or psychotherapy? I guess my real question is," Draco raised his chin, "Are there facets of the research community dedicated to the actual mental aspects of neurohealing?"

The presenter nodded, his eyebrows slightly raised; it appeared that he appreciated this question. "Excellent question. Unfortunately the psychotherapy and neurohealing communities don't communicate as much as they ought to. This would be closer to what you would find in the research halls in the Department of Mysteries; we know that it is possible to alter memories, and obliviate people, but it is unclear if we can alter the physical aspects of the brain, deliberately, in order to alter someone's mental state." he paused, his jovial smile splitting his face again. "Based on our current understanding of the brain, a healer who attempts this might do little more than create a vegetable, or a corpse."

Draco nodded, and even from this distance Hermione could see a determination in his eyes. She looked briefly around the room; no one else had seemed that interested in this topic.

"You've got me for another ten minutes," the healer admonished the silent audience. "Come on, don't be shy!"

A wizard raised his hand, pointed his wand at his throat and said, "The most common uses for microtransfiguration, according to St. Mungo's yearly report, are for the brain and for the sexual organs. Can you outline the techniques used for each and how they might be similar?"

The speaker's eyes bugged out; he sputtered like a fish for a few seconds, looking around at the many attentive academics in the room. A few people chuckled nervously.

"Yes... yes, well, my expertise is in neurohealing, but on occasion I was requested to perform... for more serious injuries, mind you... In any case, it is rather similar in technique. A quiet and needle sharp focus and intention is required for both." His previous happy-go-lucky demeanor returned - he finally seemed to get his footing - and he continued, "Delicate parts of the body require very specific processes. However, yes, the wrist movements are similar. Another question?"

Hermione giggled quietly into her hand. Moments like these were great breaks to the somewhat dry
material of lectures. Though she appreciated professionalism, the occasional slip up was always entertaining.

After a handful of tamer questions, the lecture was over, and the room shifted as people left their mismatched seats and scooted in between each other.

Hermione waited a bit until the room was less overwhelming, then exited to the bustling lobby area.

Though she was in no way on par scholastically with the other folks in the room, she recognized the members of the audience to be her kind of people - those in the pursuit of knowledge - and this made her feel a little more at ease than she would have been normally.

Maybe she should try to meet some of them... she could try, though she wasn't particularly good at networking, as it was usually by virtue of her fame that she was able to make friends and acquaintances in these kinds of situations.

Inevitably, a younger witch recognized her and came up to her eagerly, just as she wasshouldering her bag.

"Miss Granger!" the witch said. "I'm Heather, Heather Domagonin."

Hermione smiled and shook the young witchs hand. "Pleasure, Heather, and please call me Hermione."

"I've read all about the research you lead in the Department of Mysteries! I want to continue the work in understanding human magic, but as you must know, it is difficult to get an audience with Marty Scheldon."

The older witch nodded. "Yeah, he's pretty busy with the all the controversy surrounding the Love Chamber. Are you still in school?"

"I'm about to graduate, at the end of this semester."

"Congratulations," she said warmly. "What research projects do you have in your portfolio?"

Heather's excitement slipped into nervousness. "I've lead a study on the longterm effects of the Imperius curse on the brain; I'm proud to say that we published our findings to Neurohealer Ego just last month."

"That's excellent," Hermione said sincerely. "It is incredibly difficult to get work published these days - I'd lean into that when you start applying for a lab residency."

When she glanced briefly over the young woman's shoulder, Hermione was slightly startled to see Malfoy standing a few yards away, already looking at her from behind his dark frames. From the look in his eyes, she knew that she had about five seconds before he came towards her.

"Heather," she said, getting the other woman's attention, "how about you send me an owl, and I'll see if I can get you a meeting?"

The young witch smiled widely and thanked her profusely, releasing her just as Draco pulled up in front of them. Hermione turned her attention to the tall wizard.

"Malfoy," she greeted.

"Granger." His eyes softened a little, and though he still seemed uncomfortable, he also seemed
genuinely interested in talking to her. He gestured with his hand, looking down at her body, as though he was about to say something about her appearance.

"How did you like the lecture?" Hermione asked, steamrolling over whatever was about to come out of his mouth.

He looked back up. "It was informative. Speltzer is quite a character."

Relieved, Hermione's lips turned up a bit as she recalled the speaker's odd behavior. "He's a genius."

"Yes, I've been dying to attend one of his lectures. He always makes you think about why you're asking something." He paused, his eyes crinkling a bit. "Although, he did seem a little uncomfortable with that one question."

"Yeah! Did you see his face?"

"He was positively shaking, I thought his eyes were going to pop out!"

Hermione laughed heartily, pressing her hand to her face; Draco laughed with her, his giddy chuckles almost musical. After a few moments she realized that he had somehow managed to make her laugh, something she considered to be on par with being struck by lightning, and her expression dropped.

He noticed the sudden switch, and his own laughter died.

She sighed. "So... healing transfiguration, huh?"

He nodded. "I'm apprenticed, on track to become a full-time healer."

She added up a few things in her head. "That makes sense."

"How so?" His face tightened slightly.

She recognized that he was about to get defensive, and shared her reasoning before he could retort. "I saw you at the lecture in London. Plus, you read True Gold."

"Oh, yes," he replied, faltering. "I'm publishing work in Healing Quarterly on disease transfiguration." He paused, assessing her and seeming to decide if he wanted to go on. "Eventually I want to be a neurohealer, and study if there is a way to apply the same techniques to effects caused by mental illness."

Hermione considered this. It made sense - if you could figure out the root of the cause of an episode, or hallucinations, or even depression, you could potentially transfigure the problem area. "That's fascinating," she replied honestly. "Has anyone done research on that yet?"

He shook his head, and she noted with a grimace that she had inadvertently paid him a pretty serious compliment, and probably inflated his ego. She could see the makings of a smirk settling on this mouth.

"St. Mungo's would greatly appreciate it, I'm sure. They've still got a lot of patients dealing with PTSD and mental illness from prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus Curse." She kept her expression neutral; she was actually in that category, and frequented St. Mungo's for therapy like many of the wizards and witches involved in the War.

Also, she realized that she had gotten dangerously close to talking about a topic that could potentially
reveal things she didn't want to know about him.

She'd wondered before why she was able to talk to the wizard somewhat normally, but now she understood - they were primarily talking about their common interests, or at least things that were somewhat separate from their shared past. Once that was stripped away, what would happen? She realized then that despite the light conversation she was still on edge, still unsure of why she was even bothering.

She looked into his eyes, and the silence between them started to feel heavy. He was certainly different than he used to be - that was inevitable, as a great deal of time had passed, and even she had matured a lot since the War - but she was still not sure how much he had truly changed.

She tried to decide if she should break through the socially comfortable barrier of speaking about interests and try to talk to him as if he was a friend. It sounded like something she should try in order to determine what his goals were for talking to her... but she couldn't really come up with something to say, on the fly, that would allow her to judge.

"So you want to help people," she said instead. "That's amazing work." A part of her knew that she was subtly steering the conversation in order to keep it light and positive, but she didn't know what else to do until she was sure that he wasn't still a prick.

He shook his head, brushing off her compliment. "I won't be able to truly help people - in the way I want - for some time. I'd love to start, but I can't get resources, or even a spot in a neurohealing lab, without my certification."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Yeah, the academic community is pretty buttoned up. But I imagine your work would be beneficial to the Department of Mysteries as well."

"Where do you work, Granger?" he questioned. "I haven't seen you around St. Mungo's."

"I'm leading a team in the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

"But what do you do?"

She furrowed her brows, suddenly remembering all the reasons why talking to Draco Malfoy was a bad idea and a can of worms that she should not have opened. They hadn't yet talked about her and her life at all. Her heart fell; how would he take her response? How much should she reveal? And what's more, why did she even care what he thought?

It didn't matter - she would tell the truth. Because regardless of how he reacted, she was quite proud of her work and would enjoy making him uncomfortable in his prejudice.

"I'm overseeing the reversal of the treachery set in motion by the Muggleborn Registration Commission."

This was the test she had wanted, she realized; she watched his expression carefully as he predictably stiffened.

But instead of disgust, instead of malice, instead of all of the things she had expected to see in his eyes... she saw sadness. A desperate sadness that aged his face. His nonchalant demeanor dropped, and she saw it again - the look in his eyes like he was trying to find the words to say something.

"Listen, Hermione - "

"As I live and breathe, the Hermione Granger! You came to my little presentation?" The presenter
suddenly appeared at her elbow, reaching for her hand. Recovering, she shook it.

"I've heard all about your work in the Daily Prophet. Did you know," the man turned to Draco, "that she's the reason the Daily Prophet is being completely rebranded? The changes she suggested to staffing, to the organization, were positively genius!"

Hermione blushed, shaking her head. "It's not a big deal; news sources should be independent from the government. It's anti-corruption 101."

She met Draco's eyes - his expression hadn't changed; if anything, he seemed even more desperate. He held her gaze for a few seconds, and she was stunned by the amount of emotion there, by the impatience.

"Indeed! Finally, the Daily Prophet can go back to reporting real news - like the breakthroughs we've been making in epidermis transfiguration!"

"Your talk was fascinating," Draco said shortly, finally looking at the man. "You studied with one of my former professors, Madame Harvey."

"Ha ha, yes!" he exclaimed, his belly shaking. "She cracks the whip, that one; I do hope you continue to learn all you can from her!"

"I will," Draco muttered.

"Well," Hermione said, flustered, "It was lovely speaking with you, sir. I must be going." She needed to get away from the pair, as she could sense that Draco's mood was souring and she didn't want to deal with that. Any other thoughts she had, about wanting to avoid whatever he'd been about to say, she pushed down.

"Of course, Miss Granger! Drop me an owl any time!" The wizard patted her on the shoulder roughly and brushed past them.

Hermione turned her attention back to Draco; his eyes were still sad.

"It was nice to see you," he said coldly, practically sneering, and turned away.

Hermione stared after him, irritation tingling in her heart. What had that been about? Was he mad about being interrupted? Was he jealous of her accomplishments?

She shook her head, pushing his odd behavior out of her mind and resolving to find a different acquaintance to talk to. She didn't want to feel disappointed in him but she couldn't help it; it appeared that he'd had to make a concentrated effort to be nice, and that he'd only managed for a few minutes. She really shouldn't have expected anything different.

Hermione weaved through the milling attendees, adjusting her bag on her shoulder, and searched for the crowd. It seemed like the majority of the people were forming a line behind the speaker, waiting for him to be done harassing a different random person. She looked around again, and spotted a smaller crowd around a few shelves. Maybe she should just purchase a book or two, then leave.

She didn't see him for the rest of the afternoon.
The Presentation

Aqualorum Containment Meeting

Department of International Magical Cooperation

March 12th

Hermione absently checked over her schedule as her coworkers filled into the large conference room. Her week was far too crammed for her to focus on some of the things she wanted to; she would barely have enough time to breathe, let alone get the most out of the more essential sessions she was included in. They were already beginning to do planning for H2, the second half of the year, and she needed to get more ahead of that this time around.

Examining the little blocks, she crossed a few weekly meetings off her schedule - she would request the project statuses via memo - and closed the schedule planner. The planner glowed green, indicating that it had updated for her secretary, and she relaxed in her seat.

All the internal team leaders were there, as well as representatives from other departments, loosely creating a room with expertise in large humanitarian efforts, international affairs, and health and human services.

Some of the members of the room looked rather nervous - it was a rare thing to be in a meeting with so many important members of the Ministry - and Hermione eyed them sympathetically. She had felt similarly when she had started working, until she had realized that some people actually saw her that way. It had been quite an adjustment to maintain comfort in situations with people she admired, but with practice she was able to treat them as she would anyone else.

She did a double take when Draco walked in, straight backed and calm once again, placing his bag on the floor distractedly and pulling out his materials. She should have suspected that he could be involved in this project, but she'd had no idea that he would be the one putting the tactical strategy together. This was something she would have assumed that a senior healer would do, or at least a business consultant.

Draco took a miniature projector out of his bag and enlarged it to normal size; after setting this on the table, positioning it briefly so that it faced the expanse of white canvas already pulled down, he tinkered with the slide reel, checking the little translucent squares.

After he dished out the parchment rolls, his eyes settled on her, and widened.

A flash of something like fear seemed to go through him, and Hermione was ashamed to feel a bit of detached satisfaction. His previous interaction with her had ended in a very odd way, and she had not forgotten the irritation she had felt when he had turned his back on her suddenly.

It had been over a week, however, so she wasn't actually angry anymore; she was more just resigned at the memory of it.

Regardless, he was about to present something very important to her department, something pressing, and she would treat it professionally, as she had always done with her former classmates. It was a very small world they occupied, so forming a bad relationship simply for a misunderstanding would be unfortunate.

Of course, she couldn't quite say that they'd had a good relationship before this; it just seemed that
she had never really seen him in public, and so hadn't needed to deal with their relationship before this.

Just as the clock struck the hour, the room quieted down.

Richard Caticus, the Head of her department, said, "Thank you everyone for your time; I know it's tough to get us all in the same room." The people around the table chuckled and nodded.

"As you know, the Chinese and Nepalese Ministries are in a state of panic over the spread of aqualorum. They've reached out for aid to a fair amount of ministries in the Middle East and Europe, but are leaning on us as the largest to help them through this hardship.

"Mr. Malfoy is here to present the work St. Mungo's has been doing to help with the containment - and hopefully, cure - for the disease. Proceed," he finished, gesturing at Draco.

Draco bowed slightly, his eyes flitting to Hermione for the briefest of moments. "Thank you for meeting with me today. We've made some exciting discoveries that could help in the containment of the epidemic in East Asia."

He took a breath and said, "Through research and teams on the ground, we've been able to determine the cause of the rapid spread." He flipped on the small projector and waved his wand through the slides.

"What happens is the disease can easily piggyback off of fluids, and is spread through the mist and fog in the area. Therefore, the very weather in the region becomes the main source of contagion. Since there have been many damaging floods and storms in the past year, the disease has spread at an alarming rate."

"And how do you plan to stop this?"

"We've drawn up a tactical plan for your review." Draco indicated the parchment rolls in front of them. Hermione took hers up and scanned the outline quickly.

"We've worked with Spell Development in the Department of Mysteries to devise a simple incantation to make one impervious to outside fluids. It should prevent any healers or researchers from contracting the disease while they work. We've also created an ingestible potion that will prevent the diseased person from passing their infliction - it kills the contagious properties of the disease. Once this is administered, the disease can be properly treated through transfiguration therapy.

"In terms of execution, we are first proposing that some professional weather wizards set up a perimeter around the quarantine and temporarily alter the conditions there. Otherwise the disease will spread into the Middle East, and then potentially further west."

Hermione followed along on the parchment. The practical nature of the plan was simple - they would divert regular imports of the necessary potion ingredients to a camp just outside of the quarantined zone, where healers could brew the anti-contagious potion in bulk. Afterwards, they could send the potions in, allowing the internal healers to administer them.

She looked up; Draco was talking through this.

"From there, we can safely obtain a few patients for transfiguration therapy, and determine the best course for a cure. Afterwards, we can write a guide for this therapy and spread it to the healers in the region."
"How much do you estimate this will cost?" Richard asked, eyeing Draco.

Draco didn't miss a beat. "We've broken down three potential budgets, depending on how involved the British seats will want to be in the effort."

"Excellent," murmured Jonas, the financial planner on Hermione's team. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes; he was always looking for a way to do less work.

Draco smirked a bit. "The first plan, in the scenario that we cover most of the cost, will amount to at least 800 thousand galleons. There is a breakdown of what this entails in your guide there, and includes materials, salaries, construction, et cetera.

"The second plan, where we set up a humanitarian donation system, will get our community involved and will cut into that 800 thousand, potentially by a lot. However, this is risky since there is no way to know how much would be donated.

"The third option heaps the majority of the cost into the ministries in that region, and will only cost 150 thousand galleons, in the salaries of the healers and researchers we send for aid. Unfortunately, this option may also result in a lack of proper treatment for these patients, and could end up costing us the containment of the disease."

"Thank you - it seems the most cost effective option is for us to only send healers for aid - but it may be beneficial politically to get more involved. What do you think, Hermione?"

Hermione looked up at Draco, who was watching her impassively. She felt an odd sense of power in judging his work. She knew she was being critical for the sake of being critical, but that's who she was; it was her critical and analytical nature that had solidified her place in this department, and had earned her the respect that she received for her contributions.

A part of her wanted to make him sweat a bit, but she could truly find little fault with his logic and research. She expected nothing less of him, if she was honest with herself.

"I think the second option - with some tweaking - would be the best. We can run a full-scale, global campaign for donations." She turned to her peers, adjusting her voice to be more commanding. "This is a chance for us to bring together the magical communities of the world for a collective solution, to help out our magical brethren in another country. It directly executes on our mission for the year."

The department head nodded, glancing at the other advisors, who were nodding affirmatively as well. "Very good, Hermione. Any reservations you can think of?"

She nodded. "Are there other uses for the spell and anti-contagious potion? It may be a waste of resources to teach a single-use spell and potion for a specific disease."

Draco hesitated briefly, his eyes never leaving hers, and replied, "The spell is likely to have other applications - the obvious one is not getting wet in the rain, or when going underwater. As for the potion, it will take time for us to determine if there are other uses."

She smiled at him, indicating that she was satisfied with his answer, and turned to her boss.

He caught her look and said cordially, "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, for outlining this plan for us. Especially the financial side; you've saved us a considerable amount of time."

Draco cracked a bit of a smile, inclining his head in thanks. "Of course sir."

"So how can we get started?" Richard turned to the man sitting on his left.
"Process-wise, the board of governors needs to approve the amount of healers we send," the man - Egon, the lead for disaster relief - said. "Has Healer Camille already selected the healers to send?"

"She's working on the list now, and will likely announce it at the all-hands meeting this Friday," Draco replied.

"Good; I knew the Head Healer would be on top of it," he murmured. "Do you need any special permits to contract the ingredients?"

"We've contacted the suppliers for Slug and Jiggers Apothecary, as well as Pretty Penny's Pre-made Potions; we have seven suppliers ready to help so far."


The group looked around at each other, nodding and shrugging.

"Everything seems buttoned up," said the woman closest to the door.

"Great. Let's move forward with the second option, galleons-wise. Thank you everyone," Richard concluded.

The staff members around the table stood, and Hermione stood as well, recognizing the cue for the end of the meeting. Draco turned and collected his presentation materials quickly.

She had just walked around the front of the table when Draco's voice halted her.

"Granger, do you mind waiting a second?"

She looked up at him; he was wearing a slightly apprehensive expression, sliding parchment into his bag quickly.

She nodded without thinking. "Of course, what do you need?"

He closed his soft leather briefcase and came to stand in front of her. His eyes were framed in a pair of angular, frosted glasses today, giving his face a very modern, sharp look.

"I was hoping to get some feedback about the presentation. This is the first time I've done something like this... and it would be good to know how I can improve my practical healing planning."

By now the room was nearly empty; a few of the board members were still conversing, making their way to the exit.

Hermione smoothed her hands over her skirt, contemplating what she wanted to say. She could give him short, somewhat vague feedback now, though it would be less helpful in the long run, or she could break down her points, potentially keeping them there for a while. She was eager to get back to work, and could tell that he was somewhat uncomfortable being in this office after such an important presentation for him. Deciding that neither option sounded good, she went for an alternative.

"I can owl you with a written critique, going over some of the things you may want to consider presenting next time."

"Actually," he looked at her intently, "would you like to talk about this over coffee?"
The room was finally silent, and in the silence she found herself uncomfortable being alone with him, especially since she had spent much of her life avoiding him. Their brief interactions over the past few weeks had refreshed her understanding of who he was, but somehow it still wasn't enough for her to make plans with the wizard.

And... though he had clearly wanted feedback on his presentation, as it was in his scholastic interests, she had definitely noticed his previous appreciative glances, the way his eyes softened when he looked at her, or the way he took the time to notice what she was wearing.

That was what she would expect from a wizard who was interested in her... romantically.

She didn't want to think this way, but... he was essentially asking her to get coffee with him, an act easily similar to a proper date. And when people saw them there, together, talking and sipping their coffees, what would they think? They would recognize both of them easily, what with the way they were both constantly featured in *The Prophet*. It was likely that the gossip rags would be all over it as well.

Besides, somehow she felt that helping him wouldn't be in her best interests. And the idea of meeting up with him, focusing on him, for an unplanned length of time seemed unbearable. She would be on edge, waiting for him to say something that disappointed her, waiting for him to screw up and make her feel inadequate. She'd done something akin to that the last time they'd spoken; it was tiring to try to steer a conversation so she could stay comfortable.

Finally, her eyes downcast, she replied, "I... I don't know if that's a good idea, Draco."

She looked up, and knew she had made a mistake; his eyes had turned cold again, his pleasant, cordial manner dropped. For a second he looked almost resigned, but then reformed some semblance of a stoic mask and said, "Thank you, anyway," turning away from her.

Something about that micro-expression - that resignation, that borderline sadness - made her question her decision, and she halted him.

"Draco..."

He turned back.

She tried a small, timid smile. "Let me think about it, okay?"

He studied her, his eyes roaming over her face, his shoulders relaxing slightly. As she looked back at him, his expression softened, and he seemed to understand something.

She couldn't help but feel that they were sharing something real, that there were unspoken words passing between them in this moment; she could tell that he was torn between questioning her hesitation and saying something akin to an apology.

Apparently settling for neither option, he nodded once.

Relieved that he had chosen not to say anything, Hermione turned away. It seemed that she may have ruined a budding truce between them, that she may have completely nixed any possibility of a friendly development in their interactions, but she knew that if she were to see him again she would appreciate him knowing what her boundaries were.

He must have known that talking to him at all was somewhat hard for her - she had a feeling that he'd been close to bringing that up the last time they'd talked, and maybe even just now - so perhaps he would respect her wishes and keep his distance.
When she reached the door, Draco was already there, holding it open for her; she hadn't noticed him step around her to get to it first. She nodded at him in thanks and walked down the echoey corridor.
Hermione stepped out of the green flames and into the dimly lit restaurant, glancing around at the simple, contemporary furnishings. The air was hazy, and she breathed it in slowly, the way she supposed fish breathed underwater. The concrete and wood panel decor created an atmosphere of architectural comfort and minimal sophistication; the music was also modern and moody, with a heavy beat that had the people hanging around the bar bobbing. She muttered a quick *scourgify* to remove the soot from her outer robe.

"Weasley, 7 o'clock," she said to the petite hostess, after a polite hello.

The hostess retrieved her robe with a swipe of her arm and led the witch through the many slim tables - almost every one was full. A few of the wizards occupying them glanced at her as she went past, some recognizing her, and she smiled at them the best she could; Merlin, she had no idea this place would be so packed tonight. She prayed for no-one to ask for an autograph.

Finally they came upon a small booth at the end of a row, facing a lush garden filled with imported palms of every size, as well as a few decorative flutterby bushes, all in bloom.

A glass orb housing a single, small flame floated above the table; as she neared, the flame turned from blue to the typical flame yellow, indicating that the reservation had been respected.

Apparently Ginny and Padma hadn't arrived yet, so she smiled at the hostess appreciatively and took up the drink menu.

Normally she would do the tasting menu with a wine pairing, but she was in the mood for something a little harder after such a long day. When the waitress came by, she ordered a drink called a Dragon's Sunrise and closed the menu.

The many talking and finely dressed people in the place presented an easy distraction while she waited for her friends. She had stopped by her flat for a few minutes to change her shirt and to ensure her hair was behaving; it wasn't often that she had dinner in such a popular, hip and honestly expensive restaurant and she had not wanted to show up in her rumpled business robes.

In the last few years she had noticed many changes in their world. With the destruction of many old businesses as the Death Eaters had laid waste to much of wizarding Europe, new and modern businesses sprung up in their place, some even occupying space previously owned by muggles. It was no longer uncommon to go into muggle areas and enjoy the sights and local destinations; in fact, travel in general was now more common - people were no longer afraid of dark wizards in other communities, as they had been nearly wiped out by the Auror Office after Harry had become the head and banded the Aurors around the world together in a common purpose.

She adjusted the shoulder straps of her loose silk top and thanked the barkeep that brought her drink. She watched it for a few moments; a few tiny little dragons, probably made of orange rind, flew around the surface, weaving around each other in a lovely pattern, their tails entwining.

She loved well-constructed wizard cocktails.
She was just about to pass her wand over the drink to determine how they'd made it when Ginny dropped into the chair across from her.

"Sorry I'm late," she said distractedly, depositing her clutch behind her back and scooting into the table. "James got into the bathroom cabinet and there was hair potion everywhere."

Hermione chuckled sympathetically. "I do hope you made Harry deal with that."

"Oh yeah," she affirmed, taking up the drink menu. "He's probably going to be finding potion in every orifice for a while."

Hermione shook her head at the gross image and chuckled.

"What've you got there? Looks beautiful."

"It's one of their specialty drinks. It has firewhiskey in it though."

Ginny made a face and studied the menu. "I'd definitely prefer something with vodka, or even giggle water..."

The waitress came and took Ginny's order, just as Padma appeared behind them.

"Evening," she greeted, sliding the chair out. The waitress glanced at her and Padma murmured, "Pomegranate Patronus, please."

"Come here often?" Ginny joked, moving aside so Padma had enough room to slip into her seat.

"Vanessa took me here a few days ago. Ooo, is that the Dragon's Sunrise? How is it?"

"Delicious," Hermione replied, sipping.

"We drink way too much," she said with a sigh, picking up her menu.

Hermione nodded; it was a trend she had noticed among a fair amount of her former Hogwarts classmates. She didn't want to think that it had anything to do with the War, but she couldn't be absolutely sure that they weren't all using alcohol as some sort of coping mechanism. That said, they were also young and in their prime, and actually had time to be social and feel good.

It was hard to tell the difference, really.

Padma nudged Hermione, rousing her from her thoughts, and said, "Are you doing the tasting menu? Or à la carte?"

"We should do à la carte, and share," Ginny answered for her. "They've already changed the menu since last time."

They worked through the menu, placing checkmarks next to the dishes they wanted - Hermione really wanted to try the Spanish mackerel with watermelon radishes, and she marked this down - and almost immediately after they'd finished the waitress came back for their cards and deposited the drinks on the table.

"How's the season going?"

Ginny rolled her eyes with a bit of drama. "Gwyneth is changing the plays, again. She's brilliant, but the practices have been murder lately." She huffed and continued, "Speaking of which, we have a game against the Cannons - Angelina's team - in a month. Any interest in going?"
Hermione grimaced. "I'll have to see - and anyway, you should save your family tickets for the boys. I know Ron loves the Cannons."

She shrugged. "I spoil them enough as it is."

"Shit, I'll go," Padma offered. "Try everything at least once, as it goes."

Ginny shrugged, sipping her drink. Her eyebrows furrowed once she had taken a sip. "Oooo," she said appreciatively. "That's delicious."

"No more than six tonight, love," Padma put forth, eyeing the freckled witch.

Hermione laughed, looking away for a moment.

When she saw him, already watching her, in the opposite corner of the room, she wasn't prepared for the jump in her heart, the cold wash of unexpected emotion to flow through her. Her laugh died away, her expression dropping a bit.

Draco was sitting alone, a book in front of his plate, his top buttons undone and his hair falling to the side. His glasses were hanging off his nose, not even shielding her from looking directly into his eyes.

Hermione averted her gaze and tried to concentrate on what Ginny was saying. But despite the effort she was putting into ignoring his presence, for the next few minutes she found herself sneaking glances at him. Seeing him again, especially in such an informal setting, was fleshing out who she suspected he was now; before she had thought that he was somewhat quiet, awkward yet confident, and had layers of negativity brimming just beneath the surface.

Now, in this casual setting, he looked rather relaxed, his typical neutral frown absent.

The situation really helped her formulate a more detailed image of him; he wasn't just a former bully who was trying to turn his life around via some expensive and time consuming healer training. In reality, he could be that, and also be someone who would perhaps like to unwind in a crowded, hip restaurant with a book...

She now wondered what he was doing there - she wouldn't choose this place as a spot to read, and he couldn't possibly be studying: it was far too loud and distracting.

Although, it was unlikely that he spent all his time studying. People had lives.

Perhaps he was here with someone?

She covertly examined his table; upon it there was only a plate, a wine glass, a book, and the glass orb suspended just above the surface, housing a small flame, just like hers. It didn't look like he was eating with anyone.

Hermione finally noticed that he was concentrating steadily on his book, and she stopped glancing at him and brought herself back to the moment.

"No, Padma, I've eaten far too much bread this week as it is."

"You have to try it." She hovered a slice of toasted bruschetta in front of Ginny's face.

The red-haired witch shook her head and flashed her wand in mock warning; Padma snickered and took a bite. "What's the fun of all this fancy-assed food if you won't eat it?" she said after she had
swallowed.

"I'll eat it," Hermione offered, taking the last piece.

The server came almost as soon as the plate had been emptied and deposited new dishes on the table - the barley-miso barbecue sunchokes with shiitake mushrooms, the pork and kimchi pierogi with asian pear butter, and a deliciously steaming pile of roti. Ginny's eyes became the size of golden snitches.

"Who ordered the roti?" she said angrily, tearing herself a large piece immediately.

Padma chuckled. "So much for no more bread."

Hermione tucked into the other dishes - they were perfectly plated, glistening and steaming, to the point where she wondered if it was possible for food to be sexy.

"This place gets better every time we come," she sighed, depositing a mushroom into her mouth.

"I feel like this doesn't count as bread," Ginny said happily around her mouthful.

They eagerly spooned more of the hot dishes onto their small plates, talking excitedly about the flavors.

"It's the perfect level of spicy."

"I agree. The heat and the sweet are well balanced."

Hermione tried the pierogi and nodded. "Indeed," she said, gesturing as she chewed. "The pear butter cuts through the spice so well."

The girls eyed each other and laughed; it was a typical game they played when the went out that whenever they started to get too into describing the food, they would adopt what they supposed was a pompous and arrogant lift in their voice, and then joke about the posh people they assumed took these things too seriously.

"Ah yes, the wine," Hermione quoted in between chuckles.

"Mmmm, the wine, indeed," Padma echoed, chortling as she reached for her glass of mixed liquor.

"For real, though, the roti is perfection," Ginny shook her head slowly and held up her pointer and thumb in an "o" symbol.

Hermione finished her drink in no time; the orange bitters and firewhiskey went down like lava, but was sweet enough that she barely noticed she was sucking the thing down until the ice protested at the bottom of the glass.

"And another," she murmured, tapping the glass on the table twice; it refilled automatically, the orange rinds coming back to life and flying over the drink.

Padma held her hand up to the drink, and a little citrus dragon followed the length of her arm, snaking over her skin until it unexpectedly went into her sleeve.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, letting it follow her arm and come out the collar of her shirt, twirling. "Dirty bastard!" she chimed, and the girls laughed again.

"What's new with you, Hermione?" Ginny asked, finally abandoning the roti to try the sunchokes.
"All you ever do is work, these days!"

Hermione's lips quirked in a wry smile; a year ago, she wouldn't have even been seen outside of the context of the Ministry, but she'd discovered that in order to work hard sometimes she had to play hard as well. It made her more productive when she was at work.

This balanced approach wasn't something she had adopted until recently; before, she had been content to work long hours, cranking away on project after project, but she'd gotten burnt out so many times that she determined that enough was enough - she really needed to loosen up.

Her friends certainly helped - by then they had already formed intense partying habits, and eagerly roped her into them face first and hands up.

"Not true," the brunette witch replied. "I used to be much worse."

"And now we're spoiled from having you around more often," Padma added.

Ginny gestured, encouraging Hermione to come out with it; she brushed her curls aside and let out a heavy sigh. "MACUSA."

The girls sighed with her. "MACUSA," they said.

The American ministry was having a bit of a rough time; between the wars that their muggle counterparts had started overseas and the problems those wars had caused for potion ingredient trade in the Middle East, they were in a tizzy, deregulating industries left and right, over-enforcing certain aspects of their arbitrary laws and ignoring others. It was ugly and messy.

"What is it this time?"

"They're trying to take the Muggle Studies requirements out of the education standards, of course, as well as Arithmancy!" Hermione straightened her shoulders. "Easily two of the most valuable classes a young wizard can take."

"Do you actually use arithmancy, Hermione?" Padma asked, raising her eyebrow.

The brown-haired witch stopped, thinking for a second; Ginny sniggered at her expression.

"Well, not the actual magic," she admitted. "But the concepts are essential. You learn not just about the magical properties of numbers, but of how life is constructed, you know? Sacred geometry and that."

"And when have you ever needed to use... a fibonacci sequence?"

"It's very useful in cooking magic," Hermione answered lamely.

"Yes, maybe to create a centerpiece, but not for a normal Tuesday night dinner."

Hermione raised her shoulders, putting on her best mock-bookworm expression, and said haughtily, "Listen to you slackers! We must always strive for excellence!"

Hermione making fun of herself was always an instant classic to her friends, and they burst into laughter, holding their eyes and waving their hands at her.

"Stop," Ginny weezed, reaching for her water. "You're going to make me choke!"

She smiled at them warmly and took a sip of her drink. After she had finished her sip, she detected
the familiar sensation of needing to pee and stood carefully.

"Be right back, no horseplay, nose in the books," she said shrilly, and extracted her limbs from behind the booth. Her friends were still waving and bubbling.

She walked in between the cramped tables slowly, making her way to the tiny hallway she knew led to the single restroom. Now that she was standing and was away from the thumping of the music and the cacophony of random chatter, she could better feel the alcohol that she'd ingested. She smiled and allowed the warm feeling to relax her movements; it was a nice departure to be more aware of her body than she was of her thoughts.

Hermione pulled up behind a waiting individual; this place really needed another restroom, there was always a line. She looked into the kitchen aimlessly as she waited, watching the cooks in their little hats skitter around.

When she turned to the man in front of her to ask how long he'd been waiting, she met a pair of icy blue eyes fixed on her.

"Well hello," Draco said expectantly. He was slightly reserved, probably because she had basically rejected him the last time they had spoken, but thankfully he was still somewhat pleasant.

Hermione eyed him, and it occurred to her that there was no reason why she couldn't be nice. He'd clearly been making an effort recently to do just that, and she had spent that whole time tensed up and ready to lash out.

Determined to be amicable and honestly letting the alcohol take the reins, she smirked at him and said, "You really have to stop following me, Draco."

He seemed genuinely startled by her comment, but then noticed the playful glint in her eye and cracked a smile.

"I could say the same thing. You don't even work in healing."

She shrugged, swaying and pretending to consider his comment. His smile reached his eyes, and a warm feeling spread in her chest.

She liked this kind of playful banter a lot more than the awkward conversations they'd tried to have before. She could be sarcastic with him and it somehow seemed less different than the insults they had traded in school.

Though she could sense that he might be willing to joke with her, she could also sense that he was still being careful, still had a tight level of control over what he was doing. Even now she wasn't sure if she wanted to strip that away, for she didn't know what lay underneath, but in the meantime she could at least be content to chat with him aimlessly.

"So what brings you here tonight?"

He fixed her with an unreadable expression and said, "I had a date, actually."

She nodded, consciously keeping her thoughts level.

"She cancelled," he followed. "But I decided to come to the reservation anyway."

"The cancellation fees are beastly."
"I'm really just here for the food," he corrected. "I come here all the time."

"Me too," she said, then amended, "Well, I try to. It's hard to get a reservation sometimes, unless Ginny makes it."

"Ginny Weasley?" he asked, his eyes gaining some life, betraying a sense of excitement. "She plays for the Harpies, right? They're having a great season this year. I think they'll make it to the Cup."

Hermione nodded, shrugging slightly; he caught her expression and smiled wryly. "You don't care about quidditch, do you?"

She shook her head. "I still cheer her on though."

He waved his hand, a smirk still splayed across his mouth. "It's fine, Granger; most women don't give an owl's hoot about quidditch."

What kind of assumption was that? "Not most women, Malfoy," she countered. She turned back to staring at the kitchen.

"Just this one," she added softly.

He chuckled next to her.

"Apologies," he murmured. "I should know better than to include you with 'most women', Hermione."

Her name sounded rather foreign on his lips, but something in the way he said it pleased her. Her name felt almost new coming from him, like it was the first time it had ever been said. She knew that this was a silly thought, as he'd called her by her first name before, but it didn't stop the smile that played at her mouth.

A chef exited the bustling kitchen, intent on making his way through the hallway they occupied; when she stepped a little closer to Draco in order to make space, he took a step away from her, enough for her to notice and frown at him.

She couldn't quite discern his motivations for not wanting to get close to her, and so she thought of all the negative reasons, and was immediately apologetic.

"I'm sorry - " she began.

He shook his head at her. "No no, don't worry, I'm just..." he stopped, his words failing him.

He looked at her intently, clearly deciding between honesty and personal comfort, and finished, "I'm just a little sweaty from work, and I don't want you to deal with that."

Hermione scoffed and waved her hand at him; an unrecognizable feeling shot through her at the mention of his sweat, but she ignored it. "You have a labor-intensive job. Besides, why didn't you just change your shirt after work? What would your date have thought?"

He grimaced slightly and retorted, "Well, why don't you just... stop making sense?"

Her lips curved into a smile and she laughed; this self-deprecating Malfoy was pretty amusing.

Besides, she'd had a feeling that he couldn't be so perfect-looking all the time, and was somewhat relieved that she had been right. He was human, after all.
She shook her head at the realization that she'd just thought of him as being "perfect-looking"; ugh, where had that come from?

"You're a handful," she murmured.

"But you already knew that," he replied, just as whoever was in the loo finally opened the bloody door. Hermione was startled to see not one, but two giggling individuals exiting the little restroom, their hands clasped, their clothing disheveled as they scooted past.

She locked eyes with Draco; his eyes were slightly wide, and in that moment something clicked in her brain, a dizzy realization of what it meant to assume that he may be interested in her romantically, what it meant to be at least somewhat attracted to him, what could happen in the next ten seconds if she followed the rabbit hole in her brain, made clear and appealing by the alcohol dimming her reservations.

He gestured to the open door and murmured, "You go first."

She tried to ignore the thumping of her heart as she nodded and maneuvered around him; she wasn't absolutely sure that when she entered the tiny, red-lit restroom he wouldn't step in behind her and lock the door.

She closed the door softly and went immediately to the mirror; the bathroom was like the belly of a submarine, with polished, exposed pipes stretching over the ceiling. The mirror seemed to magnify her reflection, making plain the sheen of sweat across her nose, the wild look in her eyes, and the rise and fall of her chest.

She leaned on the stone basin and splashed water on her cheeks; she couldn't tell if it was the artificial light but her face was flushed, a difficult thing already to see on her warm, sienna complexion.

So much for reestablishing boundaries - a man she used to despise was about to use the same restroom.

She suddenly didn't have to use the toilet anymore; instead she took out her wand to rid the little room of all smells with a few muttered charms. She tried to hold fast to logic as she did this; she didn't want anyone to deal with any kind of odd smell, regardless of who it was, she told herself.

When she was satisfied she took one last look in the mirror, straightening her shirt and fluffing her hair, before she opened the door carefully.

When she exited, she couldn't help but seek out Draco's eyes; his expression had warmed a bit from when he'd greeted her initially, though he still gave her a wide berth when he stepped around her and into the bathroom.

Hermione shakily made her way back to her table, her beating heart mismatched with the thumping of the music.

When she sat down gingerly, it took her a few seconds to reacclimatize to the vibe of her friends after such an oddly intimate experience. Between sharing a restroom with Draco, talking about his sweat, and realizing what may have happened just a few feet away from them while they had been talking, she felt like there was no illusion of formality to prevent her from attaching the physical - and if she was being honest, sexual - aspects of being human to him.

"Just in time, Hermione, the mackerel came," Ginny said, heaping some onto her small plate.
Hermione murmured her thanks and took up her utensils, resolving to concentrate on eating for the remainder of her time there.

Padma wadded her long, black tresses up in her fist and said, "So I was thinking, something like this, you know, but with it buzzed on the side - "

"You're not still on about that, are you?"

Padma dropped her hair and held up her hands. "I'm bored, what do you expect?"

"But your hair is so beautiful!" Ginny said, exasperated. "It's impossible to get mine that long; another inch and it always has to come off, it's too damaged."

Padma pouted playfully, rocking in her chair. "It's so boring, Ginny, it's been this way since I was a little kid!" She gestured at Hermione. "Look how beautiful Hermione's hair is; how am I supposed to keep up with that with my stringy nonsense?"

Hermione shook her head, smoothing a hand over her curls. "Interesting doesn't equal manageable, I assure you."

"I said beautiful, Hermione," Padma corrected. "I just want to shave the side - I think it would look rather fetching -"

"You'd have to show me a picture," Ginny said, popping a bite into her mouth. "The only person I've seen with hair like that is Gene from The Weird Sisters."

"Well it wouldn't be like that - all stuck out and slimy," Padma said. "It would be just like it is now, but with a patch missing."

"That doesn't give me more confidence," Ginny retorted.

Hermione finished what was on her plate and took a spoonful of the other main dish - duck and quail polpette - as she listened to the girls talk.

"Ever think about switching up your hair, Hermione?"

She fingered a tight curl, thankful that she had, a few years ago, stopped brushing out her dry curls and instead let them air-dry intact, preserving their shape and changing the bushy, feather light silhouette into a mess of springy tresses.

"Not a chance, Ginny. It's been murder just to get to this point."

"Didn't you used to straighten it sometimes?"

"Yes, and my hair didn't thank me for that." She waved her hand at them. "Seriously, it's fine the way it is."

The other girls shrugged and nodded in agreement. She took a bite, letting her eyes wander for a moment and unwittingly land on Draco.

He must have sensed her glance, for he looked up from his book after a few seconds; his arm was over the back of his booth, his hand in his hair as he leaned against it.

As he looked at her, his lips turned up in a smile, and it was with conscious effort that Hermione smiled, as nonchalantly as she could, back at him. She could see in his expression that they were sharing a unique moment, a secret, about what they had witnessed a short time ago in front of the
restroom.

He looked somewhat devilish when he smiled in the low light of this moody setting; with solely the glow from the flame orb illuminating his face, his eyes were only just discernible from behind his glasses, the icy color making them shine like a wolf's in the dark.

He went back to his book, and Hermione finished her meal in a bit of a daze. Everything was pleasant tonight: the delicious food, the cold alcohol, even the lighthearted conversation. And not just with her friends, but with Malfoy as well - she hadn't felt as on edge tonight as before. She'd even managed to poke fun at him a little, and it had gone just as smoothly as if he was a close friend.

That said, he was still somewhat awkward - but that was fine. She wasn't really sure if she wanted him as a friend. She had enough of those already.

The other women sighed happily as the waitress appeared in front of them, removing the finished plates and depositing a sliver of quivering chocolate mousse onto the table.

"Who ordered this beauty?" Padma asked, eyeing the little dessert like it was something naughty.

"Gift from the restaurant," the waitress replied, meeting Hermione's eyes for a moment before she exited, the ghost of a smirk across her mouth.

After the waitress was gone, Hermione turned back to the little dessert. It was beautifully decorated, with tiny blossoms cradling the edges and a smear of fruit jam circling the little triangle.

"I've had this one," Ginny said excitedly. "Hermione, you go first."

Hermione took up her fork, tapped it twice on the table so it cleaned itself, and tentatively cut into the little slice. It separated cleanly, and she put the perfect little morsel in her mouth.

Her eyes widened as she tried to process the smooth, soft taste. It was a perfect balance of sweetness and texture; usually she couldn't handle anything sweeter than a piece of fruit, but this was heavenly.

At the look on Hermione's face, Ginny burst into laughter, and then they were both laughing.

"It's so good, right?"

"It's really fucking good."

"Whew," said Padma, stealing a forkful, "If it's fucking good, I've got to try it."

Hermione eyed her; she knew the other witch was teasing her for her expletive, as it was a rare thing when she cursed.

She took another forkful and brought it to her lips. Her eyes closed as she savored the bite; it had to be indecent, a dessert this good. It was unclear what magic they had used to create this confection, but it had to be mixed with some sort of low-level stimulant potion, for it seemed impossible that the chocolate was simply that delectable.

She opened her eyes and immediately noticed Draco, staring at her yet again, his eyes molten. She couldn't tell if it was a trick of the low light, but it almost looked like he was appraising her.

Very suddenly she felt like she was on display, as if the other individuals in the room were merely noise and only she and he existed in the space; time seemed to slow down as she could see Draco's eyes unfocus from hers, dipping down. She became aware of her body language, the weight of her
leg crossed over the other, and her heart began to beat without control; she was warm and slightly
buzzed from the alcohol, and a dozen thoughts and emotions flitted across her mind. For a moment,
she had the bizarre urge to tease him sensually; she uncrossed her legs nervously.

Almost as soon as it had happened, the moment was gone, and Padma prodded Hermione playfully
to get her attention.

"Come on, sort yourself out, love," Padma murmured.

Ginny chuckled. "You'd better share," she warned lightly, cutting into the slice with her fork and
popping the little bite in her mouth. Her own eyes widened. "Damn," she said, chewing.

"Definitely taking one of these to go," Padma put forth, her fork poised above the plate, trying to
determine the best angle of attack.

Once they finished the little slice, practically demolishing it and leaving naught but a few chocolatey
streaks on the plate, the waitress deposited the check on the table, and Hermione snatched it away
before the other witches could get to it.

"You should be a Seeker with those reflexes," Ginny chuckled, putting away her clutch.

"If quidditch was played on the ground, maybe," Hermione countered, fishing the galleons out of her
bag and putting them into the miniature cauldron provided.

It was only a few minutes later, after Ginny made her way through her cocktail (was it the third?
Hermione had stopped counting) that the ladies stood and collected their things.

As they exited, Hermione risked a look at Draco; he was fully engrossed in his paperback, his wine
glass hanging loosely in his hand. She couldn't help but pause for a second, waiting for him to notice
that she was leaving, but he didn't look up in time.

A little unsatisfied somehow, Hermione followed her friends as they made their way to the fireplaces.
Though the decent weather may have been a blessing for the other wizards on the street, Hermione cursed it as she struggled out of her heavy wool robe. It was finally warm enough where the breath in her lungs didn't freeze, but it had taken longer than usual for the weather to warm up this year and she had assumed today would be no different.

She shuffled through the misshapen wooden door of the apothecary, stuffing her robe unceremoniously into her bag as she did.

Taking care of errands was one of her least favorite things to do on a weekend, but she was somewhat excited to get started on her experiments with healing alchemy and so she needed some special ingredients.

She had already stopped by Crimson Horticultural Rarities to pick up some mandrake root and a few venus flytraps - hopefully happy in their little protective bubbles in her satchel - and now needed some other things to help along the transmutations.

She browsed the first row aimlessly, looking at the most popular ingredients - it was a fun game she played to gaze upon ingredients and remember what potions they were used in, what their properties were, and even try to come up with new potions. What would happen if she mixed lace-wing flies into a Pepper-up Potion? It would alter how long the potion lasted, and perhaps would eliminate the crash; in any case she enjoyed perfecting everything.

She smiled to herself and treaded deeper into the shop.

As she rounded the corner, she was suddenly face to face with Draco. He took a step back in surprise; clearly he hadn't expected anyone to be in front of him and had nearly collided with her in his haste to get into the same isle.

"Sorry," he said hurriedly, before he realized who he'd almost run into; he stopped when he noticed the familiar face.

"Oh! Um..." Hermione staggered, flustered about the almost-accidental contact. "Hi there."

She was slightly embarrassed about the last time they had interacted; seeing him again reminded her of the odd sensations and thoughts she'd had at the restaurant, and how she had went home with him in the corner of her thoughts.

She had concluded the next day, when she was sure that all the alcohol was out of her system - she hadn't drank that much, but it had certainly been a guilty party to her actions that night - that she would have to reestablish some boundaries between them.

Seeing him here however, with his arms full of potion ingredients, he seemed perfectly innocent and painfully normal. It was hard for her to even think of the sultry look he'd given her that night with him standing there, looking tired and bored.
"Happy April Fool's," he said, taking a step back.

"Happy April Fool's. Going to give me giant teeth again?"

This had come out a little more scathing than she had intended, and judging by the furrowing of his brows, she may have taken this too far. She knew this, but it did not stop the feelings of anger, or helplessness, that kindled in her heart.

She was still angry with him, that was clear, and though she did not want to think about the past it was still there, barricaded just beyond the walls she had unconsciously erected to protect herself from that pain.

Despite this she didn't want to upset him, not only for fear of retaliation, but also because she just didn't want to think about the past.

"Maybe," he drawled finally, "but only if your back is turned."

She was immediately consumed by an odd sense of relief; he was thankfully back to being self-deprecating for her benefit. Something about this approach was really helping her communicate with him.

She let out the breath she had unconsciously been holding. "I'd never turn my back on you, Malfoy."

"That's probably best," he replied, turning and heaving a large glass jar he was carrying onto the shelf next to him. The various insect legs within twitched as they tumbled over each other.

She looked at the potion ingredients in his arms. "Wouldn't you normally just send a house elf to pick up potion ingredients?"

Draco smiled without humor; he had apparently detected her note of distaste and found it amusing. "I didn't quite know what I wanted, and besides, it was that logic that kept me cooped up in the Manor for years."

"Oh," Hermione said, faltering. She forced herself to take a few breaths; if she kept attacking him she knew it was only a matter of time before he took a piss out of her, and potentially caused irrevocable damage to their relationship.

"Besides, how would I run into you in Slug and Jiggers otherwise?"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "I knew you were following me."

He scoffed, walking further down the row and stopping in front of the shelf of creature eyes. He considered a few, his finger following the labels under the display.

It occurred to her that she was actually the one following him, in this store, so she brushed past him to the other end of the row to retrieve the kelpie blood she needed. Thankfully this place was rather large, so even though it was a prime shopping time, it didn't seem like the shop was crowded. It was still pretty noisy in the store, however, between the skittering of some of the ingredients, the chiming of the scales on the other side of the wide wooden counter, and the screeching and squawking of the live creatures on the second floor.

After she had selected the freshest looking jar, she turned to see Draco standing next to her expectantly.

"What's that for?" he questioned.
"Oh," she said, surprised that he cared enough to ask. "I'm trying out some of Le Jandre's techniques on plant matter, and I think the blood will provide some organic tissue to help the transmutation."

"Because of the living cells?"

She nodded. "The viscous blood has some living cells still available, and because of the kelpie's shapeshifting abilities, it may adapt to a transmutation."

He nodded, examining her jar a little more closely, and thus putting his interested face right in front of her vision; she became aware of her breath, and held it uncertainly as he inspected the deep crimson liquid.

"What are you trying to transmute?" He leaned away and refocused on her.

She could hear the scholastically critical note in his voice, and found herself slightly nervous under the direct questioning. "I'm using mandrake root, and want to see if I can transmute something simple, like a lung."

"Simple," he snorted. "Lungs are horribly complex."

She shrugged. "Would you recommend I start with an eye, or a heart?"

He stopped, his eyes rolling to the ceiling as he considered this. "No, I suppose not," he admitted. "But perhaps a vein strand would be easiest, since the kelpie blood would lend itself well, and wouldn't have to shapeshift as far."

She nodded appreciatively, hugging the jar to her chest. "You're right, that's an excellent suggestion."

He smirked at her. "You're always aiming for the moon, Granger. You should start with a cloud."

"Says the man who wants to transfigure brain tissue to change someone's mood," she countered.

He shrugged, looking down at his potions. "Merlin knows we wizards need it right now."

She immediately detected the slight break in his voice, and the closeness to which he was flying to his motivations. Hermione desperately wanted to question him about why he was studying neurohealing, why he wanted to use transfiguration techniques in psychotherapy, why he was interested in helping people at all, but she wasn't sure yet if he would trust her beyond the basics, or if he would potentially shut her down.

Instead, she sighed and asked, changing the subject, "Shouldn't you be dressed up?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's April Fool's. Doesn't St. Mungo's do a gag every year?"

He nodded. "Yes, but this year's gag was illusioning ourselves to look like inferi, and I wasn't into it."

Hermione pictured it - hundreds of inferi, bustling around the hospital in their lime green lab coats and healing everyone like a typical workday. She snickered; St. Mungo's always had the best pranks.

"That sounds like fun; why didn't you want to participate?"

"Not my style," he replied. "Besides, I'm already scary enough as it is to most patients."
She nodded, but didn't miss the note of sadness in his tone as he said this. He was still notorious in their world, and somehow she knew that there were people who would question being healed by him.

"Last year's was better - the headless healers - so I'll just wait for what they have in store next year."

"Fair enough. I remember it; it was quite a sight."

He turned to look at her properly. "How do you remember that? Were you there that day?"

"Yes, back then I used to do therapy on... ah..." she fumbled, her ears suddenly buzzing at her carelessness. She had gotten so comfortable conversing with him that she had forgotten to avoid the things that she wasn't meant to talk about, the things that would inevitably drive them apart.

"Therapy, huh," he murmured.

She knew she must resemble an owl with her eyes so wide. She looked around nervously, trying in vain to find some escape, some way to excuse herself.

When she looked back at him, he was studying her, his lips set in a hard line, his brows furrowed. She was somewhat soothed to see that he wasn't about to make some snide comment at her.

"That's me as well," he admitted finally.

Her heart finally began to slow... she breathed in and out, realizing vaguely that her panic at him knowing about her therapy sessions was not only wildly unfounded, but had very nearly had caused her to flee from the shop like a scared animal.

"Hey," he murmured a little more softly, catching her gaze. She stared back at him cautiously.

"I don't know what you're going through..." he said uncertainly, "but I promise you - I wouldn't say anything about it."

She looked steadily into his eyes - probably for the longest she ever had - and was stunned to see his usual carefully fabricated expression gone, replaced with what looked like a very real frown of concern.

Once again, she found a significant power in his look... it was as if he was trying to find a way to express something to her, but simply couldn't.

"I... I've been told," he continued, leaning against the shelves and looking away for a moment, "that it will take a long time, and a lot of self-awareness, to truly get through the layers... the barriers to who I really am."

Hermione nodded; she was shaking slightly, she knew, but was feeling a lightness and lack of pressure in this moment that gave her the strength to speak. "Because you had to put something there to survive. Something to protect you... from the things that hurt."

He smiled slightly, his eyes still painfully sad. The shelf he was leaning on groaned under the weight as he shifted.

For the first time, Hermione understood a little more about him beyond what he was doing with his time or how he decided to act nowadays. She felt that she was getting a little closer to what lay beneath the carefully constructed polish, beneath the anger and resentment, and most pressingly, beneath the sarcastic indifference.
She understood this talk about layers, as it was something her therapist had brought up with her as well.

It was with conscious effort that she had tried to move on from the War - the lives that were lost, the death she had seen, the torture she had endured - but it seemed that in her haste she had instead learned to push down the sadness, the helplessness and fatigue, instead of healing from it.

What this created was a somewhat unfeeling shell of a person, with deeply rooted negativity and unresolved pain. The only outlet she'd been able to have was the focus on healing - something about learning a whole new area of magic made her feel young again, innocent again... clean.

But then she would think she had seen Tonks ahead of her in line at the grocery, or would see a photo of Malfoy Manor in the *Prophet*, or would visit Fred's grave... and then she would remember the cries of pain, the spiders crawling over and eating the wounded alive, the smell of burnt flesh and acrid potions -

"Granger? ... Hermione?"

Her eyes refocused on Draco, whose head was dipping down to level with hers.

"Sorry," she said quickly, wiping her face on her shoulder. "Just thinking."

"It's okay, you know," he said, standing up straighter and setting the jars in his arms on the shelf next to him. They clinked and chimed against each other as they crowded the other glassware.

He paused, still looking in the direction of his discarded ingredients. "Look... I know you don't want to talk to me, and -"

"No, Draco, that's not it..." she tried.

"No, really, it's okay, Granger. I get it."

"It's not that -"

"I mean, I'd hate me too. I *do* hate me."

"Stop," she said dangerously. He looked at her, slightly taken aback by the command, but complied, allowing her to continue.

"It's not that. I mean yes, it's hard for me to... talk to you normally... if you couldn't tell by my comments today," he nodded in acknowledgement, "but just realize... we just don't talk about what happened. We don't talk about the War."

"Why not?" he asked bitingly. "It's not like you were on the wrong side of it all."

Something about this comment panged her heart; she wasn't sure if it was the embarrassment of assuming he wouldn't also be recovering, or perhaps the realization that he probably had very few people, if anyone, to talk to about it.

But despite this she let a slight sense of irritation win over her guilt, and she crossed her arms, her little jar dangling from her hand. "This isn't a who's-had-it-worst contest, Draco. You must know it's hard for us as well."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath; when he opened them again, he muttered, practically through his teeth, "Of course."
She tried a small smile. "Besides, I really appreciate that you're trying to be civil."

"Civil?" he asked incredulously.

Hermione shrugged slightly.

Draco shook his head, palming his face. She couldn't tell if he was angry at her assumption or embarrassed by his own behavior - either way she had no idea what he was thinking.

The brunette witch stared at him; after a few moments, a smirk appeared across his mouth and he murmured, "And here I thought I was being friendly."

She raised her eyebrows at him, her eyes wide; at the look on her face, he broke out into a proper smile, chuckling.

"You looked like you were in pain half the time you were trying to talk to me," she informed him.

"And what about you? Pulling compliments out of your arse to distract me."

She gasped indignantly, but a smile crept into her expression; he was right, she had been practically babying him with compliments to keep him from potentially saying something awful to her.

She found herself chuckling, and after a moment he joined in; the whole situation was rather ridiculous, she realized. They were both afraid of each other.

As they laughed, she could feel a shift in their dynamic; it seemed that the previous pretense of being polite had finally fallen away, and she felt that they were actually having a real conversation.

"So why did you decide to talk to me? At Flourish and Blotts that day?"

"I didn't know anyone else."

She eyed him. "Somehow I'm not buying that."

"Ugh, Granger, let up on the reins," he drawled. "I just didn't know anyone."

She fixed him with a look; she wasn't about to let the heavy moment slip away completely yet, not when she knew she could get more out of him. Who knew when he would open up like this again?

"How about we make a deal," she started.

He playfully narrowed his gaze at her, his eyes like slits behind his honey frames. "What kind of deal?"

"A deal that we don't pretend anymore," she continued. "That we try to be ourselves around each other - as much as we can."

He stopped, and in the fear that flickered across his features she saw her own fear reflected - the fear of getting too close, the fear of peeling back a layer, the fear of what might lie underneath.

She pressed on. "If you tell me, I promise I'll tell you something."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really."
"Anything?"

"Anything. I promise." She noticed the slight uptick in his lips and quickly amended, "Within reason."

He tisked. "Typical Gryffindor. Always a catch."

Despite the pressure for him to be honest, she was still grateful for his sarcastic exterior; humor and sarcasm, she knew, were important tools in healing - at least when they weren't distracting from the truth.

"I just... when I saw you, I realized that... urgh," he said, faltering; she had never seen him this speechless, and it was starting to freak her out.

"I had things to say," he put forth, "and I didn't know when I'd see you again... so I attempted to tell you then."

"Tell me what?"

He shook his head. "Not the time, Granger. Besides, it's my turn."

She glared at him, to which he responded with a boyish smirk that reminded her of his Hogwarts self.

"Fine. Ask away."

"Why didn't you want to get coffee with me?"

She stared at him, stunned; of all the odd or awful questions he could have asked, why was that the thing he was concerned with?

"Is that really what you want to ask?"

"I mean, I'm endlessly curious about your life, but yes."

She wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic or not.

"I... I felt like..." She tried to remember precisely why she hadn't wanted to get coffee with him, but it was fuzzy now that it had been more than a week. She sighed. "I'm not sure anymore. I think I was afraid to get to know you."

He nodded coolly, glancing at his abandoned jars on the shelf.

"Please understand," she continued hastily, "I don't mind helping you with your project. In fact, the bit about the suppliers, I bet - "

He shook his head and waved his hand. "No work right now, Granger. If you want to tell me, you'll have to reconsider the coffee."

She eyed him, but inclined her head. He must know that it was hard for her to not share information, especially helpful information. "Fair enough. Let me think about it."

She suddenly remembered where they were; that whole time they had been standing in the middle of an aisle, with people bustling around the shop, pulling things from the shelves and brushing past them. She looked around.
"What time is it?" Draco asked, mostly to himself, holding up his wrist to check his watch. "Three o'clock," he murmured. He picked up his ingredients from the shelf next to him.

"I've - I've got to get some other things," Hermione murmured, looking around.

"Me too," he said.

She was hesitant to leave him, mostly because this was the most honest conversation she had ever had with the wizard, and she was slightly reluctant to leave that behind, left in the isle like a forgotten jar of frog's eyes.

He must have felt this way as well, because after a moment he said carefully, "See you at checkout," and stepped around her.

She pulled out her wand and summoned her list, dazed; this was not what she had expected when she had entered the stiff, dusty air of the apothecary, but now that it had happened she was actually breathing more easily than she had in a while. It was somewhat refreshing to talk about her feelings, to not have to smile while she was upset or say she was fine when she wasn't.

She went through the aisles quickly, collecting the rest of the things she needed: a few scruples of fluxweed, murtlap tentacles, and some icewraith essence for her icebox. She crossed off the other items - they weren't necessary yet, and she was already approaching five galleons for what she had - and vanished her list.

As she approached the counter she saw that Draco was already there, watching the old witch behind it weigh out what looked like a few handfuls of seeds.

She wasn't quite sure what to say to him; it was an odd thing to be doing something like shopping next to him, so she stewed in the discomfort while he was helped, waiting for the other ancient wizard behind the counter to notice her.

The mangy old witch wrapped his other ingredients in fabric and placed them in a simple box, and it tied itself with twine.

"Thirteen galleons, seven sickles," she croaked, just as he placed a few stacks of galleons on the counter.

Hermione tried not to feel anything at this, but it was hard not to; sometimes she forgot how wealthy Draco was, but it was unmistakable in these situations where he could get whatever he wanted and not even pay attention to the price. She grimaced as the old man behind the counter stopped tinkering with the gold scales behind him and motioned at her. She set her jars on the counter, along with the correct amount of money she owed.

Tapping at the window of the store got her attention then; she sighed when she realized it was her owl, Ginger, holding a rolled Ministry note.

She quickly heaped the glass bottles into her bag, thankful that the undetectable extension charm allowed her to carry more than her other satchels.

"That's my owl," she explained to Draco, who was watching her movements like she was crazy.

"Oh, well then... bye, Granger," Draco said.

She smiled at him quickly in goodbye and made her way to the door; Ginger followed her movements from the other side of the glass, hopping across the dusty windowsill until she met
Hermione at the door.

"Who gave you this?" Hermione questioned the bird, speaking more out of irritation than actually asking. She retrieved the rolled note, opened it and read it quickly.

Urgh; one of the Confederation warlocks from England had been bugging her secretary again. She appreciated the eagerness of some members of the Confederation of Wizards, but sometimes she felt like they bothered her incessantly just to make sure she was working, as if they didn't trust her. She didn't want to think it had anything to do with her being muggleborn, but well... she was the only muggleborn in the ranks of senior leadership, so it wasn't a stretch.

She dug in her bag for her planner, pushing the little glass bottles aside and praying that none of them uncorked.

"Need some help, there?"

"Got it," she muttered, pulling out the little planner. She looked up and found Draco standing in front of her; from the look in his eyes, it was more likely that he found her struggle amusing than he was actually offering assistance.

His eyes softened a bit. "Hey, Hermione... thanks for talking to me today."

She nodded automatically, feeling somewhat breathless. "Of course. Thank you as well."

He assessed her expression for a moment; it couldn't have been more than two seconds, but on the receiving end it seemed longer. She gave no signal that she noticed his attention.

"See you later," he murmured, turning and walking down the uneven stone street.

She watched him go for a few seconds; something in the way he had said goodbye left her feeling strangely incomplete. She felt an odd mix of curiosity, relief, and unresolved tension from their interaction today, and she couldn't help but go back over the things she had said to try to figure out what had happened.

She hadn't made as much of an effort to steer the conversation today, and it had showed. That said, they were still getting on much better than they had initially; between getting him to open up and talk with her freely about their shared past, and being able to take a piss out of him without him ripping her apart, well... it was a start.

She opened the planner for a moment, then halted; why was she trying to schedule a meeting in the middle of the street?

"Return this note to Barringer," she told Ginger tartly. "And if you feel like biting him, don't hold back."
Hermione always made a point to frequent this - and other - theaters to support the many progressive and thought-provoking shows they exhibited.

This one in particular was a fairly new establishment, replacing a shop that was wrecked during the War, springing up in its place as this section of Diagon Alley was rebuilt. The outdoor facade gave the appearance of a small, local theater, but once inside the place expanded to epic proportions, towering over the guests with high ceilings, intricate chandeliers, and chiseled, shining pillars.

She was perched at bar height table near a window, one leg crossed over the other as she sipped her wine. She was already wearing the "don't talk to me" expression that she sometimes had to don when she went out alone; it had already failed her a few times tonight, but she'd thankfully had some success over the last several minutes.

Hermione sighed as she finally saw Padma coming towards her, swaying in her tall heels.

"Fashionably late, as always."

Padma leaned in and kissed Hermione's cheek. "Never letting me forget it, as always," she replied, smiling.

Hermione glanced down at Padma's dress. "Is this the one you were telling me about?"

"Yes. Finally getting some air!"

The girls chuckled as they left the table and walked slowly through the crowd; the reception hall was positively buzzing with tastefully dressed witches and wizards, eagerly conversing and sipping their drinks. As it was opening night, Hermione should have suspected that the enormous reception area would be packed.

She caught a reflection of herself in one of the high glass windows and lightly loosened her hair at the top, puffing it away from her scalp to add a bit more volume.

"Stop fussing, it's gorgeous as always," Padma admonished.

"It's rather foggy out, so I want to make sure it isn't fluffing on the bottom and flattening on the top."

"I could use a bit of fluff, myself," Padma said sadly, lightly picking up one of her waist-length tresses. "It's so lanky all the time."

"Nonsense," Hermione retorted.

A waiter stopped near them with a tray of wine; Hermione traded a glass for a galleon and handed it to Padma.
"How is it that you always know what I want?" Padma sighed, clinking her glass against Hermione's.

"Intuition," Hermione replied. "So how did the meeting in Mumbai go?"

"Fine. Better than my meetings with Gibbons, or Rochefort. Barely had enough time to change, though - I was too busy getting vada pav by the embassy."

"Mmm. You should take me to your favorite place to eat."

"I have so many favorites, Hermione. Besides, I wouldn't dare steal you away from Richard." She smirked slyly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. She knew the attention her boss was paying to her was getting rather noticeable. "He's just giving me some career coaching, I assure you."

"You should be the one coaching him," Padma put forth. "No one our age is that high up in the Ministry. Save for Harry, of course, but he doesn't really count. Meanwhile, Caticus is approaching sixty and you're probably going to replace him any day now."

"Not a chance," Hermione waved.

"So he hasn't mentioned it? I don't even work with your team that much and even I know it's coming!"

"Well, he has been talking about retirement a lot," the curly-haired witch said. "But I feel like the politics and bureaucracy just get worse the higher up you go. That definitely isn't my favorite part of my job." She took a healthy sip of wine.

"Speaking of bureaucracy, any more harassment from Rita Skeeter?"

Hermione laughed. "Half my letters these days are from her. She's relentless!"

"So she's trying to crawl back," Padma muttered, shaking her head. "At least the book deal will keep her out of the Prophet for a couple more months."

"We can always hope," Hermione said, finishing her wine.

Padma took a sip, glancing around the room. Her eyes narrowed somewhere off to Hermione's right. "Is that... is that Draco Malfoy?"

Hermione turned immediately.

She had not expected to see him here, but there he was, near the bar, clad in elegantly modern dress robes. She could just make out the deep sapphire bit of shirt poking through his robes as he leisurely sipped what appeared to be a finger of firewhiskey. He was listening to his companions - a similarly dressed man Hermione suspected was Blaise Zabini, and woman whose back was turned to her, looking like a flute of champagne in her sparkling golden gown.

"It would appear so," Hermione murmured.

Unconsciously she pulled the slightly bunched silk dress smooth over her hips. She had opted for a little black dress tonight, and suddenly felt more exposed than she had when she'd initially walked in and removed her robe, baring the little frock (and her uncovered chest and arms) to the room. Several wizards had already introduced themselves and gushed over her accomplishments in both the war
and the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and she'd blushed horribly when their eyes had inevitably dipped to her low décolletage.

She was torn between avoiding Draco completely or deliberately going up to talk to him. He at least seemed to be preoccupied with his acquaintances, which would perhaps prevent him from seeking her out if he did happen to see her.

Although, she was curious about what brought him here, to this performance - she did not expect him to care about something like progressive ballet or supporting the arts.

And though she was afraid to even admit this to herself... she felt that she looked very good tonight and honestly wouldn't mind being seen by him.

Grounding her nerves, she exhaled slowly and turned back to Padma.

"Do you want another drink, love?"

Padma finished her wine with one final swig, swallowed and said, "Do you really need to ask?"

They made their way to the crowded bar, Hermione checking her watch on the way. They would need to find their seats in a few minutes, and she wondered briefly how quickly she could down another glass of wine.

She squeezed between two solid walls of dress robes, leaned against the bar and said to the bartender, "Sauvignon blanc, and..." she glanced at Padma, "make that two." She dropped two more galleons on the black marble.

Hermione waited, vaguely wondering how long it would take for Draco to come up to her. She felt almost childish for doing this, for putting herself in his path rather than just going up and talking to him, but - somehow it was harder when his friends were there. She didn't know how they would react to her if she accosted him out of the blue, and until she was sure that they weren't pricks she didn't want to chance it.

"Are we going to be able to finish a whole glass each?" Padma craned to look at Hermione's watch, just as the bartender deposited two shining glasses in front of them.

Hermione smirked. "We may need to chug."

Padma laughed at the serious look in Hermione's eye, taking up her glass. "You? Chug a drink?"

She shrugged and laughed with her.

Suddenly Padma's eyes flitted over her shoulder and widened, and the brunette witch already knew what was about to happen.

"Evening, Granger. Patil."

Hermione turned to see Draco directly behind her, leaning against the bar, way closer than she had expected - she inadvertently brushed his legs with her dress as she turned. There was a mirthful glint in his eye, which startled her; she had never seen him looking this happy.

"Hi, Draco," she replied. She fought the urge to back up; this was the closest she had ever been to the man, and she could feel the heat radiating off him.

"Malfoy," Padma greeted dryly, sipping her drink.
Hermione couldn't help but picture his expression as he had shared more about himself than she ever would have expected, his eyes framed in honey-brown, translucent frames. Today he wore rimless, rectangular glasses, his eyes fully commanding despite his loosened posture.

"What brings you to the ballet?" she questioned, her voice elevating over the noise of the many chattering wizards around them.

"It's supposed to be incredible. I'm curious to see how they interpret the loss of language," he answered, leaning in so he didn't have to shout. Hermione covered her blush with a sip of her drink.

She had not been prepared for his intensity - his closeness, his intentioned gaze, his comfort - and was panicking already.

She licked her lips and said, somewhat shakily, "Yes - I've seen another ballet from this company - it was about the evolution of love after the end of civilization. It was... unbelievable. I was in tears by the end."

"I heard about that one," he said, tearing his eyes away from Hermione's silky black stomach. "I'm sorry I missed it."

A hand clapped him on the shoulder, and an uncharacteristically animated Blaise Zabini appeared behind him, followed by the champagne-woman Hermione hadn't recognized. "Alright there, Malfoy? Need a wing-man?"

Draco furrowed his brows in irritation, and a smile spread across Blaise's beautiful features.

"'Sup, Granger." Blaise reached around Draco and clinked his glass with Hermione's. "Padma! It's been forever." He clinked her glass as well.

Hermione had never really interacted with Blaise before, though she knew of him; he had been at Slughorn's parties back in school, and had been fairly stoked down and calm until a glass or two of spiked cider. Either way, the unspoken animosity between Slytherins and Gryffindors prevented them from really connecting.

He seemed perfectly comfortable addressing her despite this. She suspected it was the alcohol.

"Now Blaise, you've had enough, I think!" the woman behind them chimed, though based on the sway of her hips it seemed as if she'd also had enough.

"I don't think we've met, I'm Ariana." She extended a red-tipped hand to each of the girls. "Such a relief to meet some women here! These boys are so boring, they don't get out much."

"Lies!" Blaise exclaimed in mock shock.

The new witch rolled her eyes at him playfully, turning towards Hermione. "Where are you ladies sitting?"

Hermione fumbled with her tickets, her heart beating heavily against her ribcage. Why was Draco standing so close to her? She could feel his breath - smelling like the sweet, cinnamon flavor of his firewhiskey - down her neck, pooling in the v at her breasts.

It wasn't like she was mad about it - she wasn't not enjoying the closeness, and she had known what she was doing when she'd gone to the bar, but - it was just distracting.

"We're... towards the back of the orchestra section."
"Us as well!" the witch exclaimed, plucking the glass of firewhiskey out of Blaise's hand before he could do more than pucker his lips to sip it. "We should make our way there. Oh, I'm so excited!" She pushed the men aside and took a hold of Hermione's arm rather forcefully.

Hermione avoided Draco's gaze as she allowed Ariana to pull her and Padma towards the entrance. She downed the rest of her drink and hastily deposited the glass on the edge of the bar as she was practically dragged towards the doors.

She had not expected to join the other wizards, and so she said nothing as they stepped through the archway.

The warm theater was beautifully ornate, more than any Hermione had ever been in. She gawked at the gold leaf swirls and lush velvet and brocade as Ariana ushered them into their row.

As luck would have it, Ariana and the boys were sitting only a slot away from her and Padma. Draco took the seat closest to Hermione, the empty seat between the groups the only thing separating them.

"It's supposed to be very modern," Ariana called over Draco's pristine head. "There isn't even an orchestral!"

"Yes," Hermione answered. "I love modern ballet."

"Me too!" Ariana declared, her hair swinging. She nudged Blaise excitedly, and he in turn slid an arm around her shoulders.

Hermione sighed and patted her chest, wondering if she had overdid it with the wine - she could feel her stomach swimming with the alcohol. "I don't think I've ever ingested wine that fast," she muttered to Padma.

Padma just shook her head. "Oh, Hermione. Delicate Hermione." She playfully pushed her leg into her friend's.

Draco noticed the movement - Hermione could see his face turned towards her in her peripherals. She looked down; her dress had ridden up, exposing the tops of her thighs. Draco was close enough that it was unlikely that he could see the fabric bunched at her lap, but definitely got a full view of her naked legs from the side, bare except for her ankle strap heels. The brunette witch resisted the urge to pull the fabric down.

The theater lights dimmed then, and the crowd clapped eagerly, then hushed into silence, waiting.

The first notes of sound from the performance vibrated in the theater, deep like the horn of a ship, and the curtain opened to reveal a barren, smooth landscape, seeming to stretch infinitely beyond the back of the stage, disappearing into the horizon. A lone dancer was curled up in the center, her sapphire and aubergine skin contrasting sharply with the cream environment.

Hermione's heart began to pound in anticipation.

More notes joined the vibrating music, and the dancer stood smoothly; she had seemed so small initially, but now her form grew, rising to the ceiling, filling the landscape, becoming too big for the stage; she crumpled again, and her form diminished, becoming small once more.

As the music became more complex, more dancers advanced on the first, their skin lilac, amethyst, and azure. The first dancer weaved through them, spinning and feigning as they walked slowly across the floor.
Hermione had only been to one other magical ballet performance - the previous show she'd seen by this company - and the way they'd used magic to augment the experience had been breathtaking. It seemed like this would be no different; Hermione's attention was fully on the beautifully lit stage as the dancers flitted across it effortlessly.

The performance soon evolved into duets and trios; there was an interesting element of illusion magic at work, as suddenly, after a turn or a flip, a dancer would no longer possess a mouth, or ears, or eyes. Hermione watched in awe as they struggled, fell into each other seamlessly, and moved as though they were trying in vain to express themselves.

By the intermission, Hermione was so deeply enthralled in the story that she had very much forgotten about their unexpected companions. The beauty of the dances was jaw-dropping; the dancers moved together in ways Hermione had never seen. She'd had to suppress the urge to clap several times.

She was pulled out of her state however when she heard Draco's voice, surprisingly low.

"Wow."

Padma nodded, fanning herself, her wry smile returning. "Yeah. I feel like I need to sit and just... process that."

Hermione chuckled lightly, still not fully recovered from the intensity of the performance. "I can't believe we're only half-way through. It's fantastic already."

"Oh Merlin, the duets," Ariana gushed.

"I know!"

"After that, I need a smoke!" Blaise exclaimed jokingly, standing up. "Drinks?"

"Drinks," Ariana answered, her face still brimming with excitement. She beckoned to Hermione and Padma, who looked at each other but complied, waiting for Draco to rise as well so they could follow, single file, out of the row.

As the other group walked a little ahead of them, Padma leaned into Hermione and murmured, "I think we've been adopted."

The brunette witch chuckled, beginning to feel the wine. "Indeed."

"I kind of love it though. I've no idea how she's friends with Blaise and... geez, Malfoy."

"Very weird."

"He seems different now though." Padma swayed in her revealing emerald dress, lightly bumping her friend.

Hermione found herself nodding in agreement. "Yes, you're right."

"What do you think happened?"

Hermione shook her head, straightening her dress again. "Haven't the foggiest."

"I'll be honest, when I saw him standing behind you, I didn't even think he knew who you were - what with the way he was checking you out."

Hermione's face pinked. "He was checking me out?"
Padma smirked. "Yeah." Her eyes shined with a mischievous glint that Hermione recognized immediately.

She was always trying to get Hermione to flirt with people whenever they went out. Padma's fierce beauty and sharp wit made her a natural in social situations, and whenever they went to bars, or events, or even work, the woman always had an enchanting intensity that attracted very interesting partners. She always met them toe to toe, saying what seemed to be exactly the right thing to make them laugh, or think, or... want her.

Hermione however would unconsciously sling thinly veiled sarcasm and bitterness at men until they bugged off.

The brunette witch shook her head to clear it. She hadn't thought through the possible ramifications of seeking Draco out, and somehow didn't anticipate direct attention from the wizard as a possible outcome. Now that it was happening, however, she was fumbling with how to react.

When they reached the crowded bar, Ariana had already ordered a shot each of a clear liquor, which she eagerly handed out to the ladies and the men. She had clearly forgotten that they'd already had too much to drink.

Hermione sniffed the shot - it was definitely tequila.

"Cheers!" Ariana said, clinking glasses with them and spilling some of the strong liquor over her red-clawed hand.

Hermione grimaced and took a sip, shutting off her brain before it could conjure up something swotty to say about mixing different kinds of alcohol, or giving in to peer pressure, or whatever she was supposed to be impervious to.

"It's Escupida Diablo, one of my favorites. I can't believe they serve it here; I thought it was only available in Mexico!" She took a sip and sighed, just as Blaise threw back the whole thing. Ariana looked at him sharply.

"You're supposed to sip it!" she chided. "Are you trying to get completely sloshed?"

Blaise shrugged, looking sheepish. "It just looked so good."

"It's very smooth," Hermione affirmed, smiling. While her companions' dynamics were certainly entertaining, she didn't know these people well enough to really talk to them easily, though that didn't stop Ariana. She leaned against Padma unconsciously, encouraging the other woman to help her engage.

"So how did you hear about the ballet?" Padma asked.

"My mother is one of their biggest donors. She's always trying to get me to go - so I told her, if they have a bar, I'll give it a shot." Blaise grinned. "It was like pulling gnomes to get this one to come though." He nudged Draco in the ribs.

"I'd heard about it," Draco defended.

"Yeah, but getting your reclusive bits out of your room after six o'clock is quite a feat!"

Hermione's heart quickened as Draco met her gaze, looking almost apologetic, and definitely embarrassed. "I go out sometimes," he muttered.
"Study groups don't count," Blaise winked.

"What about you, Ariana?" Padma interjected smoothly.

Ariana flipped her hair over her shoulder. "I've loved the ballet since I was a girl!"

"Me too."

"Plus, I'd never miss an opportunity to dress up!" She turned and bent slightly, displaying her sparkling dress and inadvertently pushing her arse against Hermione. "I never get to at the Ministry."

"What department are you in?" Hermione asked quickly, knowing that she shouldn't bring up work, but well, it was all she really knew how to talk about. Plus, Draco had definitely noticed the accidental contact between Hermione and the inebriated witch.

Ariana twirled back. "Department of Magical Games and Sports. I'm a financial analyst."

"Oh, my friend Ron works there. That's fascinating; what does that entail?"

"Well, I take a look at the sales data for our quidditch league and make projections. So when the games - "

"No no," Blaise interjected, "she'll never shut up about it!"

Ariana pouted playfully and smacked his arm. "You love it."

"Yes, well, you helped money-for-pants here and I out of some serious financial quandaries, I'll give you that."

"I know," she replied tartly. "You boys were bleeding galleons before I came along."

"We're still bleeding galleons," Blaise retorted, unloading his and Draco's shots onto the bar.

"This is different! You have to treat yourself now and again... " She gestured around the opulent room. "Speaking of which, oh Merlin, the ballet!"

"I know," Hermione joined. "The choreography is unbelievable. Such a raw interpretation. They actually looked like they're trying to speak!"

Someone pushed at Hermione and Padma's back, and Draco reached out and pulled her to him briefly, guiding her as the wizards behind them travelled through the space she had previously occupied. Hermione tried to ignore the electrifying feel of his hand gripping her waist, bunching the thin silk between his fingers and all but caressing her side. For a fraction of a second, she wildly considered what his hand would feel like on her naked flesh.

"Absolutely stunning," Draco agreed.

Hermione glanced at him; his cheeks were pink, probably from the alcohol; his previously brushed back hair was slightly wavy and hanging in his eyes. He had already removed his outer robe, which was draped over his arm, and for the first time Hermione noticed the lines of his chest, and how his shirt moved over his torso. She could detect the hint of a decently fit body in his tapered button-down, wrinkling over his skin, his chest peeking through the undone buttons at the top.

Padma nudged Hermione knowingly; the brunette witch looked away, caught.

"Another round?" Ariana asked.
"No way," Blaise said. "I have no idea how I'm supposed to apparate home after this."

"We've got to get in there, also," Padma added.

The group nodded in agreement and began making their way back into the theater, returning their tiny glasses to the bar and following the mob of people pouring through the doors.

Once they were in their seats again, Hermione made sure to pull the fabric of her slinky frock over her legs. She was beginning to sweat, probably from the combination of the alcohol she had ingested, the many hot lights and bodies in the space, and her own nervousness at the attention she was getting.

Draco had taken to studying her and it was disconcerting, but more disconcerting were the uncontrollable feelings she was experiencing toward the young wizard.

She started slightly as Padma leaned in and whispered, as loud as she dared without being overheard, "He keeps looking at you."

Hermione knew this game, but could not help the kindling feeling of attraction that was bubbling in her mind. It had been a very long time since she had been interested in any wizards, let alone dated a wizard, so his sudden interest, combined with his understated attractiveness, was melting her usually concrete personal walls.

"What do I do?" Hermione whispered back.

"That depends."

"On what?"

Padma smirked. "On what you want."

Yes, what did she want? She may have been hoping the witch would tell her how to avoid his attention, or at least give her advice she could scoff at, but instead Hermione was forced to really assess how she was feeling.

And a small part of her was enjoying his heated glances, more than the attention she had anticipated coming from him, and even more than the attention she had gotten scholastically or for her current work. Despite her normal lack of concern for her sexuality and her romantic pursuits, it was a segment of her life that was incredibly empty, and she could feel that emptiness more and more as the months passed.

Not that some wizards hadn't tried with her; she was still very famous, and more than a few wizards had inevitably sexualized her for the caricature she'd been in the media after the War - ferociously clever, strong, and extremely active in the resistance. But she wasn't about to fulfill any weird fantasies about bedding a teacher's pet, or a gritty war heroine.

Draco's attention seemed much different; it seemed as if he may be legitimately attracted to her, possibly yes, because of her appearance (which he had been not so subtly appraising not just tonight she realized, but before as well), but also for their shared interests. He didn't seem like the type to want someone because of the idea of them.

She was pulled out of her thoughts when the decision was made for her.

Draco slid into the seat next to hers, and the other members of his posse followed suit, moving one seat over.
She glanced up at him, and met his gaze.

"Mind if I sit here?" he murmured intently. His eyes were piercing and contained a note of roguish confidence, as if he knew exactly what he was doing.

"Didn't give me much of a choice," she replied, a smile tugging at her mouth.

"That's better, isn't it?" Ariana sighed, adjusting her gown and untangling her delicate chain purse from her wrist. "We really lucked out with these seats."

"Yes, excellent choice, Blaise," Draco murmured.

"Anything for my favorite people," Blaise winked, patting his friend on the shoulder.

Padma nudged Hermione again, and she deliberately kept her gaze forward, trying to wait out having to deal with her feelings until after the performance was over. Not a few seconds had passed before the lights dimmed slowly once more and the audience quieted down.
The Ballet, Act Two

"Unspoken"

Dodderidge Arts Theater

Diagon Alley

April 6th

The curtain opened, revealing the stretching landscape once more, and in the center of the stage there was a lithe, azure man, resting upon what looked like a pile of loose fabric. A soft whistling melody wafted from the stage, almost as if it was being sung on the wind.

The dancer stood and spread out the fabric strip he was holding; it caught a nonexistent breeze and billowed out, flowing in every direction as he twirled.

Other dancers joined him, creating a loose network of trailing silk in deep purples, blues and grays; it was a treat for the eyes, watching gravity and physics create such a simple, pleasant scene.

Hermione was enjoying the show quite a bit, but was still very much aware of the patch of warmth next to her; with Draco so close she could hear him taking breath, shifting, adjusting in his seat. His arm was touching hers; he had apparently stolen the armrest between them while she had been preoccupied, and she didn't know how to avoid feeling him next to her without nudging his arm off the thing.

She sighed, refocusing on the performance; the dancers had taken to the air, the strips of fabric forming perches as they twirled, doing complex, synchronized aerial spins. Hermione could sense the delight of the audience in the shallow breaths and small gasps around them.

Finally the aerial dancers flowed from the stage, retracting the majority of the fabric and just leaving two silky lines suspended in the air. A pair of blue dancers were hanging from these lilac ropes, a few inches from the floor.

These new dancers fused and separated, their limbs twisting as they continuously wrapped each other in the thin rolled silk, creating a complex system of knots as they weaved together.

When they finally separated, connected by several strands, Hermione's eyes grew wide; she hadn't been cognizant of it while they had danced, but she saw now that they'd created a lattice of knots easily similar to Japanese bondage. Rope tightened across both of their throats, between their breasts, under their ribs, between their legs, all the way down to their knees.

She wasn't sure if her companions would make the same connection until she heard Draco's sharp intake of breath next to her.

She tried to sit completely still as her heart sped up... she had not expected to be confronted with something inherently sensual in his presence, but now that it was happening she was paralyzed.

It wasn't even so much the knots themselves, but the way the dancers moved, one dominating the other with a grasp of her neck or a twist of her leg, and then the other resurfacing to power with a simple flip, pining the other under her.

Just the thought of Draco finding this dance erotic... it raised a slew of intense, dizzying questions in
her mind, surrounding what he was interested in sexually, and - dare she even think it - if they could possibly be aligned in that regard.

But no, she had to be imagining things; there was a very slim chance that he was thinking the same way she was, and in any case, he seemed perfectly comfortable. He was simply enjoying the performance, just like everyone else. Only she was reading too much into it all.

She tried to brush away the warmth that had crept into her belly; she knew that the alcohol was really working on her, warming her core, dimming her mind, and loosening her imagination.

As the performance unfolded, the dancers moved their unrestrained limbs just as easily as if they weren't covered in knots. Every time the dancers held each other, pulled each other, created a position over each other that was vaguely sexual, Hermione had to consciously push down the warm feeling that spread in her abdomen, the awareness of the solid body next to her, the thoughts of how good it might feel to be that close to someone. She was damn near vibrating in her seat from the effort.

In an attempt to distance herself from the stimulation of the performance, she let her thoughts wander, her eyes unfocused. Unfortunately, this seemed to have the opposite effect; now she didn't have to watch the performance to supply the visual fodder to have those thoughts - she simply had to let her mind drift and imagine the feeling she'd had when Draco had touched her waist, or when she'd felt his breath down her chest.

She tried to fight new fantasies of his hand on her exposed legs, squeezing and caressing her touch-deprived skin, wrapping her limbs in ropes. As the fantasies solidified, they became racier; she wanted to know what would happen if she stood up and straddled the handsome wizard, right here, leaving nothing to his imagination of what it would be like to make love in the middle of the theater. She could practically feel his hands as they slid the skinny straps of her dress down her shoulders and bared her braless chest.

She cursed her inebriated, sex-deprived mind and narrowed her eyes at the dancers on the stage, trying desperately to refocus.

A particularly daring movement, as one of the dancers leapt unnaturally into the air and was caught and swung by the other, earned a few appreciative gasps from the crowd. Hermione's heartbeat finally began to slow as she watched the dancers twist their bodies around each other, undoing the fabric bit by bit, and she was once again drawn into the intricacies of the performance.

The landscape darkened to a deep purple as the two dancers retreated to the wings, and Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, steadying her breath. She understood now that she'd probably had a little too much to drink already, and was grateful that she was at least sitting and had time to sober up before the performance was over.

With the end of the scene, the dances became more somber; the mouthless, aubergine dancers returned, their movements jarring and irregular, the patterns they created asymmetrical.

The connecting tissue of the performances became clear - in every instance, there was something holding the people back, something manipulative and powerful; the force was elusive when the dancers tried to fight it and consuming when they didn't, and they succumbed over and over, unable to escape.

She couldn't help but reflect on her own experiences as she watched the dancers struggle; they were trying desperately to express something, pulling their partners back, holding them, spinning them and catching their limbs.
In a less artistic and flamboyant way, her community was suffering from the same sort of inability to communicate; those that had been affected by the War quietly went to therapy and ambled about with plastic smiles, pretending that everything was okay. She was one of these people, because it was hard to talk about the trauma they had endured; in fact, some portions of it were even hard to remember, as Hermione had consciously pushed it down, pushed it away, so she wouldn't have to face how it had felt.

Besides, how could she express what she was feeling when she wasn't even sure of it? How could she name those emotions when she couldn't recognize them?

She prided herself on being self-aware, but it was actually quite hard for her to be aware of what she was feeling, even moment to moment; she could recognize basic things like irritation, or excitement, but other things - the odd weakening sensation when she was scrutinized at work, the empty feeling whenever she looked at Ron - she couldn't understand what those things meant.

And what was worse, she knew sometimes what she was supposed to feel, but was too detached to be surprised or angry, too lost to react to anything. She should have been proud of her accomplishments, should have felt confident about what she had done, but it was simply never enough to make her feel anything at all; and so she did more, pushed harder, elevated herself further, like she was reaching for something at the top of all of this, reaching for something that felt like... reverence.

Something that would make her feel anything.

The strongest feelings she'd had in a while were the feelings that seeing Draco evoked, actually - he was a fixture in her past that she hadn't been exposed to until recently, and by trying to digest the ways he had changed - and him potentially doing the same for her - she was, in a way, coming to understand more about herself.

As the curtain finally closed and the dancers emerged, waving, Hermione clapped spiritlessly; there were cheers around them, people standing, but she was still too broken from the dances themselves to participate with any real conviction.

Having so many feelings in the span of one night was exhausting, and she didn't quite know what to do with herself as the room illuminated at last and the wizards in front of her stood.

She glanced at her companions; Ariana was fighting back tears, her previously blissful exterior gone, replaced by a deep entrancement. Even Blaise seemed to be sobered by the performance; his eyes were slightly unseeing as he looked at the now empty stage.

"Whew," Padma said quietly, brushing a long black strand behind her ear.

"That was amazing," Draco murmured.

Hermione's gaze settled on him; he was looking at her already, his eyes holding a depth of feeling that Hermione instantly understood. She knew he had been reflecting on his life as well; behind his expression she could see the somber effects of his own reflection.

She couldn't help but remember the conversation they'd had in the apothecary about layers, and about protecting oneself from one's pain. She wondered what he'd been thinking about as he watched the dances, how he'd been affected.

He seemed to realize his behavior then, and looked away, his mask reforming.

"One last stop at the bar?"
The group nodded silently, and began to rise and stretch their stiff limbs. Hermione and Padma followed the other wizards silently, Hermione only cracking a smile when Padma latched onto her reassuringly, rubbing the bare expanse of her back.

The noise from the crowd was deafening as they exited the ornamented theater, filing into the glass-fronted reception area.

Ariana ordered them another round of shots, and they took these with shaky smiles. Hermione's mind was still buzzing, her vision blurred at the edges; she focused on lightening her mood and allowing herself to enjoy the sensation of the air around them, the bustling people, and the burning alcohol as she swallowed a hefty sip.

"That was a lot," Blaise said, absently swirling his glass before downing his shot.

"So beautiful," Ariana affirmed, her eyes losing their lost quality and sparkling once again. "Merlin, I want to see it again."

"Gods, woman, once was already too much!" Blaise exclaimed jokingly, effectively lifting the spirits of the group. Hermione and Padma smiled and chuckled.

"Oh, Hermione, that one duet, with the rope!"

Hermione gulped. "Yes - so incredible, the way they moved each other."

"It was so sexy. Oh dear!" She fanned herself, earning another chuckle from the group.

Hermione shifted on her heels, her body weight falling onto her hip. Now that she was standing and was not trying to focus on one thing, she welcomed the warm dimming of her thoughts, the pleasant, smooth feeling of being more sure of herself.

She thought briefly of her panic during the performance; she'd felt horribly embarrassed by her sensual fantasies then, but now that Ariana had, with her comment, somehow made the sensual nature of that duet more obvious, Hermione felt a little less uncomfortable.

In fact, she was no longer cringing away from people's glances at her simple, revealing dress; the alcohol had really loosened her up, and she realized then that she was feeling incredibly sexy, between the attention she had been getting from Draco, the fantastic stimulation from the dances, and the comfort she felt in her own skin.

She unconsciously shifted again, falling onto her other hip, and noted Draco's glance. The brief bout of power she'd felt upon delivering her response to his presentation reawakened and transformed into something akin to physical power. Something about her was drawing his attention tonight, and she knew it and was no longer afraid.

Ariana suddenly looked past them and squealed; Hermione turned to see another witch coming towards them excitedly, her arms outstretched.

As the women embraced eagerly, Blaise gave a mock dance, imitating the pair, and the group laughed.

"Everyone, this is Hannah!"

Hermione started as she suddenly recognized Hannah Abbott, her thick eyebrows and curly smile unforgettable.
"Hermione! Hermione Granger!" the blonde said, and embraced her. She turned and embraced Padma as well.

"I think this calls for another round!" Blaise said excitedly, giving Hannah a side-hug quickly and raising his empty shot glass.

Hermione eyed him incredulously and burst out laughing, forgetting her heavy feelings towards the ballet. "Oh Godric, no more!" she joked.

Despite Hermione's protests, she found a glass of wine in her hand not a few minutes later; the members of their growing group clinked glasses warmly, swapping praises over the ballet. Hermione raised her wine glass to her lips; a little voice in the back of her head (who she liked to think of as a headmistress who kept an eye on her behavior) told her to stop, since she was already four drinks in... five?

Hermione lowered her wine hand.

"How did you like the ballet?"

She turned her attention to Draco; he was standing next to her, his sleeves now rolled to his elbows and his posture much more loosened. His slightly lidded eyes and tousled hair implied that he was feeling the liquor quite a bit as well.

Hermione smiled, swaying in excitement. "It was wonderful. I'd love to see it again!"

Draco nodded, and she noted that his smile seemed so easy now, much easier than the tentative and guarded smiles he'd worn around her before.

"Yes. I've never seen anything like it."

"What was your favorite part?"

He raised his eyebrows, scratching his temple lightly as he thought. "It's hard to say, really. It was rather overwhelming."

"Yeah - everything was so dramatic. It was brilliant!" She met his eyes and continued, "I'm really glad I ran into you here."

He seemed surprised by this, and Hermione mentally cringed - it was a rather bold thing to say. She should not have been glad to see him anywhere - in fact, not a few weeks ago, she wouldn't have been glad at all.

"I'm happy I ran into you too, Granger," he echoed. "As I've seen you at some of my favorite events this year, I can see that you've developed excellent taste."

"I can't tell if that was a compliment or you being conceited."

He faked shock. "Me? Conceited?"

"I thought getting you to go was like 'pulling gnomes.'"

Draco waved, glancing at Blaise, who was laughing like he was about to spit up a lung, his hand on his chest as he hunched over. "Blaise is a smartarse."

"He seems so different from what I remember."
"What about you, Granger?" He gestured at her loosely, his eyes dropping down a bit. "You are different too."

She didn't quite know what he was getting at, and certainly didn't want to assume, so she said, "That's inevitable, as it's been seven years."

He rolled his eyes and raised an eyebrow at her. "You know what I mean. Your hair is different, your posture is different. Even what you wear is different."

Having his attention on her was already nerve-wracking enough when he was just looking; him talking about the way she looked was an extra step past strange.

"My posture?" she asked, trying not to sound hostile. "Did I slouch before?"

"No, not particularly, you just have a different... air about you."

"A different 'air'?"

"Yes, a different air." He shook his head at her. "Merlin, Granger, do you ever let up on the reins? I'm trying to give you a compliment."

She tried to shrug nonchalantly, but judging by how hot her face felt it was likely that she still looked embarrassed. "Sorry, it's just... well, I -"

"Don't expect that coming from me," he finished, taking a sip from his glass.

That was certainly true, but not what she had been about to say. But she let that statement hang anyway.

"I thought we said we weren't going to pretend anymore," he reminded her softly, his gaze firmly fixed on her face.

She nodded in acknowledgement, fighting the fluttery nervousness in her gut. "You're right."

"So what changed?"

She eyed the people they were with, subtly making sure no one was listening, and said, "I just realized that there is more to life than knowing everything. I can care about other things as well."

She didn't really want to go into too much detail here - it was actually with intention that she had put more effort into her outward appearance, into having fun, and into loosening up. It went well with her more balanced approach to life, and she recognized that whenever she did those things, the reactions of the people around her were almost always positive. She'd begun to crave that positivity, the surprise at her lifestyle, the approval of the way she looked.

Besides, it allowed her to feel more confident, which was essential when at work she was often in rooms full of pureblooded men scrutinizing every last detail of her strategies.

"Of course," he affirmed. "Spreading out your interests is important."

"What about you?" she said, gesturing at him, trying to change the subject. "You look so put-together these days."

She hoped that he wouldn't read into her comment... it could easily betray that she had noticed the way he looked and found it pleasing.
"Have I not always?"

She didn't know how to answer that, so she said, "I don't know. I don't really remember."

"I find that taking care of my appearance is therapeutic," he said. "You can choose what you want to wear, how you want to express yourself, how you want to do this or that, and the completion of it into a finished ensemble is somewhat addictive."

"Addictive?"

"Yeah. Like when you organize a messy cabinet, or sort files. That feeling you get when you're done, the satisfaction..."

"The control," Hermione murmured.

There was something rather delectable about these thoughts; Draco being addicted, being satisfied, being in control... she could easily transform these declarations into descriptions of sensuality. But despite the direction her clouded mind wanted to take, she also knew critically what he meant, and knew why that feeling was so addictive:

Because of the lack of control he had elsewhere.

She sighed, digesting this new bit of information as she tried to think of something to steer them back into the light; it was refreshing to have a real conversation, even when they were ostensibly talking about how they got dressed in the morning, but she was already feeling emotionally raw from the performance, so she wanted to keep the conversation a little lighter.

"I've been meaning to ask you - what's with the glasses?"

"My eye healer thinks it's because of the poor lighting in the Slytherin dungeons." His lips turned up in a smirk. "All those nights studying by the fire..."

This image was incredibly sexy to Hermione; she could picture him, as he was now but in school robes, lazily reading a book, the glow from the flames licking his face as he leaned on his elbow.

She shook the fantasy away. "Aren't there surgeries for that kind of thing?"

"Yes but - you don't see Potter running to fix his eyesight either."

It was true that Harry still wore glasses - in fact, he still wore the same, ancient circular frames he'd been given as a child. "I guess you're right."

"And I understand why," Draco added. "Wearing glasses... it becomes a part of your identity. Once you start, you form habits around it and... well, they just become a part of you."

"How long has it been?"

"About four years. My eyesight was failing before that, but as a healer... you know, you can't take any chances."

"Yeah... how goes that anyway? What progress have you made in Nepal?"

"So many questions," he murmured. "Nice try, Granger; we're off the clock. No work talk right now." There was an expectant glint in his eye, a reminder of what he had proposed before when she had tried to give him feedback on his work.
She searched for something to say; she knew that his previous request for coffee with her was still on his mind, and she could see in his expression that his intentions with the request - at least at the moment - were more heavily leaning toward the romantic and less on the professional. She couldn't be sure if it was the alcohol, or the strange intensity of the performance, or the crowd of polished, attractive people milling around them, but the idea of spending time with him seemed rather pleasant now.

Either way at the moment his attention was focused solely on her, not for the effect of a distraction, or out of some kind of social obligation, but for her. And that made a difference somehow.

"So I thought about what you asked the other day," she began.

He nodded, his eyes motionless. Merlin, he wasn't going to make this easy for her.

"... And I think we should get coffee and talk through some of my feedback for your project."

He smiled an actual smile, and she was momentarily dazzled before the smile noticeably dropped into a smirk.

"For your project, Draco."

"Oh yes, I know," he waved. "It's a major undertaking for my apprenticeship, so I definitely want to know how to improve."

Blaise leaned in-between Draco and Hermione to steal their attention. "Look who else we found!"

Hermione leaned in to their conversation and smiled at two former Slytherin girls - she couldn't quite remember their names - and a handsome young man with black hair who Hermione knew as one of Ron's work friends.

Ariana ruffled the man's hair, much to his embarrassment, and said, "This is Yin, everyone!"

Hermione leaned forward to examine the tattoos sprouting across one of the Slytherin girl's shoulders as they talked.

Just as she turned back to Draco, her wine glass suddenly wriggled out of her grasp, levitating above her head; she glanced up and noted that everyone else's glasses were doing the same. There was a collective sigh as people turned and started moving toward the exit.

"They're kicking us out," Ariana said conspiratorially.

The group followed the crowd pouring through the doors onto the street; it was a lively night, as they weren't the only local event to get out this late, and even the few restaurants along the street were sporting full tables, their warm, glittering innards packed to the brim.

"The night can't be over yet! Look at the dream-team we've assembled!"

"The party must go on!" Ariana agreed, clapping her hands. "Where do we take this?"

"My mother asks too many questions," Blaise said, shaking his head. "And Slytherin knows I don't want to go all the way to Mexico tonight - "
"Why not?" Ariana snapped. "My place is beautiful, we can walk along the beach!"

"I know!" Blaise exclaimed. "Draco, let's go back to your place!"

Hermione's heart jumped instinctively at the mention of Malfoy Manor; fear washed over her at the thought of the large, foreboding building, and what used to lay within.

Ariana's eyes shone brilliantly. "Oh Blaise, Draco's manor is so magnificent! It's perfect!"

"Get Tippy to whip up some food, I'll bring my soundweaving case. We can floo Andreyia!"

Draco looked between Hermione and Blaise, his expression slipping into nervousness.

"Come on! You could bring Granger!"

He looked back at her, his warm smile completely gone, his eyes wide. She tried to calm the fear in her heart, but it was useless; the lights seemed to blur around them, the noise of the other people becoming deafening, drowning out their excited plans.

It had been with conscious effort that she had avoided the charity balls and humanitarian events held at the Malfoy estate; even Luna and Harry had seen fit to attend these, but she could barely gaze upon the photo of the large manor in the Prophet without bile rising in her throat, her heart quickening and her breath becoming shallow. She never wanted to face that house, where she had experienced the most excruciating pain of her life, not only physically, but emotionally as well.

She grounded herself, and her hands shook as she said no, forcing a smile on her face. Draco looked positively distraught; he reached for her, but she moved slightly out of his range.

"Thank you for the invite, but I really need some sleep for tomorrow," she declined again, looking expectantly at Padma. Padma caught her gaze and circled a protective arm around her shoulders, smiling at them and shrugging.

Blaise waved at the girls dismissively, not seeming to notice Hermione's sudden change in demeanor, and said, "Booooring! We'll have to catch you at the next one. I know Granger knows how to party!" he winked, nudging Draco.

She waved at them, allowing Padma to lead her down the cobblestone protectively. Before she got more than a few steps away, she turned back to Draco.

"Draco!"

His eyes had never left her; he listened hesitantly.

"I'll send an owl with my availability," she said breathlessly.

Relief turned the corners of his mouth up, and he nodded at her. She turned away and didn't look back.
Hermione anxiously sipped her tea, trying to appear nonchalant as she focused on her brand new copy of *The Old Magic of Consciousness*. 

Malfoy had not arrived yet, which gave her time to both order them tea and sit with her thoughts. She had gotten to the crowded cafe fifteen minutes before their scheduled time in order to collect herself beforehand and gain some comfort in the situation before he would steal her attention.

They had been playing an odd game the other night; with the alcohol dimming her thoughts and the stimulation from the ballet igniting her senses, it had been difficult to separate the perception of their relationship and the reality of it. She'd had so many inappropriate thoughts - and fantasies - about the wizard that she was slightly nervous to be face-to-face with him again, as if he could take one look at her and somehow know exactly what she'd pictured.

Although, towards the end of the night they had basically been flirting, so it was possible that he felt the same way.

She wasn't sure if this notion made her feel better or worse.

Just as she had rolled her eyes at herself and resolved to concentrate on her paperback, Draco walked through the door, glancing innocently around the small shop, blocking the light coming from the street beyond.

When he finally noticed her, the transformation from confusion to recognition in his eyes made her breath hitch. He smiled at her in greeting and maneuvered around the milling individuals between them.

She fought a tremulous anticipation as he took out the chair across from her and sat down, resting his bag on the tile floor. His top two buttons were undone, and his shirt was rumpled enough to suggest that he'd been quite busy over the course of the day. He draped his healer robes over the back of his chair; somehow the light green matched his dark button down and pants very well.

When he turned back he glanced at her attire, his gaze traveling from her booted feet to the edge of her midi skirt, and finally over her simple business robes. She had expected this attention, and was embarrassed to admit that she had considered her meeting with the wizard when she'd selected the ensemble that morning.

"Granger," he said, somewhat breathlessly. "Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head and indicated the tea already on the table. "I wasn't sure what to get you, so I just got us tea."

"That's fine. I can't have coffee after two o'clock anyways," he replied, taking up the kettle.

"Then why did you choose this time?"
He glanced up at her, smirking. "I thought this place would be a little quieter."

She looked around at the many bodies standing near them, blocking the light and chattering happily. The weather was finally starting to improve, as it was well into spring, so many of the bustling wizards and witches were shedding their unneeded outer layers, bearing their arms and legs to the cool air.

"As you can see I thought wrong," he added. "I hope you weren't waiting long."

"No, I just got here."

He nodded, finishing up with the kettle and setting it aside.

It had been a few days since the ballet, but Hermione hadn't quite forgotten the potent sensations she had experienced in response to both the performance and Draco. Unfortunately, seeing him again brought those sensations back into the forefront of her memory.

The time spent between talking to the wizard seemed to fold away; she almost felt as though they were operating on a trajectory divorced from time, divorced from the rest of her life. Whenever she came into contact with him they picked up from where they had left off, as if nothing had happened since.

Of course, that wasn't true; a calculated two days after the ballet, she had sent him an owl with her availability and he'd cordially selected a time, with naught but a brief note that read, "I look forward to talking with you."

It had felt different to correspond with him directly over owl - it was how she sent letters to her friends. Somehow the direct line of communication altered her perception of where their relationship was going. Whereas before, she could consider him a random (or "rando", as Ginny referred to her many Quidditch-enamored fans who accosted her on the street), now he was suddenly a business partner, or a friend, or at least a close acquaintance.

She wasn't sure what he was, actually.

"So at the apothecary you mentioned something about the suppliers," he said as he added sugar to his tea.

She nodded, surprised that he remembered, and honestly thankful that he had brought up his project immediately. "Yes. I thought maybe the suppliers would be more of an unnecessary middleman; you could potentially just foster some of the ingredients on location, and avoid the shipping costs."

He nodded slowly, thinking about this as he stirred. "That's interesting," he said finally. "I'll check with the herbologists and see if we can."

He eyed her appreciatively; she could only describe the look he was giving her as one of determined intrigue, his interest apparent in the forward lean of his body and his slightly narrowed gaze.

She cleared her throat and looked around; she was feeling rather funny now that he was finally here and this meeting - which she had been both dreading and looking forward to - was happening.

When she looked back at him he was taking a sip, his eyes fixed on her.

"You seem off," he murmured. "Not regretting this, are you?"

"Oh, no, not at all," she waved, though she honestly wasn't sure.
He studied her for another few seconds, his tea pressed to his lips, before he took another sip and set it down.

"So besides the suppliers," he continued, "What other improvements would you have made to the plan?"

"My only real question was around the strategy - why did you choose to help the inflicted instead of finding a way to kill the disease altogether?"

He considered her question for a moment, which she appreciated; it was common for someone, when facing critique, to get defensive immediately or defend their decisions without considering another point of view. She had learned quickly in school that feedback was a gift - it was essential to improving her skills. Without feedback it was easy to spin her wheels endlessly and never improve.

After a few beats and a sip of tea, he said, "We decided to put the people first. No sense in making them suffer while we work out a way to eradicate the disease. Plus, the containment would have been harder, and cost more money if we had been focusing on killing it rather than helping the sick."

She nodded and smiled. "It's a very human-centered approach."

"That's part of being a healer," he replied. "You need to care about people, more than you care about the science."

His business-like mask slipped slightly then; he had so far managed to maintain a tight level of cordiality, but it seemed as if he didn’t intend to spend their entire meeting doing that. As the silence stretched on between them, the chattering and bustling of the other coffee patrons reentered Hermione's consciousness.

"Speaking of caring about people..." he began, discomfort starting to warp his posture, "I'm sorry about the other night. Blaise doesn't know... doesn't know what happened."

Hermione looked away. "You never told him, about...?"

Draco shook his head, his gaze now locked onto his tea. "I've shared some stories, but... I've managed to spare him some of the... worst... things."

"It might be helpful to talk to him about it," Hermione murmured. "He seems like a great friend."

He flashed a humorless smile, and said, "But then what would we talk about, Granger?"

She chuckled, her nervousness with this meeting finally starting to ebb. Talking to him, now that she'd made a habit of sharing some elements of what she was feeling with him, was starting to get easier.

"That's what your therapist is for," she countered.

He shrugged innocently, taking another sip of tea; Hermione let the momentary lapse in conversation ride as she looked around the little coffee shop. None of the many people here seemed to notice them beyond a glance or two to check that the table was occupied; she was somewhat grateful for the noisy interior, as it presented a good excuse to look around and thus avoid staring at Draco too much.

"You know," he continued, "It's hard to be there, on the Malfoy estate, even for me... no matter how many rooms I redecorate, walls I tear down, precious heirlooms I destroy... the stench is in the foundation. I can't get rid of it."
"Have you tried cleansing it?"

"Ah, the 'cleansers.' I have, Granger, and they have certainly done their best. But..." He looked up at her. "I can still feel the darkness."

Hermione nodded with sympathy. She couldn't even stand to look at Malfoy Manor... she had no idea how Draco could live there.

"Have you tried moving out?"

He let out a humorless snort. "I don't even live in the main house. And the rooms that... he occupied, I destroyed as soon as the investigation was complete. But I can't just avoid it forever; it's still my property. I still have to maintain it, try to fix it, and then eventually... pass it down."

To avoid the odd feeling in her gut at the mention of passing on his estate, Hermione quickly asked, "What of Lady Malfoy?"

"She's got her Parisian grounds. Even she can't stand to be in the Manor."

Hermione nodded absently, suddenly remembering that she had a nearly-full cup of tea to drink. She took a sip of the lukewarm liquid, thankful for a bit of a distraction.

When she looked up again, he was studying her, though the heated looks he'd given her the other night were nothing in comparison. He wasn't drunkenly appraising her - but he was staring at her, his shoulders drooping, his eyes calm. That same look came over his features - the slightly desperate twinge, like he wanted her to understand something. She fought the urge to look away; Merlin, why was he so intense?

"While we're on the subject, I've... I've actually wanted to talk to you for some time."

Hermione's mind took off, and she tried in vain to suppress a strange giddiness at what she knew was coming.

Draco touched each finger to its counterpart on his other hand, fidgeting in an orderly fashion - it was oddly characteristic of him - and looked down into his tea. "I... I feel awful about... about everything."

Hermione watched him, waiting.

He continued, "That time in school, when I gave you detention for no reason... or the Yule Ball, when I spilled my drink on you on purpose... and all the horrible names I called you..."

Hermione struggled to remember the instances he named - how had he remembered those things when she had forgotten? Oh yes, he had spilled his cider on her dress...

"Or the way I mocked you in class - I mean, you were just trying to learn, and I was... urgh, I was - "

"It's okay. It's in the past."

"No, it's not okay," he returned, shaking his head. "You didn't deserve that. Especially not you."

It finally sank in what he was doing: Hermione swallowed, trying to keep her brimming emotions in check. She had carefully buried that pain, the insecurities that he had relentlessly trotted out in their teen years. Remembering how it felt brought those insecurities back into the light and forced her to deal with them.
"It's okay, Draco - "

"I watched Aunt Bella *torture* you, Hermione," he breathed, his eyes unfocused. "How is that okay?"

Her heartbeat quickened at the memory; she could suddenly plainly feel the frigid marble under her back, the weight of another body on top of her, the twitches from the Cruciatius reverberating in her limbs. Even the smell... that odd earthy smell left behind by the snake, the smell of old blood, like rotting meat -

She looked around, dazed, at the happy, coffee drugged customers surrounding them, blissful and ignorant of the heavy admissions happening beside them... and as she had been trained to do, she focused on remembering where she was, what day it was, what she was doing. She was sitting here, drinking tea. It was spring. Crookshanks had eaten a cricket this morning, Ron had finally returned her wand-polishing kit. She was breathing in and out, in and out. In and out.

Gathering her breath, she fixed her gaze back on Draco as her heart finally began to slow; he was still speaking, but she interrupted with, "Draco - I really don't like to think about that time. Don't... it's okay. It's really okay."

He stopped, finally noticing her pained expression, and said, "I'm... I'm sorry."

She raised her hand, ignoring the sweat now sliding under her arms. "Don't get me wrong, I really appreciate what you're doing, I just..." she met his eyes, "I don't like to think about it. We're adults now, and I'm... I want us to move on."

He nodded slowly, his eyes still wide with discomfort.

"Thank you, though. It means a lot to me." Hermione was still trying to recover from the thwarted flashback; fear was prickling her heart in anticipation for a Cruciatius that would never come. In a flash of assurance, she boldly reached across the table and covered his fidgeting fingers with her palm. Her stomach flipped at the sensation of his hands, all warmth and smoothness.

"I mean it. Thank you."

He smiled a grateful smile, and she was embarrassed to realize how beautiful his face was when he smiled. His eyes were still sad, but he gripped her hand briefly, gently, acknowledging her thanks.

"Do you..." he said softly, and then paused, seeming to search for the right thing to say as he played with her fingers, "do you want me to leave you alone?"

A small part of her panicked at the thought; as much as she didn't want to admit it, running into him had generally been a pleasant - albeit confusing - experience and she was enjoying talking to him, helping him with his work, looking at him, thinking about him...

She shook her head and replied, slightly higher than she'd wanted, "No, of course not. I've... enjoyed talking to you." She subtly pulled her hand away from his, though afterward she could still feel the ghost of his fingers on her skin.

"So... what changed? Why the sudden apology?"

He suddenly looked far more uncomfortable than he had just moments ago. He seemed to consider a few different answers, before he leaned back, reforming his emotional mask.

"It was important to me... that you were happy."
Hermione stared at him incredulously, fearfully, hopefully. What did that mean?

Noticing her odd expression, he quickly followed, "Like I said, part of being a healer is helping people, making them feel better. I couldn't... truly call myself a healer if I didn't try to help the people I had hurt." He paused. "Not that it really has anything to do with being a healer... I was a prick for so long, and I can't just... brush that away forever." He ran a hand through his hair, mussing it slightly. "Does that make sense?"

She nodded slowly. "Of course. You're a lightbringer."

He smirked at the healer nickname, relief relaxing his features. Most people had a mixed relationship with healers, as they could simultaneously save your life while giving you the worst pain you had ever felt. It was fitting to be considered both an angel and a demon.

"Well, I'm glad that therapy seems to be working for you," Hermione commented, taking a sip.

"I think I'm more myself than I've ever been," he murmured. Various expressions flitted across his face, his eyes unfocused; after a few moments he looked up and smiled spiritlessly.

"You know... I see the people that I hurt - I see them every day, in my patients, in my coworkers, in my teachers, and... I feel so much."

His openness was incredibly mesmerizing; she watched him carefully, determined to listen, feeling truly lightweight in the heavy moment. Bodies were surrounding their table, bustling with their coffees and pastries, but somehow they felt so far away.

"I try to put it in words, figure out where to go with it, but..." he looked at the people around them, slowly rubbing his hands together, "I just feel so much."

He looked back into her eyes; somehow this was now perfectly comfortable to Hermione, and she steadily matched his gaze. After a few beats, he cracked a sad smile.

"Phew," he breathed, chuckling to himself.

"I know what you mean," Hermione put forth. She paused; normally it was hard to share herself, but given his openness she felt a strange connection and strength that made it easier. "I think about the past and... I just reach a wall."

He nodded, watching her.

"It was always an uphill battle for me, being a part of this world," she continued. "I knew nothing about it, and I tried to learn the history, the culture, the customs, and... eventually I realized that no matter what I did, people would always see me as an outsider. Even if I was the smartest one in the room, even if I knew all the answers... people would still think I don't truly understand what being a wizard means."

She gestured at him. "And people like you, well... you didn't help. It was a reminder that I would face this deficit - this prejudice - no matter how much I studied, how much I proved my worth. I would face it for the rest of my life.

"And the thing that bothered me, Draco - it wasn't the insults, or the indifference, or even the treatment of my friends - it was the fact that no matter what, I would always have to work twice as hard to get half as much as you, simply by virtue of your parentage."

She met his gaze steadily, her voice breaking. "You struck the genetic lottery, Draco."
He watched her, holding her eyes. She could tell by the edge to his expression that she had hurt him with some of the things she had said, but could also see that he wasn't about to argue with her. She sighed in relief, looking away.

"Thank you for telling me," he said seriously.

She nodded, fighting the emotion crawling up her throat.

"I desperately don't want to be that person, the one who makes it harder for others. And... I want you, even now, to think that I'm different, that I don't view muggleborns that way... but Hermione... " he ran a hand through his hair. "I'm still activity fighting those thoughts. I still... I still have to catch myself."

"I... appreciate your honesty," she said carefully, trying not to feel disappointed.

"I have a lot to be ashamed of, really."

"Don't be ashamed, Draco."

"How can I not be?"

She shook her head at him. She really didn't know how to answer that, because deep down, she was relieved in the face of his shame. His shame meant that he cared, that he felt enough to want to change.

"We all have unlearning to do," she murmured. "Our history influences our present and our future, as much as we don't want it to. We have to stop, examine our biases, and understand them, in order to cleanse our perceptions."

His frown lifted, presumably in response to the slightly preachy note in her voice. "In English, Granger. What do you mean?"

"I'll give you an example," she continued, sighing. "At the ballet you asked about my hair, and why it was different."

He nodded.

"You see... I spent the majority of my life trying to tame it, straighten it, smooth it down, so I could better fit into the 'ideal'- what everyone else thought was beautiful." She instinctively took a curl between her fingers. "What I realized was that it wasn't other people's perception that was the problem - it was my own. I thought that sleek, flat hair was desirable, and I tried in vain to replicate it. Eventually I stopped trying to be something else and just embraced my hair the way it was, learned how to let my hair do what it wanted... and everything changed.

"The validation I sought, the stress from worrying about it... just melted away. I examined my bias, challenged it, and cleansed my perception. And the bonus is - being able to be myself, be in my most natural state... it's freeing."

"I wouldn't know," he joked lightly.

"I can't say that I'm perfect," Hermione followed quickly. "I'm still trying to figure it out. But these little things - wearing my hair natural, not being afraid of other people's opinions - it adds up, and helps me heal."

He nodded again, sipping his tea, and the discomfort she had originally felt in sharing herself with
him started to creep back into her heart. This was the most she had ever told him about herself, and even now a part of her was squirming, telling her to hold back; but despite this, she steadied her resolve and concentrated on taking another sip.

"I can't say that I've done a great job of - how did you put it? Cleansing my perceptions."

She shrugged.

"But I can say that my... awful treatment of you came from unfounded delusions of superiority." He shook his shoulders, as if he was shaking away a heavy thought. "That was quickly remedied, if not by the Death Eaters, then by my excursions afterward."

"And so you became... more self-aware? After the fall of the Death Eaters?"

"My behavior at university nearly got me expelled," he explained. "Plus, my father's former business partners told the press that working with me was like working with 'a mandrake with a beater's bat.' That cut pretty deep."

"So..."

He smirked. "So it was either lighten up, or never work again."

"Which you could have done," she said gently.

"Yes, but that's terribly boring, don't you think?"

She scoffed. It was a horrendously privileged thing to say; he could feel unpressured and secure in the knowledge that he never needed to worry about things like how he was going to pay rent, or what he was going to eat if he didn't work.

"I see the look you're giving me," he drawled softly.

"Oh, it's nothing," Hermione replied.

"You think I'm a frivolous little rich boy."

"No..."

He eyed her, his eyebrows raised.

"You're lucky that you don't have to worry about money..." she began.

"Who says I don't need to worry? More money, more problems, as the muggles say."

"Well, I guess you're..." She stopped cold. "No way... hip-hop? Really?"

He grimaced, looking like he had been caught.

"Oh dear," she said, chuckling. She pictured him with a fat pair of headphones muffling both ears, bobbing his head to beats. "Tell me you don't listen to muggle music."

He relaxed somewhat. "It's not me, it's Blaise. He soundweaves, so he's always listening to records to see how people are making songs these days."

She shook her head, trying to process this bizarre bit of information.
"It's not unnatural," he muttered, looking slightly harassed.

"It's not that," she sighed. "I just never would have figured."

"Face it: there's a lot you don't know about me, Hermione," he said vaguely; his tone held a note of seduction that instantly made Hermione's neck grow hot. He always chose the most interesting moments to use her first name.

"But even so, we've trotted out my life enough. What's going on in your world?"

A slow exhale escaped from between her lips; she was thankful that the business of discussing their past - which she suspected had been weighing as heavily on his mind as it had weighed on hers - was over, at least for the time being. Even though she felt infinitely lightweight from not only receiving an apology, but also tapping into his internal struggles, she also knew that there was still deeply-rooted anger to unpack there.

Putting her thoughts aside, Hermione twirled her teacup. "Nothing interesting. I don't do much besides work these days."

"I'm sure that's not true," he commented lightly. "Come on, Granger. I've shared the dark corners of my mind. You can at least tell me what you do for fun."

"Well, I was thinking about studying cognitive neuroscience at university. Either way I need to make a decision before I'm too deep in politics to escape."

"I said for fun, Granger."

"Learning is fun!"

"Well, I suppose it is. At least with cognitive neuroscience," Draco affirmed. "It's incredible. Any idea which institution you'd try?"

"No idea."

He took a sip of tea. "Try the Jilner Institute of Magic. I studied neurology there with an emphasis on neuropsychology. They teach more physiology than other magical institutions, so I find that I know more about why I'm healing something a particular way, rather than just doing it because it's worked for other healers."

"That sounds great," she affirmed. "In the muggle world, you couldn't get away with not knowing how the human body works."

"Well, yes, because they're all cutting people open and such."

She decided to not pursue that comment and said instead, a little tersely, "Well, they at least understand that you can't treat people differently based on blood status."

He stopped, eyeing her; she had brought up something that was somewhat touchy in the magical community, a problem that was only rectified in recent years: that pureblood and muggleborn patients were treated vastly differently, because of presumed physiological differences that were not there. Healers had until recently assumed that muggles and muggleborn wizards had more tolerance for pain, and were thus not given as much care as pureblooded wizards.

Draco methodically picked up his tea, drained it, and set it down, before he fixed her with a tightly-controlled expression. "I studied more physiology than my peers, Granger. It didn't take long for me
to fully realize that heritage amounts to nothing beyond what diseases you're likely to contract."

Hermione quirked her head to the side. "Are you sure that the research out of the Department of Mysteries didn't have anything to do with that?"

She was referring to the research the Department of Mysteries had done in order to properly negate their previous claim - forced onto them by Voldemort's ministry - that muggleborns stole magic from proper wizards. A full-sale research project was called for to examine wizard DNA, to determine not just the how, but the why. At the project's completion, they had found that a person was simply more likely to be magical if they were born to a wizarding family, and that the gene behind it all was actually available in all humans, and just dormant in most.

It was research that Hermione had personally oversaw; her position of power within the Department of International Magical Cooperation had been solidified early-on because of her contribution to that project. She had been the liaison, dealing with the press, the content strategy, and the marketing strategy, as well as helping on the ground as a test subject, data analyst, research coordinator - whatever they needed her to do.

She was playfully referring to her own research, technically. He smirked at her and said, "I'll admit, that did have a big effect on it, yes."

At the unwavering admiration in his eyes, she detected that he hadn't just meant the actual research, but also the person who had made it possible - her.

Hermione hadn't been prepared for him to take her question so seriously, and she found herself sweating slightly under his gaze.

"So what is the endgame with your healing, Draco? Where do you want to be?"

"You know, it is supremely difficult to get you to talk about yourself," he murmured, flashing a sly smile.

Hermione shook her head, her features scrunched up in embarrassment. "I know, I'm sorry. I don't like talking about myself."

"Don't be sorry - I guess I have time to figure you out."

Once again, his tone was mildly seductive, in a way that had Hermione avoiding his eyes on her.

"So um," she fumbled for a second, "your healing?"

"Well, a part of me wants to be holed up in a lab somewhere, doing experimental psychology and eventually cognitive neuropsychology. But... another part of me just wants to keep healing. Helping people."

"It feels good, doesn't it? When you help people?" She wore a wry, somewhat condescending smile, but she knew he wouldn't be offended.

He smirked at her. "It does."

"So you'd want to uncover the relationship between the mind and the brain."

"Yes. My theory is that by studying obliviated patients and those with neurological illnesses, we can understand more about what parts of the brain contribute to what."
"Which would then make surgery safer."

"Potentially. Though the critiques of this method are that it's probably attempting to oversimplify something inherently complex."

"That is interesting... but you still didn't answer my question," she said, trying to be a little more forceful; even though she was enjoying this talk more than she had anticipated, she was still somewhat hesitant to poke fun at him, at least in the same way she would with Harry.

He smirked at her appreciatively. "What is the endgame?"

"Yes. There has to be a reason you're doing this."

He sighed, nudging his now empty teacup, leaving wet, amber rings on the porcelain of the dish.

"I want to help the victims of the War. And not just the ones who fought against the Dark Lord." He met her gaze steadily. "I want to help the former Death Eaters as well."

Her heart leapt instinctively into her throat.

"You want to... help them? The... the murderers?"

"Well it sounds awful when you put it like that, but... they're suffering too. From mental illness especially, thanks to all that exposure to dark magic, the casual use of the Cruciatus and Imperius, and most of all... Azkaban."

"But... they - "

"Come on, Granger. Isn't this what you were preaching about when the War ended? How we can't just pick up the pieces, we have to proactively heal the community?"

"Well, yes, but... this isn't exactly what I had in mind."

"There are thousands of people who have family members in Azkaban. Or worse, have family members who were Death Eaters. Don't you think it's hard for them as well?"

Hermione grabbed the tea kettle, trying to find something to do with her hands, and refilled his cup and hers. "Yes, I understand."

"I mean... you're looking at a former Death Eater," he said heavily. "Wouldn't you give me a chance?"

"Well, now that I know more about you... yes, I would."

"Does a person have to qualify to have a meaningful existence?" he said softly. "By those standards, my father certainly doesn't deserve an inch."

"So you want to help him as well."

"He's just... he's incorrigible. No matter how much we argue, how much research comes out, how much he interacts with muggleborns... he just won't change. I... I have to help him."

Something clicked in her brain - the focus on transfiguration and alchemy magic, the comments about changing perceptions and thoughts... he wasn't trying to...?

Hermione looked at him squarely as he took a sip of his newly refreshed tea. "I'm not gonna lie, I'm
"slightly horrified."

"What? Why?"

"You can't just... transfigure someone's brain to make them think differently. That's not going to solve the problem!"

He set down his cup, raising a protective hand. "No, don't misunderstand, I don't want to just... charm my way to a better father. But he does have severe mental illness, and... he has suffered through much psychological trauma. By studying neuropsychology, I could figure out a way to help him. A way to help everyone."

"But why transfiguration?"

He shrugged. "Charms are imprecise, and potions can have long-term effects we aren't aware of. That leaves alchemy and transfiguration therapy."

"But what about... good old-fashioned psychology? And therapy?"

"Obviously those things are working," he murmured, gesturing at himself. "But for patients with debilitating mental illness, or memory loss, or brain damage from prolonged exposure to the Imperius... it isn't enough. How can you reach them with reason when... they barely know who they are? Barely know what's real?"

Hermione floundered for a few moments, trying to conjure another argument against it all; Draco pressed on through her silence. "His ideas consume him; he's trying to protect himself with them, it's all he has left. But that's not what I'm trying to change."

She shook her head, trying to process his reasoning. It hardly made sense to her.

"You can trust me, you know," he said, his patience apparently ebbing. "That I know what I'm doing."

She sighed. "You're right. As long as you aren't trying to... reprogram people."

"I'm not, I assure you."

It struck her that despite the ways he was different - for example, he had managed to talk to her for almost a half hour without insulting her directly - there were still subtle things about the way his mind worked that she would inevitably find off-putting.

"Are we good? You look like you're about to hex me."

"Yes," she waved, concentrating on her full teacup. "I'm sure you have research and statistics and that."

"I know you're interested in healing," he murmured, "But I think about it all day, every day, so can we talk about something else?"

Hermione had been subtly trying to keep their conversation more towards professional topics - his project, healing, etcetera - so she was slightly reluctant to oblige this request and honestly surprised that he'd picked up on it.

She sighed, her breath leaving her lungs sharply, and looked at him squarely. "Draco, what are we doing?"
"We're... drinking tea?"

"No," she said softly, shaking her head. "I mean, what are we doing?"

He looked away, the strangers around them catching his gaze for a few moments before he answered. "I don't know, Granger. I just..."

For a few moments, it seemed like he wasn't actually going to continue. But then he let out a heavy sigh and looked back at her. "When I saw you, and you were so... angry at me still, so uncomfortable around me, despite trying to be nice, I just... I wanted to show you that you don't have to be."

She stared into his eyes uncertainly. Sure, she had been angry at him and that would understandably bug him, but this conversation, and the intention behind his expression, hinted at a deeper motivation that she was starting to pick up on.

Maybe it was the fact that she really didn't see herself becoming friends with him, or the fact that despite their loaded conversations, she wouldn't consider seeking him out to talk like this.

Whatever this relationship was, it wasn't heading towards friendship.

Given this, even now she could feel him pulling her in romantically; she didn't want to think that way about him, at least not yet, but something about him was horribly irresistible.

It could have been the polish, or the roguish confidence, or perhaps the well-timed moments of vulnerability; whatever the case, she could not deny that she was becoming more attracted to him every time they spoke.

She didn't want to fall into the trap that she'd fallen into before, where she'd wanted to be the one to help someone, to heal someone, to save them. It had been that way with Ron, years ago; she had thought she could change him, thought that eventually the things she didn't like about him would stop mattering. But in the end he hadn't given an inch, and they had ended it, assuming that the other was at fault. In reality they had both simply provided the comfort needed after the War, but once that was stripped away, nothing lay beneath.

She didn't want to fix anyone, to change anyone; it took too much energy that she honestly didn't have. So hopefully, if she eventually did decide to give in, Draco would be able to take care of himself.

And though he had been rather intentioned with his glances at the ballet, it was unclear how much of that connection was real and how much of it was a result of the circumstances.

She brushed these thoughts away, looking at her watch in a show of trying to end their conversation before it took a turn that she wasn't ready to deal with yet. "I should, um," she murmured, "I should get back."

He smirked, as if amused by a private joke, watching her collect their dishes. "Can I walk you to the nearest fireplace?"

She affirmed, levitating their dishes to the self-serve dish rack and picking up her things. She walked towards the entrance, trying not to feel the heat of his presence behind her.

When they came upon the narrow street, it was luckily less busy than it had been when she'd first arrived. A few people walked casually down the sidewalk, window shopping and talking amongst their groups.
She stepped aside, and his tall form exited the cafe behind her.

"I prefer the northeast fireplace," she said, edging down the street.

He gestured. "Northeast it is."

They walked in silence, Draco with his hand in his pocket and his healer robes over one shoulder. Hermione kept a tight grip on her book, pulling her fingers across the page edges to occupy her fidgeting hands.

A few people waved to her excitedly as she and the tall Slytherin made their way down the street, regarding her companion with wary eyes and barely masked scowls. She smiled back at them, casting a side-glance at Draco.

She thought he hadn't noticed people's odd looks, but after the third time a stranger smiled at her and sneered at him, Draco let out an amused snort.

"What?" she asked.

He shook his head, a small smile playing at his mouth.

They came at last to the northeast fireplace, brick-fronted and sooty, situated between Flourish and Blotts and the quidditch shop. She turned to face him.

"I'll see you around?"

Draco nodded; for a dizzying, electric moment, it looked as if he was about to step in and hug her in goodbye. Hermione stared up at him uncertainly.

"You're incredibly strong, you know," he murmured, pulling his healer robes from his shoulder and draping them over his arm. "Not everyone can stand being despised."

This comment tickled her the wrong way on multiple levels, as did his weary expression. Before she could recover, however, he had given her a small wave and retreated back down the cobblestone.

Resolving to spend the next thirty minutes decompressing in her office after such an emotionally taxing meeting, she turned to the fireplace and grabbed a fistful of floo powder with a heavy sigh.

"Ministry of Magic."
Despite the growing density of Hermione's schedule, it had been an excellent few weeks; she'd made strides in removing anti-muggleborn bias from the electoral system, had helped plan the seventh Battle of Hogwarts Memorial, and had managed to secure powerful allies within MACUSA to combat anti-muggleborn laws being written there.

She actually felt lighter, calmer, than she had in a long time; while the politics around who she met with, what laws she looked over, and who she challenged were a constant thought in the back of her mind, she'd actually felt free enough to let some of that go and just push forward without regard to how it might backfire politically.

That approach had certainly worked for her most recent meetings at least. That said, she was still pretty exhausted as she closed and locked her desk drawers, ensuring that her modest office was tidy before she exited.

"Out for the day, Miss Granger?" her secretary asked as she appeared in the doorway.

"Yes, Celes. Going to stop by the festivities, then head home." Hermione paused, assessing the girl, and followed, "Why don't you go down to the party? Any memos can wait until tomorrow."

Celes smiled brightly, her hands already darting to her cloak and purse. "Thank you, ma'am!"

Hermione walked swiftly to the lifts, trying not to feel solitary; she would very much like someone to go with to the Ministry worker's party, so she wouldn't be standing around awkwardly sipping cheap wine and waiting for the clock to strike five, but she knew from experience that it was hard to be tethered to your boss at a work event. She wouldn't deny Celes an opportunity to roam the party without worrying about how her boss might approve.

Regardless, Hermione would make an appearance, though she was desperate to get home and snuggle into her couch cushions with her newest Speltzer book.

When the lift deposited her in the atrium, she scanned the sea of people; the atrium was the most crowded she had ever seen it, with wizards crammed together, clutching their alcohol and laughing with each other. The normally menacing Aurors near the marble fountain were laughing and entertaining themselves with dancing patronuses; a few crotchety Confederation wizards were hunched together near the coffee stand, smoking pipes and sipping their sherry with disdain. Famous gobstones players were telling stories to the league officials, who were watching with rapt attention; even the undersecretaries to the Minister, who were usually in such a state, looked calm and spirited, adjusting decorations and checking that everyone was having a good time.

With a resigned sigh Hermione entered the fray, making a beeline for the drink table surrounding the fountain. This was going to be yet another banal office party, and she really didn't like networking. There was hardly a point; everyone more or less knew who she was, and as a result was constantly trying to get her eyes on whatever trivial project they were working on. The best she could do was remind them of the overall goals of their Ministry, and then pray that they didn't light up her memo box with endless meeting requests.
She selected an empty glass and poured some firewhiskey - just a little bit to take the edge off, she told herself - and took a sip. She would need a little bit of alcohol to comfortably converse with these people, people she rarely saw outside of the context of meetings.

Although, she really didn't have the strongest stomach for liquor at the moment since she had apparated and taken portkeys several times today, thanks to some poor planning on the part of the Russian ambassador.

The wizarding world really needed to invest in some location-to-location communication; needing to be in person for a meeting in São Paulo and then immediately afterward for a meeting in St. Petersburg was exhausting.

She wondered briefly if she could develop that; she'd already developed a magical copy of muggle technology in the form of the calendar planner she carried; her patent for it was still taking in galleons, not to mention was still bewildering her colleagues. It was kind of lazy, in her opinion, to create something out of necessity that was essentially a magical copy of muggle tech, but she at least enjoyed the ease of her schedule planning now.

She edged away from the drink table to avoid the other wizards crowding it and glanced around again.

Harry was standing a ways away, in a deep discussion with Kingsley; though Hermione wanted someone to talk to, she didn't really want to interrupt a conversation between the Head Auror and the Minister.

She sighed as she thought of her old friends. They didn't realize it, but her fame was vastly different than theirs; they were accepted as celebrities and capable wizards, and were gushed over without question.

But Hermione was respected despite something; she was an exception, a surprise, a nod of grudging approval. She knew it was because she was muggleborn; she knew this because it came across in the little things people said when they congratulated her, the little notes of "you've done so well for yourself," and "you're so clever, considering." As if she was somehow an anomaly, as if she had fought against some otherway of being.

As if it wasn't a natural state for her kind to be good at wielding magic.

There was a light touch on her arm, and she turned, her brows furrowed in irritation as she made to glare at the person who brushed her.

Instead, Draco was standing next to her, a warm smile dotting his sharp features.

Her eyes widened; she had thought of him more than once since their talk a week ago, and in that time she'd managed to replay that day in her head endlessly, trying to discern his motivations. With him standing next to her, all those thoughts came rushing back, and she found herself panicking as the vague memory of what he looked like was fleshed out before her eyes, sharpening her memory.

"Oh," she sighed, cursing the flutter in her chest at the prospect of talking to him. "Malfoy."

"You looked like you were in the middle of an intense thought," he murmured. "Don't let me ruin it."

"Too late," she returned.

When he smiled, and she felt her irritation at the party begin to ebb, the lightness she had been feeling over the past week suddenly made sense; she had been basking in a glow since their meeting
in the cafe, but she hadn't really connected the dots until now.

Despite this she was very aware of her boss, her coworkers, and even some of her friends in the crowd, and wasn't sure how they would react if they saw her talking to him. She tried not to feel ashamed of this thought... he was somewhat of a social pariah, even now, and though she didn't really care about that so much personally, somehow it mattered when her boss was nearby.

Also, having him so close was confusing her again and she was rather desperate to escape any strong physical responses to him while in public.

She looked around covertly, and leaned in to say, "What are you doing here?"

"Wouldn't pass up free booze," he said seriously.

She eyed him.

"That was a joke, Granger," he said, shaking his head. "I thought I'd gotten you to loosen up, Merlin."

She grimaced, her mood finally warming. "Sorry, I was in a good mood until I got here. I don't really like Ministry gatherings."

"I could see that," he said, glancing around. "It might as well be an extension of work; everyone is just talking about their projects anyways. Everything is so..." he waved his hand, trying to find the words as he scrunched up his features.

"Exactly," she murmured, chuckling. She eyed him appreciatively, pressing down her panic at talking to him; regardless of how it looked, she was actually grateful to have someone around to talk to. Someone who wasn't trying to schmooze her over.

She had built a tendency to be open with him over the course of their previous interactions, so she wasn't surprised by the ease in which they were able to connect now. Nevertheless it had been more than a week since that day so she wasn't exactly sure where they stood, as when he'd left her there in front of that fireplace, there had been a lot of... uncertainty. Uncertainty of where he fit into her life.

For example, it was rather disarming to talk to him amongst her coworkers and friends. It was like she was melding three sides of her life - work, personal, and... ultra-personal.

Ultra-personal?

She would figure that one out later.

"I thought you'd be hanging out with Potter."

Hermione refocused on the moment and glanced at her friend across the room. Harry was still talking with Kingsley; based on the incline of his head and the furrowing of his brows, it looked like he was puzzling out some mystery.

Sighing with a note of sadness, she said, "He's so busy, it's impossible to catch him these days."

"Is Potter just... normal now? No special powers or other nonsense?"

Hermione chuckled. "He never had any special powers. Goodness, I'm so glad the Prophet has fact checkers now."
"So that was your doing as well," he murmured, looking towards where Harry was standing. "Thank Salazar."

"Not a fan of the Prophet?"

"You know how it is," he drawled. "The Prophet is beastly."

"Yes, I do know, actually," she said wryly.

"I'll admit, I partially got into healing to mitigate the things they wrote about me. Even now, they always treat the healing and charity events with such... surprise."

Hermione shrugged. "It is not what most of us expected of you."

"I could see that. I... actually had it in my head that all the horrible things that were written about me in the Prophet were somehow caused by you."

"Why would you think that?"

"I mean, since you headed the reorganization - and were even editor for a while, if I remember correctly - I thought that your hatred for me carried over into your work."

Hermione shook her head at him. "Of course not, Draco; I actually had them take the gossip section out for a while." She paused. "The public didn't like that, though."

He snickered, looking over towards the newspaper stands near the lifts. "Bloody insatiable, they are."

To Hermione's dismay, Draco lingered on the word insatiable for a second longer than he should have, and she felt the first twinges of warmth stir in her body.

The memories of the things she'd felt last time they had seen each other were swimming just beneath the surface of her mind, and she was reminded again of how she had felt, sitting with him in the cafe.

She had dwelled on their meeting for the rest of the day, going over the things he had shared in awe, trying to read in between the lines as much as she could. And when she had caught herself thinking of his fingers playing with hers, or that particular expectant confidence he exuded whenever he said something bold, and her vision clouded... she'd had to press him firmly out of her mind and try to shake herself back to reality.

Unfortunately he was so much better in person than he was in her memory, and she was having a hard time keeping her thoughts level. She definitely didn't want to seem interested, or overly-eager, or... sex-deprived, though she was starting to realize that all of those things might be true.

Normally she wouldn't feel twinges of arousal just from someone saying something, but she couldn't help but be deeply seduced whenever Draco spoke.

Conflicted and embarrassed by the direction her thoughts had taken, Hermione quickly asked, "So how goes the research?"

"Dammit, Granger," he murmured, shaking his head. "You're incorrigible."

"What? What'd I do?"

"We should talk about what you're working on," he said, nudging her. "I can't escape my research."
"Oh, right," she said, her arm feeling a little funny where he nudged her. "You mean with the kelpie blood?"

"I mean, anything. There are bound to be interesting things happening in your life."

"I assure you there are not."

"Regardless, come out with it."

She tried to discern his motives, looking at him through narrowed eyes, but it seemed like he really was interested.

"I, um... well, I transmuted a vein strand," she said. "Thank you for the suggestion, it didn't take as much adjustment - or wasted ingredients - as I anticipated."

He nodded in acknowledgment, looking surprised.

"And so I thought more about your suggestion; like, why did it work? And then I realized - I could apply the same logic to other parts of the body. So, using other shapeshifting creature ingredients, I was able to add bones, and muscle, and nerves, and even epidermis," she finished.

Draco chuckled, shaking his head. "You know, when I said there were interesting things happening in your life, this is what I meant. That's amazing."

"Is it?"

"Yes. If you can transmute a living limb, or growable skin, or - shit, a usable organ - you could revolutionize the way grafts are done. You could revolutionize the way healing is done."

"It was just a mess of mismatched parts, it didn't look like anything," she said quickly. "I don't know enough physiology to transmute a proper limb."

"And?"

"And it took too much time and ingredients - its impractical for full organs or limbs."

"And it's bloody brilliant," he corrected.

"No, I was just... messing around, really."

"Any chance you'd let me see your notes?"

She smirked. "So you can tweak the formulas and release them under your name? Not a chance."

"Thwarted again," he muttered slyly, and she laughed with him.

"I'm not trying to go anywhere with it," she said after a moment, swirling her firewhiskey. "I was mostly just interested in the techniques."

"That's what I love about you, Granger," Draco said seriously. "You do things just to see if you can."

She chuckled nervously, trying to ignore the sudden lift of her heart. Oh god, she was sweating now; even though she felt like he hadn't meant anything by this comment, she couldn't help but feel flattered by the implications.
"Yes, it's very Le Jandre of me," she said quickly.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far. He really just does whatever he wants, and uses 'the pursuit of advancement' as an excuse." Draco shook his head. "His goals are his own, and have nothing to do with the goals of the magical community."

Her heart began to slow it's furious beating - he apparently didn't notice that his comment had flustered her - and she sighed. "He'll probably make the same discovery I did any time now."

He stared at her squarely, his lips set in a line; she was getting used to his demeanor, his mannerisms, and so she knew that whatever he was about to say would either be controversial or heartfelt.

"I have an idea," he said finally, pushing his marbled frames up on his nose, "How about you write up the results, and submit the manuscript for review. I can help you figure out which journals to try."

"It was just an exploration - I didn't follow a strict methodology."

"You can frame it as such," he encouraged.

"I'm not super interested in healing. It's more the human body, and how the brain controls it, that I'm trying to learn before I consider studying old thought magic for the Unspeakable program."

"Either way - anything you develop can still help healers."

"I mean, it was... it was just a mess of pieces. And it's impractical."

He looked at her mirthfully, though his eyes were still piercing. "Look, Granger, I know that healing alchemy isn't your bag, but - with your brain, your dedication and critical eye, you can really make an impact in the community."

She shrugged, her heart swelling; he was consistently surprising her, saying things that kindled something deep in her soul, stroked a confidence that she hadn't felt in herself in a long time.

"And if it gets published, you can be a consultant to healers in St. Mungo's, and have that to back up your university application."

"If I have time, maybe," she confirmed, her eyes sparkling.

"Besides," he said, his smirk returning, "I gotta get you into the Department of Mysteries so I can get access to the Brain room."

"Aho!" she exclaimed, swatting at him. "Is that your grand plan? Helping me out so I would sneak you in to do your neuropsychology research?"

"Or put in a good word for me," he added.

She shook her head, taking a sip of her drink.

"You seem to forget - you're dealing with a Slytherin, here," he chuckled, running a hand through his hair and mussing it gloriously. "Nothing comes for free."

"No good deeds out of the kindness of your heart?"

He scoffed. "What heart?"

Something in his expression made her laugh; she loved when he was self-deprecating, and how
easily he could defuse the sheer lunacy of the situation by both acknowledging it and ignoring it.

"You have a heart, Malfoy," she admonished.

He shook his head, feigning exasperation. "I know, it's so annoying sometimes!"

She laughed again, swatting at him; she grasped his arm for a second, and another delightful twinge of warmth washed over her at the feeling of his skin. She could feel the tiny strands of hair over the top of his arm, the soft pliable skin underneath, and even the potential force that he could exert. Shocked at the intense feeling, she withdrew her hand, feigning nonchalance.

A group of young wizards - probably interns - brushed past them quickly to get to the drink table, and Hermione suddenly remembered where they were.

She turned to glance around the room, eying the groups of coworkers huddled together, talking and laughing, and immediately saw Harry looking at her in confusion.

Dread spiked through her involuntarily, as if she had been caught doing something she wasn't supposed to; had he seen her laughing with Draco? And oh goodness, had he seen her touch him?

"Oh - " she started.

Before she could figure out what to tell Malfoy, Harry was saying goodbye to Kingsley and making his way towards her, squeezing through the people separating them.

"Hermione," he said when he reached her, eying her companion. "Alright?"

"Of course Harry," she returned, her heart quivering. She wrapped him in a warm hug, resisting the urge to gauge Draco's expression; out of the corner of her eye she could see him tense up.

Harry released her, his smile easier. "Nice to see you out and about."

"I could say the same. You've been away for weeks!"

"Yes, the investigation in Qatar finished up yesterday, so it will be business as - "

"Harry!"

Hermione blanched as Ron appeared behind Draco, gobsmacked, his arms outstretched. He maneuvered over to them quickly, looking between Draco and Harry like they'd just kissed.

"Ron - "

"You prick, you missed the match!" he said, clapping his friend on the back.

"Work," Harry said apologetically. "Ginny won though, she told me."

Ron seemed conflicted as he flashed a tight smile. "Yeah, she played brilliantly."

"Hard to cheer for the Cannons when she's against them, huh?"

"Yeah, well, the Harpies are a great team, Gwyneth is really whipping them into shape with those offensive rolls."

It seemed that the boys were simply going to ignore Draco, possibly waiting for him to get so uncomfortable that he would leave, or perhaps waiting for the tall Slytherin to say something so they
could pounce. Either way, they were both tensed up like a pair of ready springboards, waiting for Malfoy to twitch.

And while Hermione knew it was unlikely that the boys would curse someone in public - they were responsible adults, and also famous enough that a duel could make the papers - it was still unclear if they were opposed to shouting at each other in front of the Minister.

"Oh! Did they demo the new plays?"

"Yes, and they were... man, they were **interesting**. Never seen chasers use the other team's formation to confuse them. Plus, their offense hit like a hammer. No huddles, they just kept going and going!"

"Wow. I wondered why Ginny was so beat."

"Yeah, she put in major work. Did you see her interview in the *Prophet*?"

"Yes, she's on her way to the Hall of Fame."

"I've always loved the Harpies; they've consistently been pioneers in chasing techniques," Draco murmured.

Both boys finally looked at him properly; Hermione watched helplessly as they stared each other down, her heart sinking even more.

"Malfoy," Harry greeted finally, his face hardened into an expression that Hermione knew too well.

Harry had always been good at hiding his emotions - she suspected it was a byproduct of growing up in an environment where hiding was necessary for survival - but she had known him for so long that she could tell when he was angry.

And through his hard stare, she knew that whatever was about to happen, it would probably take all of Harry's effort to keep his cool.

Draco managed a tight smile in response, his eyes flicking to Hermione as he did.

"So Hermione, it's been a bit - what is your team working on now?" Ron asked, clearly trying to sound nonchalant.

"More of the same, you know. Reforming laws, contributing articles, interfacing with other ministries. That kind of thing."

"If you're working in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, how come you're interested in thought magic?" Draco asked.

Harry and Ron glanced at him sharply, and Hermione pinked. It looked odd that Malfoy knew about her interests; should she have told the pair about her unplanned conversations with the blond wizard? She hadn't even gotten an opportunity to talk to her friends about her alchemic explorations.

Honestly, part of why she hadn't told them yet was the fact that she really **was** interested in everything - it was what made her such a valuable asset to the Department of Mysteries during the muggleborn research project - and her friends always shook their heads at her whenever she talked about some other new magic she was learning.

She knew this time was different, however... the passion she felt for discovery, the complexity in micromagic techniques, and the mystery still surrounding the brain and thought magic... she was
getting closer to what she really wanted to spend her time doing.

Maybe it was time to tell them?

"Personal interest really, but I may eventually want to go into... the Unspeakable program," she said. She eyed Draco for a moment, wondering if he was stirring the pot on purpose. His lips twitched.

"Really?" Harry asked. "And how come this is the first we're hearing of it?"

Hermione shrugged, though she was cringing internally. She really ought to have given them more details. "I haven't decided what I want to do yet."

"But you're on track to becoming the head of your department!"

"That's really impressive," Draco put forth. Harry and Ron narrowed their eyes at him, and he stared back, his own gaze hardening.

Hermione panicked at their looks, knowing that if she didn't do something they would devolve into insults any second now.

"Thank you, Draco, that's really sweet of you," she replied, eyeing Harry and Ron. They noticed her dangerous expression and looked away. "I'd actually like to be head of the Department of Mysteries eventually."

Draco nodded slowly. "Ambitious," he murmured, and in his wicked smile she knew he was comparing her to Slytherins.

She caught on and said, "Yes, perhaps I was sorted into the wrong house after all."

Harry and Ron looked positively distraught at the idea, but seemed to notice the playful turn in conversation and decided to play along.

"I know Malfoy can help you there," Harry said, recovering sooner than Ron.

"You always knew me best, Potter," Draco replied, and though Hermione knew he was joking, there was a serious edge to his voice that indicated that he may intend to have a similar conversation with Harry that he'd had with her, not a week before.

"My drink is a little low for this," Ron said somewhat darkly, gesturing toward the drink table. "Let's fill up."

The new group made their way to the crowded makeshift bar; Draco hung back a bit to walk behind Hermione, his hand on the small of her back. There was something in this gesture that made Hermione nervous; it was almost as though he was solidifying a connection between them, like he was staking his claim. She made no move to bat his hand away, since at the moment she felt more affinity with him than her tactless mates, but she noted the move to analyze later.

Luckily her business robes were rather thick, so his touch wasn't distracting her as much as it could have.

Harry quickly passed them all a finger of firewhiskey; Draco downed his without a word, his eyes never leaving the green-eyed wizard. Harry looked slightly taken aback at the blind trust involved in such a gesture, but accepted it with a slight raise of his brow. Ron scowled at the blond wizard; he had probably seen Draco remove his hand from Hermione's back and had jumped to the obvious (and possibly correct) conclusion.
"I wasn't planning on getting that smashed, Harry," Hermione admonished, but sipped her refreshed firewhiskey anyway.

"I'm going to need it if he's sticking around," Harry retorted, gesturing at Draco with his drink hand. His mouth was turned up in a smirk but his eyes remained hard.

"So what are you up to these days, Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "This and that. Trying to reform the Auror program. Now that there are less dark wizards to catch."

"You're sure about that?" Draco replied, a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Oh, come off it Malfoy, we know you wouldn't hurt a bowtruckle," Harry waved.

Draco acknowledged this comment with a slight nod. "Unless that bowtruckle had a nasty case of aqualorum."

Hermione smiled; she knew her friends could carry on with the wizard if they really tried. She knew they were only doing it out of fear for her potentially hexing them in public, and that she would get an earful about it later, but for now... she could just enjoy the meaningless banter and drink some more. She took a sip.

"Speaking of aqualorum, Draco is the one leading the containment effort."

Harry and Ron nodded slowly, sipping their drinks and feigning interest. Draco smirked at their expressions.

"They don't want to hear about that, it's terribly boring," he said.

"Wait, how are you leading that?" Ron asked, surprising the brunette witch. "Are you finished with your healing training?"

"Someone reads the Prophet. Ten points to Gryffindor," Draco replied playfully. "I haven't, but the Head Healer knows about my business background - because of my previous venture capital work - and thought it would be a good residency project."

"You were helping out businesses while you were in healing school?" Hermione asked, surprised. "No wonder 'Malfoy sightings' were likened to seeing a demiguise in the Prophet."

He shrugged weakly. "I tried to do too much at once."

Hermione nodded and took another sip.

Draco looked behind him and then said, "I should get back home to finish some research, actually."

"Oh no, don't go," Harry said dryly, sipping.

Draco smirked at him and waved, meeting Hermione’s eyes for a brief second. For the first time she felt slightly disappointed at his departure; he was getting better in social situations and she rather enjoyed how he could keep up with her.

She smiled at him.

After Draco had gone, the boys were silent for a good ten seconds before they eyed her critically.
"What was that about?" Harry asked, gesturing at Draco's back.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I don't need your permission to talk to people," she said tartly.

"That's not what I'm talking about," he returned.

She sighed and downed the rest of her drink, wondering how much she should reveal, what angle she wanted to take. She could tell them that he was simply a business partner for the aqualorum epidemic... but she wasn't on that project directly. She could tell them that she'd run into him at some healing events she'd attended... but that would just lead to more questions about her want of a career change.

She'd have to give them the proper story.

"Alright, alright," she sighed. "I've been running into him every so often, and we've been talking. He... he took me to coffee last week and apologized for how he treated me in school."

"For real?"

"Yep."

The boys nodded like a couple of floating buoys, their expressions unreadable.

"So... what did he say?"

"He's trying to reconcile his past, I think."

"Why? Why now?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm not sure."

Harry and Ron looked at each other; Hermione was suddenly aware of the many loud voices and laughing individuals around them. She glanced around at her coworkers; it suddenly struck her as odd that Draco would even be at this event.

"So how's little James, Harry?" she asked.

"Don't change the subject," Harry retorted. At the steely look the witch gave him, he quickly added, "he's fine, keeps growing, you know -"

"Hermione!" a high voice said from behind her.

She turned and was embraced by the bubbly witch; Hermione disengaged to see who it was.

"Ariana!"

"And who are these handsome gentlemen?" the witch teased, turning her gaze on Harry and Ron. Both of them looked somewhat stricken.

"Yes - these are my friends."

The boys introduced themselves quickly; Ariana briefly gushed at them - they were all famous war heroes, especially Harry - and clinked their glasses excitedly.

"I thought I recognized you! I met Hermione at the ballet. I thought I might see you here, girl! You were so much fun!"
Hermione seriously doubted that; she'd spent the majority of that evening using Padma as a social shield.

"Shame you missed the afterparty at Draco's. But there will be others!"

Both her friends bristled and the brunette witch mentally kicked herself. They were really going to let her have it now. "Owl me if anything comes up," she said, ignoring the daggers being directed at her.

"Of course!" Ariana's eyes lit up as she spotted another friend and said, "Make sure you bring these two." She put a hand on Ron's cheek - his face reddened violently - and with a quick smile at them, made her exit.

"'Draco' now, is it?" Harry asked tersely, shaking his head. "I can't even begin to keep up with you these days."

"And Malfoy," Ron continued, his cheeks still red. "He's turned into a real pretty-boy, hasn't he?"

Hermione shook her head, took a breath, and began to lay into them, admonishing them thoroughly for their bad behavior; honestly, she was happy that they'd acted so poorly so she could dodge their questions.

Reprimanding them effectively took the wind out of their sails, and they settled after a minute, sipping their drinks and looking around.

Several coworkers came up and engaged the group in pointed conversation, talking about the projects they were working on, but Hermione couldn't help but let her thoughts wander to Draco. Even as the three wizards were accosted for a photo - no doubt a headline featuring the snapshot would read, "Golden Trio Reunited on Eve of Battle of Hogwarts" - she couldn't help but try to figure out her feelings towards the blond wizard, and why she had almost been - exasperated? - when Harry had interrupted their conversation.

Having his attention on her directly was so deliciously satisfying, and he was just so... so playful sometimes, it was really enjoyable. He was reminding her to relax, to enjoy life, and not be so uptight all the time. Sure, she wasn't nearly as bad as she used to be, but she was still a scholastically intense person that enjoyed working and learning all she could.

Unfortunately, part of her loosening up meant that she was acutely aware of her own... physical... needs, and how at the moment they were not being met in the slightest. And so it was understandable that when he'd shown some interest in her, she'd started to wonder about him... if he was dating anyone seriously, if his attention on her was actually romantic, and mostly... if she wanted to try something.

Fear of rejection was keeping her from being straightforward about it however, despite her suspicion that he was attracted to her.

What she needed then was another chance to see him out, a chance to be around him when they weren't surrounded by her coworkers, weren't being accosted by her friends.

Maybe... she needed to be alone with him?

Ugh. She was not used to thinking about another person this way and she was getting a little embarrassed again.

Besides, she'd never had a great sexual relationship with anyone, except for Viktor perhaps. Viktor's
physical presence had been intense, as he was a big guy, his body all bulging muscle and strength, and he certainly knew what he was doing sexually. But with her other partners, it had been mostly about intellect; she'd been attracted to how smart they were, the way their mind worked, and she had really just wanted to talk to them endlessly. The exception to this had of course been Ron, but there were so many years of messy feelings and expectation there that she hadn't realized that once that was gone... she didn't actually like being with him that much.

She had to be kidding herself, that any kind of sexual relationship with Draco would somehow be better than with anyone else. Besides, even though she was certainly feeling... a lot... whenever he was near her, she was still acutely aware of his shortcomings and how they might rear if she got involved with him. She'd learned that from Ron as well.

She shook away these thoughts, refocusing on her friends. She really didn't want to think about her relationship with Ron when he was standing right in front of her.

"I can't wait to see what they've done with the decorations. Last year was pretty spectacular."

"Yeah. And using the pitch for the event was kind of refreshing."

"They'll probably have it in the Great Hall this year though. Ginny was complaining about her heels getting muddy, and I'm sure other people did as well." Harry turned his attention to Hermione. "Hopefully we can get Hermione to come this year."

"I'm coming," she defended. "I don't like to stick around normally. It's hard."

Harry and Ron both nodded sadly, suddenly finding their drinks incredibly interesting.

Hermione cringed; she didn't want to remind them of what the Battle of Hogwarts Ball was actually for. Recovering, she asked quickly, "Have you finished your speech yet?"

Harry scoffed and waved. "I always wing it, and it works out fine."

The brunette witch shook her head; how great must it be, to just wing it and everything turn out okay? "Great," she muttered.

"I know you're prepared," he said, smiling.

She had been writing her memorial speech for weeks, and so she felt prepared in that sense, but she felt a little uneasy at the prospect of what happened afterward - the ball. Normally she didn't care either way, and she didn't even go usually; the ball was mostly an excuse to drink, tour the grounds, and try to bring in donations for the school and the families of the fallen. But since she had been talking to Draco, she had a certain nervousness about the event that was hard to place, and she found herself overly worried about things like what she would wear, how she might style her hair, and if she should procure a date.

"Always," Hermione replied, somewhat shakily.

"I heard that the Japanese ministry is sponsoring it this year," Ron said.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Ambassador Tsubaki and I were going over the details with McGonagall just the other day. Minister Ito will be there as well... security is going to be pretty tight."

"The whole department has been commissioned as guards," Harry said seriously. "Thank goodness I can stand around and drink."
"And wear your Auror armor under your dress robes," Ron added knowingly.

Harry elbowed him.

"It will be nice to be back, anyway," Ron said, stretching and rubbing a spot under his chest, presumably sore from the quidditch league tryouts. "And see how Neville is holding up."

"You know, you could always come and teach Dumbledore's Army one of these weeks," Harry said. "To be honest, it's becoming a bit of a chore for Seamus and I."

Ron waved his hand. "Last thing I want to do is have fourth years practicing stunning on me. No way."

With a shrug, Harry finished his firewhiskey and vanished the glass. "Well, think about it. I've got to get to the Auror Office. Debrief."

Hermione nodded and said goodbye; soon Ron also departed, as he didn't typically hang around her anymore if Harry or one of their other friends wasn't there. She didn't mind this; in fact, she found it awkward to talk to him one-on-one sometimes, as she could tell that a part of him missed their relationship.

As she stared around the atrium, trying to figure out what to do with herself, Hermione couldn't help but search for Draco; though she couldn't really remember what they had been discussing, she had a peculiar urge to continue their conversation, an urge that likely had nothing to do with talking to him and everything to do with being near him in general.

While she didn't know for sure if she really wanted to pursue anything romantic with him, it felt good to be near him, felt good to have his attention directed at her. No one looked at her the way he did - and though there was the occasional wizard who would try to hit on her, Hermione always treated them with derision and flippant disregard.

Not that she wasn't interested in dating - she was just very particular about the way people approached her, and if she felt even remotely uncomfortable, she sent the wizard away with a frown.

She had learned how to do this a little too late, but after endless unwanted attention from men who clearly just read about her in the *Prophet* or noticed her in bars, she had built up hefty personal defense mechanisms that had them running.

It had taken a lot of slip-ups for her to recognize what kind of sexual attention did - and did not - make her feel good.

She wondered briefly if Draco would actually attend the Battle of Hogwarts Charity Ball; she couldn't recall ever seeing him there in the years she'd attended, and had definitely never seen him at the memorial service beforehand. She was suddenly beset by the urge to ask him if he was attending... but how could she do that without it seeming odd?

She spotted a blond man in the crowd, but after a moment she could tell that it wasn't him.

She sighed, twirling her empty glass in her fingers; she doubted that he was still here. He'd likely went home, just like he said he would.

Hermione glanced around one final time, ensuring that no-one was paying her any attention, and made her way to the fireplaces, trying not to let her thoughts drift to the ball only a few days away.
The Memorial

Battle of Hogwarts Memorial

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

May 2nd

She felt incredibly small, out here on the pitch; she had forgotten how large the field was, how tall the stands were in comparison. They seemed to stretch endlessly into the sky as the crowd of somber individuals roamed about, finding their seats and exchanging a hushed word or two.

Usually by the time the last speech was done, the crowd picked up a bit - but in the beginning it was always like this, all grim faces and quiet tones. By sunset the memorial would be more lively - in anticipation for the ball, for free alcohol, for a break to the melancholy.

Hermione usually only attended the speeches portion of the event, since she spoke almost every year. She'd been to the ball a few times, and remembered the first year they'd had it: everyone had been in too much of a mood to have fun, as the War was still too recent, and the speeches about the loved ones they'd lost had affected them too much for them to do more than drink heavily and wonder around, consoling each other.

She had it in her mind to attend the ball this year however, since through the grapevine she knew that the majority of her year would be there. It seemed that enough time had passed where they could celebrate the lives that had been taken without being consumed by grief.

She tried not to think of the dress hanging over her wardrobe, a dress she had picked out after way too much thought and agonization; unfortunately this resulted in her harboring some resentment towards the innocent garment.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione summoned her notes to get her mind back on track. She quickly recalled what she was meant to say, how she was supposed to turn her phrases. Yep, unity.

By the time the majority of the wizards and witches sat in the creaking chairs, she was calm and focused once again, the words for her speech floating under the surface of her thoughts.

Kingsley Shacklebolt came to the podium, his elegant, embroidered robes flowing behind him with the wind, and the crowd clapped obligatorily, their faces doleful.

"Thank you all for coming."

A hush fell over the crowd as they waited.

"This memorial never gets easier," he began. "Nor do the days following, as we remember those who gave their lives so that we may enjoy a life free from fear. But in your solemn celebration, please remember - our fallen brethren bid us to think of life, not death. They still live for us in our hearts, joyous like the spring, untarnished and faithful to memory.

"Our grief is not our end, it is our beginning. A beginning to learn from our mistakes, celebrate our magic, and fear not what we don't know." He paused, looking out over the crowd. "The late Albus Dumbledore once said, to quell the fear of his students: 'Happiness can be found in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.' I bid you, now, to turn on the light, and reflect on
the smiles of your friends."

The clapping was more relaxed this time. Kingsley continued. "Fellow wizards, I'd like to give the floor now to Minister Ito."

The Japanese minister flashed his crinkly smile, bowing to Kingsley, who returned the bow and gestured to the podium.

"Good evening. I want to thank Headmistress McGonagall, Minister Shacklebolt, Ambassador Tsubaki and all of those who made this event possible. Your hospitality and kindness has been unrivaled.

"My people can relate to what yours are going through; we are still, even now, dealing with the aftereffects of Grindelwald's devastation to our community. It has been exciting to see the ways in which your community has recovered, and I look forward to the collaboration between our ministries and our schools, to help bring each other into the Golden Age of Peace."

The crowd clapped politely, and the Minister looked over them with his warm, crinkly smile. "I will not take up much of your time, and just leave you with this. In Japan we have a saying: 'If you want to change course, change your stars.' This is a mantra we have lived by, and it has helped us move on from Grindelwald's reign. I see your people embracing this with open hearts and eyes, and thus changing your stars and following a different path."

He waved, and the crowd applauded again, looking far less melancholic than they had when Hermione had arrived.

One by one, the various presenters came out and gave their speech. Professor McGonagall talked about the restoration of the school, the changes to Hogwarts security and curriculum; Angela Brown, Lavender's older sister, was both laughing and sobbing as she described her sister's smile, her passions, and even her annoying bad habits, earning tear-filled chuckles from the audience. Richard Caticus, Hermione's boss and Head of her department, talked about the collaboration between their ministry and others to prevent similar wars around the world.

Finally, it was Hermione's turn. She took one last slow exhale - an effective presentation technique she had learned - and stood.

The claps seemed deafening as she stepped in front of the podium; she scanned the crowd, noting vaguely that it was almost double that of the previous year. She raised her wand to her throat.

"It has been seven years since that night," she said, her elevated voice soft and contemplative. She stared around at the crowd as they watched her, and continued, her voice rising, "Seven years since we fought the forces of darkness, seven years since we toiled with our loved ones, seven years since we triumphed over Voldemort. And I am happy to say that in that time, we've rebuilt our Ministry, rebuilt our homes, reclaimed our peace.

"We've seen great strides in both equality and Ministry representation. With our yearly census in, we've found that there is a higher density of muggleborns in our Ministry than any other in the world. Last autumn, magical beings were given full control over their colonies, and representation within the Confederation of Wizards. And most recently, thanks to my dear friend Harry Potter and the courage of the Auror Alliance, the dangerous dark wizards who have sought to continue Voldemort's work are no more."

There was a rumble of claps, and Hermione paused to indulge the crowd before she continued.
"But recently, it has become clear that this is not enough; there is still much work to be done. We have healed some of the wounds from the War, but there are deep wounds that cannot be healed without attention, wounds that were created much before the War, much before the popularity of isolation, the dismissal of change.

"It is clear that while we have overextended in the past few years for those who have been mistreated, persecuted, and denied basic freedoms, we have forgotten other facets of our community: those who have shaped our community in the image of the Old Way, those whose influence has magnified generation after generation. It is important now, more than ever, that we come together, as one, and heal each other."

She paused, assessing the crowd. The silence was only broken with the rustling of the tapestries, the occasional shift on the wet grass.

"I see a bright future," she continued in the same, soft voice. "Where we come together regardless of family, regardless of magical race, of class, of education or job. I see a future where we build our community together, where we lean on each other and trust each other and hurt and mend together. Where we truly are one; one people, one community. One world."

Her voice rose. "A friend reminded me recently," she continued, "that a person shouldn't have to qualify to have a meaningful existence. And I believe that is absolutely true; we can no longer judge each other by things we cannot change, about our pasts, our heritage. We can only judge each other by what we choose to do now. And now I challenge you to choose to embrace each other. Embrace those you don't understand, embrace those who you are wary of, embrace those who make you afraid. And together we will conquer fear, preserve peace, and ultimately, move forward!"

The crowd broke out into respectful cheers and claps again, recognizing the end of her speech; among the sea of familiar faces in the crowd, she could see her boss clapping eagerly, nodding at her in approval. Hogwarts teachers were practically beaming as they applauded. Some of her ministry friends looked slightly apprehensive, but were smiling and clapping with everyone else; she would have to talk to them later. She tried in vain to catch anyone beyond the front few rows, as they were just dots extending into the horizon.

She sighed and glanced behind her to see if Harry was ready. He nodded at her.

"And without further ado, I would like to introduce you to the man who has worked, his whole life, to bring our world to where it is today. A man who was just a boy when I met him, just a boy when he was forced to fight, forced to face evils no one should at such a young age. A man who led us to victory, who was a light in the darkness, who to this day loves so fiercely. My wizard brethren, please welcome: Auror Harry Potter."

Harry crossed the stage to thunderous applause and cheers. She cringed as she passed him; she knew how he hated to be congratulated on his work in vanquishing Voldemort, as the whole business was still very damaging for him. She could see a grimace ghost across his features before his smile fit in place once more.

Harry went on with his speech using his usual method - sheepish declarations of unity, of how the real victory of the War was a reminder of how they needed to come together, how Love was and will forever be the most precious thing they can preserve.

Hermione looked on in admiration. He was so effortlessly charismatic, so comfortable in this setting despite his shyness; he really knew exactly what to say and do to evoke a strong response from an audience. And the people loved him dearly - Hermione could see it in the eyes of the crowd as they listened with rapt attention, their sober moods forgotten.
Finally, after an enthusiastic standing ovation, Harry stepped down and crossed back over to where Hermione was standing.

After they had made their way off the makeshift stage and onto the squishy grass, Harry looped his arm through Hermione's, much to her surprise, and guided her away. She smiled at the people gathered to talk to him as they made their way past.

"Thanks for saving me," he murmured imperceptibly, avoiding the eyes of the people around them.

She chuckled, keeping her cordial smile in place. "You could tell them to bugger off, they'd still come crawling back for more."

When the pair stopped, no longer in danger of being interrupted, Hermione turned to face him properly.

"You did wonderfully, Harry, as always," Hermione said, squeezing his arm.

He nodded, distracted. "Thanks."

"That may have been the best one yet."

"You say that every year," he chided. "You were right, I should have had something planned."

She waved her hand, smiling at some wizards waiting near them to steal Harry away. She took his arm and walked further into the crowd.

"Do you really believe what you said? About people deserving a meaningful existence, even if they were on the wrong side of the War?"

Hermione smirked. Harry had seen right through her jargon and understood her speech for what she was really saying. She had structured the address to be somewhat vague and inspirational so the polarizing things she was hinting at were merely hints. Harry had always been very perceptive however, and he knew her better than anyone.

"I meant it. We can't just ignore a whole part of our community. They have feelings too."

Harry scoffed, grinning. "They have feelings?"

She chuckled, swatting his arm. "You know what I mean."

They chuckled together for a few moments; Hermione relaxed, feeling truly content for the first time that day. She missed Harry endlessly, as it was a rare occasion when he was able to spend time with her. Most of his time was taken up by his job, or Ginny, or his son, and she really wanted to reconnect with him.

She squeezed his shoulder as she looked over the pitch, and he put a hand over hers, gazing out as well.

"People are starting to heal," she murmured, watching some parents and former students talk and laugh together. "What we've been doing has been working."

Harry nodded absently, squeezing her hand. "Yeah."

"But how are you doing? I barely get to see you anymore."

Harry smiled, though it had a sad twinge to it that made Hermione's heart clench. "I'm doing good."
Between the Auror training and James, I've been kept pretty busy."

"Did you think about what I suggested?"

He sighed, his smile jokingly patronizing. "Yeah, yeah. If I had time for therapy, I'd do it."

"I barely have time, myself," Hermione put forth, "but you have to make time. You'll feel so much better."

"Doesn't it make you feel those things again? Relive those memories?"

"Well, yes, it does. But that's important. You have to confront those memories. Otherwise the trauma won't heal. You'll still have visions. Nightmares. Flashbacks."

Harry stiffened under her hand.

"The therapy has been good, really. There are still some barriers to break down," she admitted, "but it really does help."

"Alright," he conceded. "I'll try to find the time. I guess we were just so busy trying to make everything right that... I forgot to take care of myself."

Harry paused, almost imperceptibly, but Hermione could tell that something had happened. She turned and followed his gaze, her eyes settling on the familiar form of Draco Malfoy. He was talking to Professor Slughorn, intently describing some concept with his hands. Slughorn looked like he had something foul under his nose, but was listening with respectful attention.

Draco was still wearing his work attire, and something about his whole look - his dark frames contrasting sharply with his pale skin, his healer robes open and revealing a long, chrome healing instrument draped casually around his neck... it had her thoughts entering inappropriate territory already.

She took a deep breath, looking away.

"You alright?" Harry asked, assessing her.

"Yes. I just... remembered that I forgot something at work."

Harry didn't look overly convinced, and Hermione averted her gaze. His eyes, those alarmingly green eyes, always had the effect of Veritaserum; she couldn't lie to him for long before crumpling.

Not letting her escape, he murmured, "Malfoy came and talked to me too."

"Huh." She feigned uncaring interest, though she knew Harry could see through it. "I suspected that he might. How did that go?"

Harry snorted. "Better than I expected. Though I definitely know that we won't ever be friends."

"Why is that?"

"I mean... he's still a prick."

"A prick?"

"Yeah. He's... he's kind of manipulative. He always has been, but it's different now. Subtler. I could feel it, the way he said some things."
Hermione tried not to immediately compare this to how Draco had interacted with her, but it was useless; she had thought that she was accessing the person behind the facade he projected, but now she wasn't so sure.

"I'm glad he reached out though; it really lifted a weight off. You know I told him about following him around? In sixth year?"

Hermione smirked. "What did he say to that?"

Harry shook his head mirthfully. "Something stupid about me being pathetic of course, what do you think? But we talked about that a little - what he was going through, how Voldemort used him against his father."

"That's... wow."


"I'm glad you guys got to work it out."

Harry scoffed, scanning the people around them. "Well no, not 'work-it-out,' I'd say we just shared what was happening. He was curious about the mind-connection thing with Voldemort. Apparently that got reported in the *Prophet*."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, he's trying to become a full-time neurohealer, so that makes sense." She smiled a bit and followed, "Gonna run off and become a test subject?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No way."

"Talking to him has been helping, actually," Hermione admitted, still staring at the blond man.

"How so?"

"It wasn't just the apology. I'd forgotten so much from school, so much of the happenings that didn't have to do with Death Eaters or people trying to kill you. And... even thinking about how awful he was... somehow it's been good. Remembering what it's like to feel something." She took a deep breath and exhaled sharply.

"Look, Hermione... " Harry started.

She made the mistake of looking back at her friend, and her heart leapt into her throat.

"I don't know what's going on... with you and him," he said steadily, gesturing at Draco. "But just be careful, okay?"

Damn his attentiveness.

She tried to wave her hand dismissively, but she knew that it wouldn't matter. "Don't worry about me, Harry. I'm fine."

He shrugged, though he had strategically placed himself between her and Malfoy now, and she'd have to peer around him to continue eying the former Slytherin.

Hermione was mentally repeating profanities as she tried to continue to engage him in conversation; thankfully the Minister stole Harry away a few minutes later, and she left them to their talk, feeling Harry's eyes on her as she walked closer to the edge of the pitch.
Somehow, by acknowledging her relationship with Malfoy as something, like something was going on, Harry had elevated her situation past whatever she had assumed it was before. Being attracted to someone wasn't usually a problem for her; she could be attracted to the occasional witch or wizard and it was fine, and she could carry on with them without much consequence or thought. Attraction was a simple chemical response, a simple feeling.

But Draco was different; there was nothing simple about this. He wasn't just evoking some strong physical - and mental - reactions simply by being attractive. He was reminding her of how she used to feel back in school, was opening up a dam of forgotten memories and feelings. And once the dam was opened, the feelings kept coming, fleshing out her memory, fueling her therapy-aided self-discovery, and mostly... confusing the hell out of her.

She was even morphing some of their shared memories; wondering why she had never noticed how tall he was, trying to recall why he'd seemed so repulsive to her back in school. If memory served he had always been somewhat fit, though his ugly sneers and indifference had distracted her from really thinking about him like he was a boy, let alone a human being.

What would it have been like... if he had treated her well in school?

She'd already had a tight grip over her hormones in relation to Viktor, and even Ron... goodness knows that despite being firm about not engaging in sexual activity in school ("That's hardly appropriate, we learn here," she remembered saying), she'd been constantly fighting with her own body. After school, she had definitely let loose, much to Ron's (and later, even Viktor's) benefit. If Draco had touched her in school the way he had at the ballet... who knows if she would have been able to resist.

She imagined a late night detention together, a professor conveniently leaving them alone... him draping her over a table and pulling her skirt up -

She let out an exasperated breath. Bloody hell, she needed to get a grip.

Dodging a few elderly witches, she crossed the threshold of the pitch, settling near one of the stands.

She thought she had escaped far enough away to where he wouldn't be able to find her, but inevitably she caught sight of him squeezing between the wizards surrounding her, making his way over to her intently. There was a light touch of a smirk on his lips as he neared.

He was actually seeking her out.

Her heart thudded involuntarily.

"This wasn't as bad as I expected," he drawled as he came to stand in front of her, gesturing around him. With the afternoon sunset casting a warm glow over the field, Draco was edged in golden light, his hair catching the sun like shimmer on a lake. The wind flowed through them, dragging his scent under her nose. Something uncoiled in her belly.

"Hi, Draco," she replied, mostly to get her bearings. The prospect of having a conversation with him after she had just discarded some rather vivid fantasies was not helping matters. "Why would it be bad?"

He looked around. "Not exactly welcome here. Though Healer Camille insisted."

"Oh?"
"Needed to talk to Sprout and Slughorn about potions - for the epidemic."

Oh.

"That was an interesting speech," he murmured, his smile incredibly smug.

"Ah," she said, mimicking his smirk.

"If I'd known that I would have such a profound effect on your policies, I would have come to talk to you sooner."

Hermione tilted her head at him. "Would you have, though?"

He bared his teeth in a dramatic cringe. "Eh, probably not, actually."

She chuckled; talking to him directly had both a calming and heightening effect on her resolve. She definitely could carry on with him normally - as long as he didn't say something bold.

And currently she could tell that though he was trying to maintain their casual, joking rapport, the speeches had clearly had a deep effect on him.

"That was the point of my speech actually," she said softly as people maneuvered around them. "The fact that these programs, these reforms, my job, shouldn't even be necessary. We should all just respect each other for the content of our character. And come together, regardless of our fear of each other."

"They don't understand it that way, you know," he put forth. "Those who shaped our world. They see the reforms as punishment for the Dark Lord. Punishment for fueling his regime."

She furrowed her brows. "You mean the pureblooded elite?"

"You don't know how it feels," he pressed on. "Feeling responsible for all of the good things in the magical community, only to be blindsided with derision and suspicion after the War. They still feel like this is their world. Like you're trying to corrupt a community they built."

"But they were able to build it because... they took advantage of muggles centuries ago. They acquired wealth and passed it down generation after generation, concocting arbitrary traditions and rules to protect their status. And then that status was weaponized in order to protect their selfish ideals."

He didn't look happy at the declaration of his family traditions as 'arbitrary', or her description of pureblooded ideals as 'selfish.' She cringed, hoping that she hadn't hit some nerve. In his impassive expression, she could detect a slight tenseness in his jaw.

"The hierarchical structures of class and rank exist everywhere, Granger," he replied. "That's not just a magical thing, it's a human thing."

"But what about supporting dangerous individuals just to give in to one's own fear? Fear of people they don't understand? Did Voldemort's followers really believe that the world would be better without muggleborns?" His wince at her use of the Dark Lord's name was not lost on her.

"They believed in whoever was going to stop the world from changing."

"But is change so bad?"

"It is, when the way things are working is already beneficial."
"So they wanted to protect the status-quo."

He let out a humorless snort. "If by 'status quo' you mean a respect for wizard heritage and customs, then yes."

"They were blinded by prejudice!"

"Muggle-raised people bring muggle prejudices into our world with them," Draco said shortly. "Do you think that wizards have ever discriminated against people based on skin color, or physical disability, or - Merlin - sexual preferences?" He shook his head. "They're not made of gold, no more than purebloods are."

"No one is saying that muggle prejudice is any better. The point is to overcome all prejudice."

"And you don't think that the intermingling of other prejudice will have an amplifying effect?"

Hermione shook her head, somewhat exasperated. "Well, you could say that about mixing cultures. You could say that about mixing anything - there are going to be social hurdles to overcome. People think differently, and that's okay; the issue is when someone makes it hard for someone else for things they can't change. That's the trouble."

"And can purebloods change the way they were brought up, what they were taught to think?"

"Yes, they can. Just like anyone can. It's called unlearning."

"Not everyone is strong enough... smart enough... self-aware enough - "

"Well, you were."

He stopped, looking at her squarely. Another gust of wind flowed between them, rustling the tapestries behind them and carrying their robes off the grass.

"I'm still not," he replied softly. "It's not easy, you know."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "It's still worth it to try."

"Thank Merlin for therapy, for self-reflection. For my training, and finding my passion. Not all of us have that - some of us just live for the status."

Hermione rubbed her temple. This was the closest they had gotten to arguing since they had started talking again, and she really didn't want to do this here.

Logically, she knew that he was partially right - well not 'right' exactly, but at least had a point - but the irritation that bubbled in her chest was still potent. Their discussion was quickly not becoming about facts or compassion or progress, and was actually just becoming a battle to see who would concede.

She knew that the pureblooded social elite was still sore from the War, and that their fear of muggle customs and culture made them resistant to accepting muggleborns. They were desperate to hold onto their heritage, their traditions, their superiority, and saw muggleborns as an invasion that brought new ways of thinking, new customs... new clothing and food, even new slang... and that scared them. They didn't want the Old Way to be polluted.

And though she enjoyed being challenged on her ideals - it was like exercise for her, forcing her to strengthen and evolve her outlook until it was ironclad - she didn't like arguing with purebloods over
the benefits of having an integrated society.

Breathing in and out, trying to let her helpless fatigue ebb away, Hermione muttered, "Look, I know you don't really have any other muggleborns to talk about this with - but can we not?"

Draco ran a hand through his hair, finally noticing that they had been arguing at quite an inappropriate time, and nodded. "No offense, Granger," he murmured.

She waved her hand. "It's okay. I know there are problems. No system is perfect, no cause is perfect. But we really should work together to accept one another."

He nodded again, and she couldn't tell if he was placating her to prevent them from arguing again or if he was actually agreeing. She decided that right now, she didn't care either way.

A hand touched her shoulder, and she smiled at her colleague, Jason, as he waved to the pair and went past. After he disappeared, she took another calming breath, remembering where she was.

"So," Draco said, clearly trying to salvage the mood by feigning a conversational tone. "Going to the ball?"

Hermione nodded mutely, her irritation mingling with her nervousness and producing a distinct feeling of annoyance at herself - herself for arguing and having doubts about why she was even talking to him, herself for thinking about the ball way too many times in the past few days, of imagining swishing satin and romantic lighting, and blond hair and a piercing gaze behind sharp frames...

"Don't look excited."

"Oh, no, it should be good," Hermione said quickly. "I just don't want to talk to diplomats tonight."

"What do you want to do?"

She started mentally repeating curses again. "It will be nice to see our old classmates."

He nodded, scanning the people around them, his eyes pausing on a few. It occurred to her that though her relationship with her classmates was mostly positive - she could forgive them for their teasing, especially now that she was removed from that situation - Draco's relationship with nearly everyone was negative. While his treatment of Harry and Ron had been especially fierce, not very many people had escaped his wrath.

"Are you going?"

Draco shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. I can't say that the last time I was here was very... pleasant."

She nodded mutely, trying not to think of the red dawn after the battle, with almost half of the castle laying in rubble. Uncovering crushed and bloody bodies, students and adults alike, moaning.

She brushed away this memory forcefully and declared, "You should go."

He cocked his head. "Should I?"

She suddenly wished they were arguing again, so she didn't have to dance around her feelings and could just talk to him like he was anyone else. "I think it would be good for you, to try to connect with people."

"I have been doing that," he said, gesturing at her.
"Not just me and Harry - " He looked surprised, and she quickly explained, "He told me that you talked to him. But you should try to connect with other people too. You never know what could happen."

"They'd hex me senseless."

"And you didn't think I would do that?"

He smirked. "No, you're a softie, Granger. Besides, you're too smart for that." He glanced around again, his eyes stopping a few steps away.

Hermione followed his line of sight and finally noticed two witches waving at her, trying to get her attention; she smiled and waved back at her friends. Draco looked on with a hint of amusement in his expression.

"She's the one who studied under Le Jandre," Hermione explained, watching as the witches playfully mocked adoration. "Want me to introduce you?"

He shook his head. "No, you should catch up. I've got to talk to Sprout." Draco eyed the witches coming towards them and leaned into her, his breath feathering over her neck.

"See you later," he murmured into her ear, and stepped around her.

As Jasmine and Marielle embraced the witch, shooting odd glances at Malfoy's retreating back, Hermione's brain was working furiously, her neck still tingling from the feeling of his breath, so close to her ear. Had he meant, 'see you later,' as in at the ball? Or later, here? Or 'see you later' like, see you around?

Or 'see you later,' like -

"Hermione, you were brilliant!"

"Smashing!" Marielle said, squeezing her again. "Love all that lovely-dovy tosh about unity."

"Oh, tosh?" Hermione quipped, grinning.

"Between you and Potter, I was going to get a toothache!"

Hermione waved her off and started to walk towards the edge of the grounds; she wanted to talk to her friends more privately, and needed to get home to change soon anyway. Her friends followed dutifully, and she turned her attention to Jasmine. "How did you like the speech?"

Jasmine smiled, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "It was wonderful, Hermione! You really... did a good job."

Hermione inclined her head. "Jazzy, I know you better than that. What did you really think?"

Her friend's expression wavered; she pursed her lips, her eyes fearful as she looked between Hermione and Marielle.

"I just... why do we have to do all the work for them? Why don't the purebloods ever try to change themselves?"

"They do. We're really making progress with that demographic - "

Jasmine shook her head, her bob swishing. "I'm so tired, Hermione. So tired of having to explain to
them when they say something shitty. So tired of having to 'convince' them that I'm fully wizard. I always have to be the one to challenge them."

Hermione's heart sank. Her encounter with Malfoy just a few minutes ago suddenly became a clear example of this.

She always felt like she had to lecture people - not even always purebloods - whenever they did or said something that reeked of bias. In fact, she felt like if she didn't say something, it would just become some other muggleborn's problem.

"I know," the brunette witch sighed, brushing her curls away from her face as she walked. "But we really do have to work together. We're never going to solve anything by blaming them."

The girl shrugged, twisting her bracelet around.

"Oh, lighten up, Jazzy. How can you be upset with this sunset?" Marielle motioned to the horizon, drawing attention to the fiery orb currently bathing the entire valley in golden light. The witches stopped in their trek towards the gates, observing the sight.

Hermione sighed, becoming aware of the wind rustling her clothing, moving her curls, and studied the landscape; Hogwarts had always been an incredibly beautiful place, between the lush hills, distant, jagged mountains, and the endless expanse of sky. Hermione briefly remembered the way the sunlight had illuminated Draco's hair.

The girls stared at the scene for a few more moments before Hermione turned back to Jasmine, suddenly remembering something.

"How's your soul research going? Any breakthroughs?"

Jasmine shook her head. "Our research has plateaued. I can't say much - "

Hermione waved her hand. She knew the deal; Unspeakables could only reveal what was public knowledge.

"But I can tell you that the dementor testing has stopped. Did you see the report?"

She shook her head. "It's on my list."

"Thank god, too. They made it freezing in the test chamber." Hermione shivered at the thought.

"What about your research? Still thinking about studying cognitive neuroscience?"

"I've actually been doing some alchemic transmutations in my spare time - "


Hermione smiled. "This is good, I promise. I transmuted living human tissue."

Jasmine's eyes widened. "That's brilliant, Hermione!"

"Thank you! I started writing up a manuscript for submission, and was wondering if you wanted to take a look at it once it's done? I'm not sure if it's useful for what you're doing, but regardless of whether or not it gets published I want to get your thoughts on it."

"Of course I'll take a look. If only we knew the composition of a soul... we could try something
"What do you know about the composition?"

Jasmine smiled. "I can tell you that it isn't any known matter. It's closer to light than it is to anything solid. Or transmutable."

Hmm... transmuting light. There was a thought. Hermione's brain started calculating. Perhaps studying glowing marmites... no, they produced light, but what was light? Could you transmute energy?

"You're already thinking about a way to do it."

Hermione smiled, nodding.

"Hermione, you have to hurry up and get your degree so you can go through Unspeakable training! We need you."

"I will, I will. Just trying to figure it all out," she said. "What else is going on with you?"

"Mari's life is far more interesting than mine."

Marielle snorted, flipping her dark hair over her shoulder. "Not the kind of interesting I want. No 'good' surprises happen in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

"Nonsense," Jasmine countered slyly. "She's been talking to this guy who comes in, and this past week, he asked her out!"

"Oh, how nice!" Hermione gushed, though her friend didn't look pleased. "What's his name?"

"Terry... Terry Boot," Jasmine supplied, nudging her friend.

"I'm not going out with him again," Marielle scoffed.

Usually Marielle was more than happy to gush - and especially overshare - about her love life, so this response was somewhat alarming.

"Why not?" Hermione asked. "He seems nice enough, I knew him in school. Always had top marks."

Jasmine gave her an of-course-you'd-approve-of-that look.

"No, no way. He's one of those reformed purebloods."

"'Reformed'?"

Jasmine cut in. "You know, it's a status thing, dating a muggleborn. Like, its proof that they're with it, they're 'cultured'. That they care about people."

"Yeah. Like it somehow makes their past prejudice okay if they're shagging one of us."

"Look at me, I'm so different, see, I date muggleborns!"

Marielle rolled her eyes. "Or worse, it's a 'fuck you' to their shitty parents who're still bloodthirsty."

'Bloodthirsty' was a somewhat callous term used to describe someone who had pureblood mania,
someone who thought that muggleborns weren't fully wizard. Hermione didn't usually hear it outside of community protests or support groups.

"I... I never got the impression that he cared about that kind of thing," Hermione said, surprised. She tried to think back on her interactions with the young wizard; of course, he had been consistently surprised at her when she'd mastered N.E.W.T. level spells in Dumbledore's Army, but at the time she'd considered his reaction to be justified.

"His dad's the one who fired those employees when he found out they were in the Muggleborn Support Alliance," Marielle said. "And Terry talked about how upset he was about that endlessly at lunch. Like he had something to prove. It was... ugh, it was irritating. Sometimes I want to leave that stuff behind and just go on a date, you know?"

Hermione sighed dejectedly. She remembered that article about Warlock Boot; she'd been reorganizing the Prophet at the time. "I'm sorry, Mari."

Marielle waved her hand. "It's okay. To be honest, he was a nice bloke beyond that. I'm just... I don't have to deal with that faux-progressive shit from potential boyfriends."

"Yep," Jasmine affirmed, nodding approvingly. "Put your pussy where your politics are."

Hermione gasped and swatted at her friend, and the girls burst into hysterical laughter, pushing each other. Their ruckus drew some attention from the people around them, and Hermione fought to control her own laughter.

"Honestly, I can't take you two anywhere," she admonished, though she was having a hard time containing her chuckles. She drew them further down the path, the gate finally rising as they neared.

"Too bad, Hermione; we were planning on getting you drunk later!"

Hermione waved her hand. "Not too much for me tonight; I've got to talk to some important donors - "

"Urgh," Jasmine drawled, rolling her eyes. "I forgot how responsible you are."

Hermione snorted, looking around. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It's not, but we definitely want a repeat of last time!"

Oh no, 'last time.' Hermione tried not to think of their debaucherous night in muggle London, where they had happened upon a warehouse party, gyrated until the early morning hours, and stumbled back to Hermione's flat. She had never in her life let loose like that - swearing and laughing and dancing and, oh god, snogging random people.

"No, no," she sighed. "If that happens, I expect an incarcerous. Please."

They chuckled and nudged her playfully as they stepped through the gate.

"Alright, ladies. See you at the ball!"

Marielle and Jasmine waved and cooed, and then disapparated with two sharp pops.

Hermione really enjoyed her friends, but sometimes she worried that they brought things out of her that she didn't always like. They were mental sometimes, partying like there was nothing else, swearing and creating scenes all over the place.
While she recognized that they could be a bit... much... she also recognized the importance of having more than one kind of friend. Sure, she couldn't see them mingling with her childhood friends (like Ron for instance - no doubt he would say something half-cocked and they would pounce on him like a rabbit) but she didn't mind compartmentalizing her life.

Jasmine and Marielle were both activists, in the kind of way that Hermione could never be; they weren't afraid to offend people, to make them uncomfortable, to fight fire with fire. They were the kind of radicals who would paint over anti-muggleborn businesses, spread defensive hexes through pamphlets and provide back-door legal council. They were anarchists, working on the ground through word-of-mouth and hearsay. It was scrappy and glorious.

Hermione was a play-by-the-rules kind of person, she always had been, and her approach was rather... front-door, compared to theirs. She was trying to find the roots of different problems, and fix muggleborn persecution that way, by reforming laws, checking bias in the *Prophet*, and sewing information to their diplomats and lawmakers.

Together she knew they were a powerful force, as she at least recognized the benefits of each approach - plus it helped to keep and eye on them so they didn't get into too much trouble.

That said... she was really getting sick of this work.

It was never-ending and tedious, and it required so much of her energy to deal with people's bias, daily. She wanted to help people in other ways, ways that didn't leave her drained and compassionless in the evenings, in a foul mood as she worked on her side projects.

She sighed and focused her mind on her apartment building. No sense in getting splinched. She apparated, bracing for the nausea as she touched down in her flat.

Once inside her warm, pristine apartment, she quickly stripped off all her clothes, donned her robe, and went to examine the frock hanging over her wardrobe. It was a simple gown - high neck and backless, with a snug silhouette in an unremarkable blue.

The sense of nervousness she had felt earlier crept back up, made bittersweet by her interactions with both Draco and her friends. She was still crushing on him, that was inescapable, but now the doubts she'd felt initially were starting to rear again.

Pursuing a real relationship - where they were together, and met regularly, and went on dates and all of that... it seemed impossible.

Of course, she didn't *have* to date him. She didn't have to get that involved, their relationship didn't have to be about that. Maybe she could just... shag him.

She shook her head violently, somewhat ashamed of herself. She was usually such a subdued and logical person, and so she wasn't used to not having control over her own wants. Unfortunately this was also a byproduct of thinking too much about the past - real emotions were starting to brew in her mind. Real memories and feelings, recollections of the fatigue she had felt in school, the love she had so fervidly shown her friends back then. She had been a shadow of her former self for so long, and now that her walls were starting to come down, she was actually *feeling* things. Things that were debilitating and confusing and even... heartbreaking.

She really needed to talk about Draco in therapy, she realized. She hadn't even mentioned him to her therapist, beyond a "Oh yeah, my old bully apologized to me and that was cool."

Clearly he was having more of a profound effect on her than she realized.
And chances were, he was going to the ball. And would probably seek her out again. And maybe even want to dance with her. And Merlin, would there be alcohol there - it was an open bar.

Thumbing over her bare side and the impressions left behind by her bra, she refocused on the floor-length gown.

She *accioed* her wand and waved it over the dress, altering the dye, and the dress changed from the dusty blue to a deep, emerald green.

That was better, but she still felt like it was missing something. She waved her wand over it a few more times, changing the hue of the green until it had a more bluish sheen, and saturating it even more. The color was fine... but...

Giving up, she shed her robe, letting it drop to the floor, and removed the dress from the hanger; she really didn't want to fuss over her outfit like this. This was part of the reason why she didn't attend these kinds of events; even when she did have something to wear, she always fuzzed over it endlessly and then was never satisfied. She stepped into the gown carefully, shaking her head.

She fastened the dress around her neck and shimmied to get it to lay flat, and did not even glance at the mirror before she exited her room and entered her small bathroom.

She made short work of her makeup, just enhancing her day makeup with some more mascara, and fluffed out her hair. The coils were mostly behaving today, but she wet a few fuzzy ones and dried them with her wand, transforming some of her frizz into curls.

Her hair tamed, she went to retrieve her d'orsay heels - she really needed more than just one pair, needing to alter the color every time she wore them was annoying. She changed the black to a matching turquoise and buckled the straps.

Hermione briefly caught sight of herself in the dress and stared at her reflection with furrowed brows. This *wasn't* a big deal, why was she fussing, it was driving her mental...

She smoothed her hand over the high neck, removing the wrinkles above her chest; she wondered for the umpteenth time if she should have done something low-cut instead of backless, but honestly... if she was going to be around important politicians and wealthy warlocks, she didn't want to draw attention to her cleavage. Her robe would shield her naked back from unwanted eyes for the majority of the evening, until all the old, uptight wizards had gone, and then she could potentially shed the cloak and have fun with her former classmates.

That said, she knew - based on the other dresses available in the shop she'd bought this from - that this was a fairly modest style, and she still wanted to feel sexy.

She aimed her wand at the slit in the front, sliding the point up her leg and drawing the opening of the slit up until it stopped at a daring, but not too cheeky, point above her knee. She experimentally pulled it up and down, up and down.

Up... up? She drew the slit all the way up to her hip and winced, quickly pulling it back down her thigh. Bugger, she wanted a bit of *leg*, not a bit of knickers.

How could she still feel sexy, but not...?

In a flash of assurance, she waved her wand around her knee, transforming the interior lining of the dress from the same deep turquoise to a brilliant flame red. The red peeked out from the slit; when she kicked her leg experimentally, the slit peeled back over her thigh, flashing the red underside.
A jolt of excitement shot through her; *that* was interesting, and what she had been looking for. She sighed, placated, and kicked her leg a few more times, deciding to alter her shoes to match.

Satisfied with the electric addition, she plucked her robe from the rack, slid it over her shoulders, and apparated back to the Hogwarts gate.
The Ball

Battle of Hogwarts Seventh Annual Memorial and Ball

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

May 2nd

Hermione carefully followed the fire-lit pathway, gazing up at the castle as it rose against the dusk. It was oddly intimidating, approaching from the gate; Hogwarts castle had always been so magnificent, so overwhelming when she was a child, and that fact had not changed with time.

As she neared, she began to see other individuals funneling through the doors, talking and laughing, swaying in their long dress robes. The anticipation was heightening her eyesight, and she zeroed in on these individuals, recognizing the backs of at least three people's heads. The entrance to the Great Hall was breathing with glowing light around the corner, and even the courtyard was lively, strung with lights and vines, the normally austere fountain made radiant by the reflecting glow.

The radiance intensified as she stepped through the archway to the Great Hall, and Hermione couldn't help but look up; the typical floating candles were swapped for decorative paper lanterns, flickering and casting warm light over the milling guests. Several bar-height tables dotted the edges of the room, stacked with tiny morsels of what looked like sushi, as well as dozens of glowing carafes. She briefly wondered if the carafes were glass and the liquid inside was glowing, or if it was the bottles themselves; either way, it produced an effect of incandescent wonder.

Hermione stopped for a second, trying to quell the nostalgia overpowering her at the other, more familiar sights: the high teacher's table, still in place at the head of the room; the bewitched ceiling, rafters only just discernible, stars and nebulas glittering; even the familiar sight of ghosts floating above the heads. She spotted Sir Nicholas talking to Professor McGonagall, his lace collar particularly large and ruffly, as well as Kingsley and Minister Ito laughing over small cups of sake, The Grey Lady flowing distractedly over them.

"Damn, girl!" a voice called out.

Hermione turned and smiled as Jasmine swished over in her kaftan, eyeing the curly-haired witch over her already half-finished glass of wine. "Jazzy!"

"I miss this place," she exclaimed, quickly wrapping an arm around Hermione in greeting.

"Me too," Hermione agreed. "Was it much different to attend right after the cleanup?"

Jasmine sighed. "It was horrendously different. Can't look at a column or staircase the same when you spent time spelling it back together."

"I'm glad it's back in one piece."

"Yup. Took all summer, you know... plus having classes after that - its hard to feel stressed about something like an exam after you've dueled with a Death Eater."

Hermione nodded; the memories of that night were brewing just beyond the barrier in her mind, and if she didn't concentrate on where she was, what was happening right now, she would be brought back there, and that was not how she wanted to begin her evening.
Recognition lit up Jasmine's face as she looked over Hermione's shoulder, and she whistled low and long.

Hermione turned as Marielle sauntered towards them, her exaggerated hip movements showcasing her daring dress.

"Mari, you fox," Jasmine said, scanning the girl's attire. "You do know this is a ball, not a club."

The girl waved her hand, shimmying in her tiny cocktail dress so Hermione and Jasmine both got an eyeful of jiggling cleavage.

Hermione covered her eyes. "Dammit, Mari," she said between chuckles. She wasn't quite inebriated enough for this yet, so she followed with, "I've got to find Ambassador Tsubaki. I'll catch you girls later?"

They affirmed and waved, and Hermione escaped further into the room, taking a deep breath. She really shouldn't feel this apprehensive, but all the familiar faces around her - former students whose names she couldn't quite remember, teachers and board members talking to ministry officials - she had to stop for a second and figure out what she was doing.

She had already made a schedule for the evening (a fact that she had not shared with anyone; no doubt they would tease her about it mercilessly) and she summoned this little list quickly with her wand.

It was twenty to eight, so she had time before the majority of the guests would arrive. She had blocked off time to socialize with her former classmates and friends, and whenever her targets appeared she would accost them one by one. If she spent time between eight and nine talking to the donors and diplomats, she could spend time between nine and ten talking to her former teachers, updating them on the status of her life and seeing if they needed anything with the school. Then, with it sufficiently late, after ten she could potentially drink and reconnect with her friends again.

Hermione quickly ran through the names of the diplomats she was meant to talk to, then put away her list.

It took a few sweeps, but she eventually spotted the tall, lithe form of Ambassador Tsubaki, and went immediately to check in with her.

Luckily everything had gone fairly smoothly with the setup; even the problems Hermione had anticipated - the daring menu and decorations, the language and customs barriers, the time change and long-distance portkeys - everything seemed to be in order. She briefly showered the young ambassador with praise, earning earnest blushes and thank-you's, before she drifted away once more.

She checked her watch; okay. Time to find a friend.

She only had to glance around once this time; she saw Ernie Macmillan talking to a witch who was probably Eloise Midgen, judging by her brown bob and round silhouette; Professor Flitwick was laughing with Seamus Finnigan, probably over some debaucherous story of Seamus back in school. A familiar dash of long, dark braids by one of the tables seemed like the best option for right now.

Hermione walked carefully in her high-heels to stand beside a suited Angelina Johnson, who was casually sipping a drink out of a copper mug.

"Angelina," she greeted.

Angelina's braids swung as she turned to look at the witch. "Hermione! Fancy that, I almost didn't
recognize you!"

Hermione embraced her and asked, "What brings you here tonight?"

"Oh, I just started as the part time Flying Instructor. The Quidditch season is during the spring and summer, so once that's finished I can come here in the fall and teach classes, maybe even ref."

Hermione nodded. "Are you trying to teach full time?"

She grinned. "Not a chance - I just get bored."

"Did..." Hermione glanced around, lowering her voice. "Did Ron end up making the team?"

Angelina sighed heavily. "I told him to try out for Chaser, he's much better at it, but he insisted on trying for Keeper. It's the hardest position to get besides Seeker."

On cue, Ronald Weasley bounded over to them and opened his mouth.

Angelina held up her hand. "We're still reviewing the tryout memories, Ronald. You'll know by next week."

He faltered.

"Let's get a drink, Ron. It was nice to see you, Angelina!"

Hermione all but dragged Ron to the bar. After she fetched a carafe of sake, pouring some for her and her companion - oh, it looked like the sake itself was glowing - she said, "I'm sure you did well."

Ron shrugged his dropping shoulders, taking the drink. "I trained all winter - if I didn't do well, then there really is no hope." He stretched, and Hermione noted that he did seem a lot more flexible - and less clumsy - than he had the last time he had tried for the team.

In the silence she once again found herself uncomfortable with his dispirited, slightly expectant demeanor, and said abruptly, "Here, I saw Seamus somewhere."

Ron nodded numbly as Hermione located Seamus again and waved. Thankfully he saw her within a few seconds, and said goodbye to Professor Flitwick, leaving the professor in stitches.

"Look at you kids," Seamus said when he came up to them, playfully scandalized, glancing at their drinks. "Nothing beats your Lavabombs, Seamus."

"Puttin' the 'fire' in 'firewhiskey', you know me!" He stepped over to Hermione and gave her a quick kiss. "Alright there, Hermione. Beautiful dress."

"You too, Seamus," she replied, smiling. Ron snickered, earning a playful punch from the other man.

"I saw Parvati over by the entrance, her date looks like the bad side of a beater's bat - oh shite, you fuckin' wanker, get over here!"

Neville looked stricken as he neared. He squeezed Hermione's shoulder in greeting, and she smiled, fighting a slight excitement at his touch - Neville was terribly handsome nowadays, though he didn't seem to notice.

"Some of my students are here, Seamus," Neville admonished, though he grinned. "Yours too."
Seamus snorted, leaning against the bar.

Hermione was relieved to see that Ron seemed a little less awkward now that they had their other friends around them. Watching the boys interact was somewhat soothing for her; her nervousness about this event was finally starting to ebb. Seeing her friends laugh and nudge each other reminded her so strongly of evenings in the common room, her studying by the fire while they played Exploding Snap, irritably hushing them and telling them to keep it down. Even other memories of the red and gold chamber were coming back: first years nursing injuries from their clumsy dealings with the staircases, piles of books and parchment as stressed students crowdsourced essays, the Weasley twins hawking their concoctions, plotting how to cause a disturbance during second period so they could get out of a Potions exam.

She sighed. Oh, George. It was hard to be around the remaining Weasley twin now, as his pain was still just beneath the surface of his playful exterior. The space next to him seemed so obvious and inescapable, and even seeing him at all was somewhat heartbreaking, as he shared his countenance with his fallen brother. It was hard to even meet his eyes.

Hermione glanced around, wondering if he would be here tonight. He had definitely received an invite, though she suspected that Hogwarts hadn't meant as much to him as it had to other students. Both of the twins had been biding their time, waiting for the opportune moment to escape the structure of classes and grades.

"Hermione."

She turned and smiled as Blaise Zabini leaned on the bar next to her. He looked especially dapper in his high-collar dress robes, his strategically undone buttons accentuating his long neck.

"Hello, Blaise! I thought I might see you."

He nodded, sipping his drink; Hermione noted that his demeanor was very different from the last time they had interacted. It seemed that he was stoked down and calm tonight, similarly to how he had behaved in school. She puzzled through this briefly, glancing at his drink.

"I'm glad I came," he murmured, twirling his glass. "I almost didn't, but I think it will be good to see everyone again. Even Slughorn."

Hermione smirked. Slughorn was probably gushing over other members of his former Slug Club as they spoke. "Where's Ariana tonight?"

Blaise waved his hand through the air, looking around. "Who knows. I invited her, she said 'maybe.'"

Hermione looked at him squarely. "I thought you two... I thought... "

Blaise shook his head. "I have no idea what's going on, myself."

"But... at the ballet... "

"Ariana is a flame - she burns hot and bright - but if she's a flame... I might be a forest."

Hermione knew that Ariana was rather flighty, but had thought that she was a good match for Blaise, as their habits were somewhat similar and they seemed to make each other laugh.

"When you know what you want, you have to go for it, Hermione," he said seriously. "I keep telling Draco that, but it seems like you might have to be the one to push."
There was a slow recognition of truth in Hermione's brain as she processed this comment; her stomach clenched as her nervousness deepened once again. She didn't want to acknowledge the thought bubbling to the surface of her mind, as it was almost as scary as the alternative.

"What do you mean?" she asked, breathless.

"I've already said too much," he replied, smiling mischievously. "But hey - it's a beautiful night, and there's an open bar. Anything can happen." He took another healthy sip, draining his glass, and tapped it twice on the bar to refill it.

"Cheers," he said, winking at her, and moved away.

Her heart was pounding in her chest as she searched the room, trying to find the object of her thoughts. She tried desperately to remember if Draco had said that he was coming, her mind drifting to his goodbye earlier in the evening; he'd said 'see you later,' but she couldn't be sure of what he'd meant. As she started to puzzle through his response yet again she stopped herself; she didn't want to dwell on those words any more than she already had.

Her heart calming, she pivoted, trying to draw her thoughts back to rationality.

She needed to find him, so she could... manage any potential altercations. Yes, that was it.

No, no one would dare get into it here. Not with the dreadful reality of the purpose of this event at the bottom of everyone's hearts.

Hermione sighed and sipped her sake, willing her mind to be quiet so she could concentrate on the moment, concentrate on something simpler like the taste of her drink - clear and dry, with a slight sweetness. Perfect. She had forgotten how much she enjoyed sake, as it had the smoothness of wine and the efficiency and bite of harder liquor.

"Whoa, that's wicked!" Seamus exclaimed, pointing at her.

She blanched, swallowing.

"You can see the sake going down your throat," Neville explained. "How is it?"

"Delicious," Hermione answered, feeling odd about all the boys now staring at her lips. She fetched the carafe next to her to refill. "Interested?"

Neville waved, as did Seamus, but Ron of course offered his cup, and she poured him another.

While the boys played with Ron's sake - some things never changed - Hermione looked around again. She was delighted to see Firenze towering over the guests, having a rather intense looking conversation with Ambassador Tsubaki; his head was coming dangerously close to the lanterns floating just above him. She also spotted some former Prefects, and thought distinctly that she ought to get them all together for a snapshot.

Finally, almost unwillingly, she recognized Draco's profile, tapering blond hair with his dark glasses pressed over his ears. She braced for another bout of fluttery nervousness.

Oh Merlin, that was definitely him.

She scolded herself briefly for amplifying her nervousness by dwelling on the young healer so much; she was really making too big a deal out of this whole thing.
Hermione had never seen him at this event before, and as she studied him, she understood why; he was sitting alone, a forgotten drink in his hand as he stared at the wood of the table in front of him. He was elegantly dressed but subtly so, his wealth apparent only in the details of his ensemble.

It seemed that no-one wanted to talk to the wizard who had nearly costed them the War, who had purposefully lead Death Eaters into Hogwarts. It didn't matter that he was also responsible for the capture of the remaining Death Eaters, or that he had rigorously helped with the restoration of the school and the treatment of the wounded.

In fact, there weren't very many former Slytherins at the event at all - there were a few that had been there, helping to restore the grounds, but very few from Draco's year had deigned to show up.

It had always been that way - Hermione vaguely remembered that one year, Greg Goyle had shown up with Susan Bones as her date, which had ended in an argument with some of her former housemates, and his abrupt departure to the temporary portkey journey room.

Unfortunately, Seamus noticed her steady attention directed elsewhere and followed her gaze. "Urgh, look at Malfoy over there," he muttered.

The other boys turned to look as well.

"Yeah. Fancies himself Harry Potter with those glasses."

"They do make him look less threatening."

Hermione opened her mouth to defend him, but no words came out. Defending Draco somehow seemed easier against just Harry and Ron, who were more likely to take her overbearing lectures. Seamus was more likely to scoff at her, and goodness knows that despite his tougher exterior and stronger sensibilities, Neville still crumpled under her scrutiny like a wilted leaf.

Besides, she was feeling a little too breathless to think straight.

"What do you think compelled him to come tonight?" Ron asked.

"He's a glutton for punishment, he must be."

Neville shrugged. "Enough time has passed. Maybe he's done being under his rock."

"I'm gonna go over there and talk to him," Hermione announced, finally speaking up.

All three heads swiveled towards her; she carefully avoided Ron's already suspicious eyes.

"Right, that'll go over well."

"No, she'll do it," Ron put forth, "she's managed to talk to him before without hexing him."

Seamus grumbled something like, 'lemme at him.'

"Tonight is about mingling, about healing," Hermione reminded, gesturing. "This is a good way to start."

"Start? At least let me finish my drink first."

The boys laughed, not noticing Hermione as she straightened her posture and pushed off from the bar. When they glanced over, she was looking at them all levelly.
Seamus sighed, rolling his eyes. "Go ahead if you want. Bloodthirsty prick better not say anything though, just give us the sign and he'll sprout antlers."

"No, something less visible. Peanut-butter mouth."

"Oh! How about jelly-legs?"

"No jinxes," Hermione said tersely. "Trust me, I'll be fine. He's not so bad anymore."

The boys floundered for a moment, looking at each other; Hermione tried not to panic. This was not how she had wanted to approach Draco - with a judgmental audience - but she had done this to herself and now she needed to follow through. She took a deep breath, steadying herself on her heels and smoothing her hand down the front of her gown, and walked steadily over to his table.

She didn't have to look behind her to know that her friends were watching; she hoped that whatever happened when she reached the blond Slytherin, it would not encourage them to send a hex or two his way.

"Hi, Draco."

Malfoy looked up, his frown warming into a smile that unsteadied her immediately. "Hey, Granger."

She watched with baited breath as his eyes dipped down for a second to fully take in her appearance, stopping for a moment on the hint of leg exposed by the slit in her dress.

"I was wondering... if you wanted to join us?" She gestured at the bar, where the Gryffindor boys were watching them with identical expressions of apprehension. Blaise was near them, now talking to one of the Slytherin girls Hermione recognized at the ballet - Daphne Greengrass, her mind suddenly supplied - as well as Padma, whose waist length hair looked especially long from this angle, completely shielding the top of her dress from view.

"I'm... I don't know, Granger - "

"Come on, it'll be fun. I'll mediate."

He grimaced, shaking his head.

"You can ignore them and just talk to Blaise."

"Are... are you forcing me to socialize?"

She smiled. "Not forcing; encouraging."

"Semantics," he retorted.

She wavered for a second, then pulled out a stool and sat at his table. She couldn't help but feel fluttery as Draco watched her do this, his eyes drawn to the slit up her thigh again as the red interior of her dress flashed. She unconsciously checked the clasp of her dress cloak, ensuring that it was still secure. Not that it mattered - her gown came up to her neck, and he wouldn't even be able to see her back from this angle.

Maybe later though, her traitorous mind urged.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be here," she began.

He nodded, glancing around.
"... But I'm glad you made it. How did talking to Professor Sprout go?"

He looked at her suspiciously, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Do you actually care, Granger?"

She floundered for a second - on the one hand, she actually was curious about how his work was going, but on the other hand she knew that she was just asking so she had a reason to talk to him, to be near him, to feel the warmth of his presence so close to her as they sat at the tiny, tall table. She tried to ignore the fabric of his pants centimeters from her bare leg.

"Yes, of course."

He shook his head. "You'll have to forgive me - I'm afraid I'm not used to genuine interest. It's a little uncanny."

"Are Slytherins really that bad?" she asked.

"Not just Slytherins; no one actually cares about... well, people are usually just waiting for an opportunity to ask a favor."

"Hmm. Sounds familiar."

He smirked. "I really was interested in your research - but I can be interested and still have ulterior motives."

She shrugged, downing the last of her glowing sake. Draco watched the glow light up her mouth, dim as she swallowed, and travel down her throat. Hermione suddenly wanted to feel more than just his eyes on her neck.

"You look fantastic," he remarked.

"Thank you, you clean up well yourself."

He inclined his head in thanks.

Silence. Oh, this wasn't good.

He took up his drink and sipped, his eyes still fixed on her. Her gaze was drawn to his mouth; what she wouldn't give to be one of those ice cubes tumbling against his lips right now -

She had a brief flash of horror as she considered that by staring at his lips so, she had made her thoughts rather transparent. "I, um -"

"I know you have important people to talk to tonight," he said, suggesting, oblivious to her thoughts. "You don't have to talk to me just because no one else is."

"I'm not - doing you a favor or anything," she said seriously. "I really wanted to talk to you."

This seemed to lift his mood a bit and he moved a little closer. His legs were now brushing against hers, one leg even sliding slightly between her bent knees. She quivered on her stool.

"How 'bout you tell me about your manuscript," he murmured. "Have you started writing it?"

"Of course," Hermione breathed, a little relieved. "I'll have it finished sometime in the next few weeks."

"Good girl," he said approvingly. "I'm glad you're deciding to submit it."
"Thank you for suggesting it."

"I'm full of good ideas," he said vaguely.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck...

"I'm concentrating on the theory. The practical aspect needs some fine-tuning."

He pursed his lips. "What's missing to get the transmutations right?"

"Precision. I don't know enough physiology to create something that is truly useful. I've tested the flesh I transmuted, and know that it is definitely human; the missing element originally was the essence of a person. So I used my own essence and was able to get the resulting tissue to match my DNA - "

"Merlin, that's brilliant - "

"- but it's still unclear if the transmuted flesh would actually work. Fulfill its function."

He nodded, thinking, scratching his temple. "And there really isn't a way to do it without an intimate understanding of how the particular tissue is put together."

She nodded.

"Is the precision - the understanding of the makeup - in the intention? Or in the alchemic circle? Because you may be able to communicate the structure with runes."

"It's a combination of both. I'm only using runes for... the recipe, so to speak."

"And so everything else is in your head."

"Mnhmm. And I had to read up a lot on how veins and epidermis are structured... and bones, don't even get me started."

"But for a healer..." he gestured at himself, "it might be easier. To do this with your method."

"I mean... I can't see anyone but a healer using this process."

He smirked. "See, Granger? I may be useful after all."

"That's not why I'm talking to you," she replied shortly.

He cocked his head, leveling her with an interested gaze; a warm feeling crept up her neck. It was so easy to puzzle through problems with him, so effortless to bounce ideas off of him, that she had nearly forgotten her former nervousness... but now she was acutely aware of who she was conversing with, and could feel the warmth of his body emanating, inviting her to come closer.

"There are spells that healers use to understand the exact dimensions and makeup of a problem area," he drawled finally, fingering his forgotten drink. "But they take years to master. Even for overachievers like you."

She smirked a bit, resisting the urge to swat at him playfully; no flirting when her friends were nearby...

Remembering the group she had left at the bar, she turned to look at them; the boys had apparently lost interest in the exchange, forgetting about their promises to jinx Draco. Ron and Seamus were
poking at Neville's torso as he cringed away, probably teasing him about his fit physique as usual; Harry had joined them as well, and was looking over his shoulder, perhaps to check that no one was about to accost him for an unwanted conversation. Blaise had also attracted a bigger group, and was now joined by Parvati, Hannah, and a dollop of a man that Hermione assumed was Parvati's date.

She turned back to Draco, tilting her head toward their former classmates.

As expected, he held up a hand and said, "I'm an instant mood killer."

"Which I suspect is actually fun for you."

He smirked. "Nothing gets past you. As fun as that sounds, I'd like to not sprout any tentacles tonight. So that's a solid no."

Hermione met his gaze steadily, her eyebrows raised; unfortunately his gaze softened a bit, and the moment began to turn into something else entirely, something that was just between the two of them. He was looking at her like he was trying to figure out what she was, like she was a rare plant he was cataloging, or a new life-form full of promise and intrigue.

His knee brushed against hers, and she was beset by the urge to slide forward, fully part her legs around his bent knee, pull him into her body and do away with this charade, this game that she suspected they were both playing now, a game of who would be the one to make the move.

She was hopelessly untouched, and his attention felt so good - urgh, he wasn't even touching her directly, and yet his proximity was as pleasurable as if he was actually smoothing his hands over her skin.

She cleared her throat, trying desperately to concentrate on her original plan, and found herself standing. Luckily he sighed and stood as well, gesturing.

It took significant effort to resist the urge to grab his hand; Merlin knows she wanted to.

Even the idea of his eyes on the back of her neck, just visible under her curls, had her shaking in her heels as she made a path through the sharply-dressed attendees around them.

She decided to lead them over to Blaise, which seemed like a safer option for the former Slytherin, as that little posse had less reason to hate him than the cluster of Gryffindors standing a little further down the bar.

She was trying to creep in unnoticed, but as they neared Blaise looked over at them and a wide grin split his face.

"Why, look who it is!"

Draco shook his head, clapping his friend on the shoulder. "Cheeky bastard."

Hermione barreled through the awkward gasps and looks by immediately embracing Padma. Hermione could feel Padma's smirk against her cheek.

"Hermione, love," she said, her eyes positively glittering. " Knocking them dead!"

Hermione scoffed, releasing the dark-haired girl and smiling at everyone else in greeting. Parvati's date returned her smile without hesitation, possibly because he had no context as to why this particular gathering was odd. There was something freeing about his blissful ignorance, and Hermione wanted that for herself, wanted the freedom to be with whoever she chose simply because
she chose it, without any regard to what other people would think.

For example, comparing his expression to Parvati's, it was like they weren't even witnessing the same thing; Parvati looked as though a bludger had just knocked her over the head.

"Good to see you, Parvati," Hermione said, finally giving her a hug as well. Parvati gave Hermione a weak pat on the back.

"Hermione," an easily recognizable voice said behind her. She turned and embraced Harry solidly. Her own name was starting to sound foreign in her ears.

"Harry, it's good to - "

Before she could stop him, he had turned and pointed her out to the former Gryffindors, and suddenly the two separate groups had become one, Seamus and Neville coming around to face Harry directly.

Hermione stepped to the bar, trying to find something to do with her hands and temporarily avoid the situation she had just helped create. She slowly refilled her cup with more glowing sake and selected some sushi from the nearby platter, taking her time to resolve her lack of extra hands by levitating her new plate.

Thankfully she could hear Draco and Blaise getting on, the rest of their group chuckling nervously at them or continuing with their previous conversations.

This wasn't so bad; despite the sense of unease that wafted from everyone, they were patiently and cordially sipping their drinks and smiling at each other. Others took notice of the sushi as well, filling small plates and commenting on the variety. Hermione watched in distaste as Ron drowned his sushi in soy sauce, letting it grow saturated and heavy before he tried in vain to lift it from the liquid. It inevitably disintegrated, and he was left plucking at individual bits of rice and shoving them into his mouth.

"Look at us!" Blaise gestured around their group. "Slytherins and Gryffindors, enjoying a laugh and a cocktail."

"Things are different at Hogwarts now, you know," Neville put forth. "The houses do little more than determine what dormitory you're in. The competition is a lot healthier."

"The shenanigans were fun, though."

"You would say that, you were in Ravenclaw."

"We dealt with house shaming just like everyone else - it sucks to be thought of as the wet blankets of the school," Padma sighed, sipping her cocktail. "And in that regard, sometimes I wonder if I really belonged there."

"You're certainly not a wet blanket," Hermione murmured.

"The Sorting Hat is probably barmy anyway. It's literally putting eleven-year-olds into groups based on personality. I barely had half a brain back then," Ron added.

"Can confirm," Seamus said with his finger up, and the group chuckled.

Hermione glanced at Harry; a slight touch of amusement was turning up the corner of his mouth. "You know, the Sorting Hat originally recommended I be in Slytherin," he said.
Hermione smiled. Harry never disappointed.

With that simple admission, he had shifted the dynamics of the group; everyone predictably gasped, muttering variations of *no way* and *how* in disbelief.

"I thought I could smell it on you," Draco said, raising his glass to the other wizard.

"Maybe you should have gotten off his coattails then, Malfoy."

Draco looked sharply at Blaise. "Well now, this one's got jokes!"

"I guess the Sorting Hat saw something different in me," Harry shrugged, smiling at his former housemates.

"I'm sure it's been known to be wrong," Neville suggested.

Draco smirked. "Yeah; no idea how you managed to make it into Gryffindor, Longbottom. I thought they'd need to make a new house for you." Ron snickered around his mouthful.

Hermione wasn't sure how Neville would take this declaration, but after a second he shrugged knowingly, covering up a smile.

"Yeah, the Sorting Hat messed up with you too, Ron. With your bottomless pit you should have been in Hufflepuff," Seamus added. The group laughed, Hannah crying "hey!" with a smile, and Ron shook his head, grinning as he lowered his now empty plate.

"House values manifest in different ways," Hermione defended. "And the Sorting Hat sometimes chooses our houses by what values we need to surround ourselves with. So that we grow into the person we need to be."

Seamus gagged jokingly and Hermione swatted at him, effectively making the larger group chuckle again.

The mood officially lightened, Hermione was happy to see Blaise and Harry start a mild conversation about Blaise's unusual wand color - apparently he'd gotten it in Italy, unlike his classmates who'd gotten theirs from Olivander. Draco was talking to Padma about the new additions to St. Mungo's and the new research facility in Mumbai that was opening the next day. Hermione sipped her sake and turned to Neville.

"Hey, Neville, how goes the classes?"

He smiled and said, "Great. The students actually seem excited about the curriculum changes."

"What changes?"

"I never understood why Defense Against the Dark Arts concentrated so heavily on dark creatures. So this year we've centered the classes more around understanding and avoiding the pull toward dark magic."

Hermione nodded approvingly. "That sounds excellent, Neville."

"I couldn't have done it without Harry," he said quickly, gesturing at his friend.

"I'm trying to give you a compliment," Hermione said lightly. "Take it."

Neville smiled again and patted her arm; she waited for the familiar excitement of being touched, but
it was an unfocused feeling of contentment, a light tingle, nothing at all like the touches that Draco had bestowed.

A slight disappointment settled over her; Hermione had been hoping, in the back of her mind, that she was simply craving some kind of companionship and Draco was the only one on the playing field. But the truth was that it wasn't just anyone that she wanted; it was him specifically.

She wasn't just lonely, not anymore.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Hermione said, recovering, "Do you have a contact for ordering a pensieve?"

"I mean, McGonagall would know, but I think they're pretty expensive; it's impractical to own one."

Hermione nodded, thinking.

"I believe the Archives has one - "

"The next available appointment is two months out," she said. "Thank you for getting me in to use the school's by the way."

"Anytime," he said sincerely. "And let me know next time you're here, we can have dinner or something."

Draco's shoulder brushed against hers, and she quickly said, "Yes, of course."

"Neville never has time for dinner, he always eats in the Great Hall," Seamus put forth, cutting through their conversation.

The other man shrugged. "It's just easier. I'd make time if I needed to."

"Is McGonagall thinking of having any other extra-curricular classes?"

"Dumbledore's Army is hardly a class," Seamus replied, "it's more of a dueling club."

"She was talking about offering something like that for students wanting to get into wandlore."

"Yes, and Madame Pomfrey and Slughorn were talking about having one for people interested in potion-making."

"Yes; certain careers are hard to get into based on what we learned."

"How did you get started, Malfoy?"

Draco turned to look at them, his eyebrows raised; he had probably never been casually addressed by the Gryffindors, and certainly not while also standing in the Great Hall. Hermione nudged him discreetly.

"Oh, I had to go to university, then healing school of course. They looked at my transcripts and placed me accordingly."

"And then..."

"Well, I'm not a full healer yet, I'm still apprenticed. Still another two years out, at least." He sipped his drink.
"Hmm," Neville murmured, "I think we should talk to McGonagall."

Seamus groaned. "But I'm not even a real professor..."

"Well yeah, but we need more programs like Dumbledore's Army."

"What else would we do?"

They devolved into a discussion about career prep and how loose it was at Hogwarts, and Hermione nodded at the boys, her expression warming into a smile; she loved when her old friends made positive improvements to their world, even if it was something as small as offering extra-curricular activities to bright-eyed students.

"Granger, you look like you're about to burst into flame."

She turned to Draco, her smile still wide. "What? I'm glad that they're interested in helping our young minds."

"No, you're excited by the prospect of students having to do even more work."

She shrugged, catching a few more notes of the boys' conversation; Neville was in deep thought as Seamus tried to convince him to invest in more "fun" clubs.

"How did you get started? Doing..." Draco asked, gesturing around, "whatever it is that you do?"

"I was approached by Kingsley, after he became the minister. He was the one who reformed the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

"Hmm, I seem to remember that."

"Yes, and... well, I slowly just started to... take on more and more. I used to just check bias in the Prophet. Now I'm meeting with diplomats and policy makers pretty regularly."

"And where does alchemy fit in?"

She smiled, bumping him with her shoulder. "It's just interesting. Thought magic is the endgame."

"But you're still doing your political work."

She grimaced. "Yes."

"What can I do to convince you to follow your dreams?"

"Who says my dream is to do research?"

"Isn't it?"

"I'm... well, it's certainly close."

Draco shrugged slightly, glancing at the bar, as if he was contemplating getting a different drink.

"No more for you," she said lightly, trying to discourage him from getting another, and also trying to change the subject.

He looked at her in mock annoyance. "You're one to talk. Your cheeks are already red!"

She immediately felt her face with the back of her hand; her cheeks did feel warm, but she wasn't
sure if it was the alcohol or the focused attention he was paying her.

The sound of his chuckle made his intentions plain, and she glared at him. "I've only had one drink!"

He waved his hand. "You know I like teasing you, Granger. You should learn not to play into my hands so easily."

Into his hands, Merlin. "I wouldn't deny you your fun," she replied softly.

Oh no - he was giving her that look again, all heat and... oh dear, was it desire?

"I, um, I think I will go find the donors," she said shakily, checking her watch. It was past her scheduled time anyway, and the place was starting to fill. "But come find me later."

To anyone else it would surely just look like he was nodding at her - but his eyes still held that molten intensity. "I will," he murmured, taking a sip.

Determined to not dwell on the brief moment - she didn't want her friends to see how flustered she was - she turned to Blaise and said, "You got him?"

"What - are you babysitting me now?" Draco asked incredulously, elbowing his friend. Blaise moved to avoid his blows, laughing.

"Gotta make sure you stay out of trouble, Malfoy," Blaise said, absolutely loving it.

Hermione sighed and waved to their group; as she exited, squeezing between other attendees, she could feel a familiar gaze on her retreating back.

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Hermione was quickly becoming bored with being in "work mode", as every so often she could see her former classmates chatting and drinking together. Her robe was starting to feel heavy and itchy against her bare arms as she poured a refill into her empty sake cup.

For the last hour she had slowed down on the drinking; she had actually managed to reach that beautiful sweet spot of being just buzzed enough to carry on a conversation without feeling self-conscious. It was amazing what alcohol could do for one's confidence. Not that she wasn't typically confident - but it was very different to appear gracious and socially adept at a gathering like this than it was to defend a decision in a meeting, or give a room full of politicians a presentation.

The last person she had talked to - a wealthy witch whose high hair had come dangerously close to brushing one of the floating lanterns at one point - had been very sweet, though a tad boring; Hermione had thought that she could be interested in the intricacies of the dragon scale trade until the woman had started breaking down each particular variety and their prices.

As she looked out over the tables once again, Hermione finally spotted the last warlock on her list, thankfully no longer talking to the heavily adorned witch wearing what must have been a vaults-worth of jewelry.

"Warlock Sayhoun, it's a pleasure to see you," she greeted, coming into his line of sight and reaching for his hand.

He took it immediately; her method worked, as he was jolted into accepting her hand without being able to consider if he actually wanted to talk. His smile as he recognized her came a second later. "Yes, Miss Granger. Thank you again for the invite."
Hermione was by no means an expert at schmoozing, but it was usually easier once people had been drinking for a while. This wizard's glass was half empty, so when she paused for a breath to take a sip of her sake, she tapped his glass twice with hers, and it refilled. He showed his thanks with a slight incline of his head.

"Your contribution last year was greatly appreciated," Hermione began. "Did you get a chance to see the new practice chambers?"

The wizard shook his head, scratching in his scraggily beard. "Unfortunately no. Though I wouldn't mind a private tour at some point."

Hermione avoided his eyes, trying to let this comment roll off of her as she suddenly remembered another reason why she didn't like these kinds of events. "I'm sure we could arrange one for you. Professor Slughorn loves to show off his new chambers."

The wizard wrinkled his nose, abruptly needing to take a sip of his drink. Hermione suppressed a smirk.

"I've seen some of the other restorative editions," he said, changing the subject. "I'd say that the profile of the castle looks even better than it did before the destruction."

A cold wash of emotion flowed through Hermione; she bit down her indignation, forcing a smile. The castle was beautiful, but it shouldn't have needed to be repaired, had the Death Eaters not destroyed so much of it. "Yes, the additions have been very beneficial for the students."

"It must have been glorious, the battle," the wizard said wistfully. "Had I known it was happening, I would have gladly joined the fight."

Hermione bristled, anger quickly rising in her heart; glorious? There was nothing 'glorious' about war -

"I heard that the castle was quite a sight," the portly wizard went on. "Shimmering with defensive magic. The desks and statues coming alive."

Hermione smiled tightly, nodding, and said, "I'd say it was rather gruesome to watch Death Eaters being crushed and impaled by the statues. Never knew a person could spill that much blood."

The man's jovial expression dropped, and Hermione quickly smiled again and said, "Excuse me. Have a great evening."

She escaped as quickly as she could, avoiding any eyes that were seeking hers out. She tried to quell the fear in her heart; the assault of emotions was already overwhelming, remembering her first year, the wonder she had felt gazing upon the facade, as well as the battle, the abhorrent darkness and despair, the air thick with fear and smoke.

She finally found herself outside of the Great Hall, and she quickly scaled the steps to the terrace, welcoming the frigid night air in her starved lungs.

The cold swirled around other outdoor guests as they stomped confetti from their shoes and dragged pipes. Hermione ignored them, leaning against the mossy railing, pressing her knuckles into the damp greenery.

It was bittersweet, being back on these grounds, the grounds that had been the backdrop to some of her best - and worst - memories. It seemed only yesterday that she was sitting on the benches to her left, cramming in last minute studying before O.W.L. exams. She remembered walking the lake with
Harry, talking over preparations for his second task in the Triwizard Tournament. And mostly, she remembered the crumbling of the facade, the shimmering of hundreds of spells, in angry reds, blues, and greens, shot back and forth over the beaten stone. Bodies everywhere, both human and creature, dead or unconscious.

She sucked in a sharp breath as her heart began to beat without control. She placed a hand over her chest, focusing on the calm water of the distant lake. It wasn't happening now, there was nothing to be afraid of. Everything was over, the history had been written.

It's okay. It's okay...

A hand gently touched her arm, and she turned to see Draco, his eyes dropping, his glasses sliding down his nose.

"Are you alright?" he asked, all concern.

She nodded, attempting to smile, though she couldn't say he was doing much to stop her heart from beating so hard. "Yes. I'm just... thinking about the past."

He came to stand beside her, turning his gaze to the water.

They stood in a companionable silence for a few minutes, the cold wet air lying heavily in their lungs. Somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, a cry sounded, like a lonely werewolf.

He edged his hand over hers, and she looked up at him. He was staring down at her with the same sadness that plagued her - the loss of their home, the brutal end to their childhood. The games they had played of pride and insecurity that had been so frivolous, so unimportant in the face of what was to become of them.

"Phew," he breathed quietly.

She nodded, slowly threading her fingers with his and clasping his hand fully. "I know."

She stared at him for a long moment, trying to determine what he was thinking. His eyes were bright and clear, and Hermione quickly found herself getting lost.

She was briefly reminded of talking to him at Flourish and Blotts, the look he'd had on his face when he'd desperately wanted to impart his harmlessness, desperately wanted to assuage any fear she had of him.

His thoughts were made clear a second later however, as his gaze dropped a little further down her face. For a brief second he swayed slightly forward, as though he might actually lean in and kiss her. She panicked, her heart thumping again.

"I miss being here," he said after a moment, turning back to the water. "This was really the only place I felt at home."

She nodded absently, trying to ignore the warmth of his hand in hers, the feeling of loss as the intimate moment ended.

She had felt similarly, about Hogwarts; though she loved her parents, she hadn't had many friends in the muggle world. With the strange things that happened around her - she'd still been a magical child, whether she'd known it or not - other children either avoided her because of the weird things she did or her lack of social prowess. Her wild hair and toothy smiles had not invited as much torment as they had at Hogwarts, but she had been lonely regardless.
Hogwarts offered her an opportunity to grow with people her own age, who were magical like she was. It had been amazing.

At least... she had told herself that. The truth was that she'd spent years trying to gain acceptance, and nearly worked herself to the bone to get even close to that.

She had briefly considered being a teacher, but with no position to fill at the time besides Transfiguration, she'd decided against it.

But while it wasn't the path for her... Draco may still have a chance.

"You know, Draco, you may not have to choose between helping people and doing research. You could come back," she murmured. "Madame Pomfrey has assistants. You could work here part time while you do your neuropsychology research."

He looked back at her as though she had discovered magic itself, his eyes bulging, his eyebrows curled. He looked as if he wanted to refute it, but the brilliance of her suggestion outshone his hesitancy.

"That's... I could do that," he said, astonished. He squeezed her hand, his gaze fixed on her.

The look in his eyes was breathtaking as he exhaled; his gaze dropped back to her lips.

A heat bubbled in her body, dimming her vision. He was so close to her, and yet the warm sensation demanded that he be closer, that she put distance between her heart and the memories that chilled her. She pulled his hand away from the fence and toward her waist, drawing him in.

He stepped forward cautiously, his other hand gliding up her arm, leaving a trail of tingling flesh until it came to rest on the side of her face.

"You're incredible," he murmured, rubbing a thumb over her jaw.

Their physical chemistry, which she had been desperately trying to ignore, flared. He stroked her cheek, his eyes swimming, roaming over her face. She drew shaky breaths, leaving his other hand on her waist and clutching the front of his robes to pull him closer.

Even as the alarms rang in her head, she fit against him, her broken sadness mixing with her frustration. Her body melted into his warmth, and before she could really process the new connection he was kissing her tentatively, sweetly, squeezing the back of her neck.

His mouth was like candy, tasting of the sweet after-glow of the cocktail he'd been drinking. Their hot breath mingled with the heavy air; almost immediately, Hermione was overstimulated, sweat blossoming between her breasts.

Confused at the conflicting feelings, and perhaps frightened at her own desires, she became conscious of the reality of what they were doing and released him, pulling back.

She gazed at him for a long moment, fighting through the haze of her desire, trying to conjure her feelings of uncertainty, but it was useless; kissing him felt so good, much better than the darkness that had crept into her mind as she had thought about the War. Her reservations melted away, and she pulled his face down to hers.

When he kissed her this time, his respectful hesitation was gone, replaced by a desperate - yet innocent - hunger. His sudden grasp of her waist dislodged her cloak from her neck, and the cold night air swirled around her, curling over her shoulders as his fingers easily found the exposed skin
of her back.

She must have gasped at his touch, for a second later he was smoothing his hands up her back; how could she ever have just been satisfied by being near him, talking to him? This was elevating her expectations to a whole other level. Somewhere in her mind she distinctly sighed finally, god yes as she breathed into his mouth, pressing her breasts against his chest.

Arousal flared in her body - her untouched senses were flooded, channeling every micro-touch of his chest and fingers though her and stoking a growing fire in the pit of her belly.

She wanted him desperately, his beautiful body, his flagrant kisses; she wanted him to touch her everywhere, to worship her. There was a certain level of danger involved; his temper was short, his history a shadow behind him, and even through his touch she could sense a fire that drove him, a deep attraction to her that bordered on a dark fantasy. She knew that if they were to have sex - while they had been cordial enough in public - there was still a lot of deeply rooted tenseness between them that would result in rough kisses, tumbling each other's bodies around and raking nails over soft skin.

This darkness excited her, drew her in with its forbidden nature; kissing him was deliciously naughty and she wanted to find out what it would be like to fuck him... even here, in her childhood sanctuary -

Oh!

She disengaged from him with a start, looking around; a few people had noticed their heated kisses, but were either too inebriated or too preoccupied with their own company to do more than giggle at them. It came to her attention that they were openly snogging at a very public event, with cameras flashing, wizards and witches drunkenly talking and laughing around them.

Hermione stepped back, her hands on his chest as she tried to collect her wits to form a decent sentence. She had never had such an intense sexual response just from kissing someone; while she had previously wondered if her attraction to him was based on some kind of perceived fantasy, she now knew it was based on physical reality.

She looked up and met his gaze, and she knew that his expression reflected her own - astonishment, desire, and a touch of confusion.

Clearing her throat, she dropped her hands, trying to figure out what to say to him, trying to figure out what she wanted. She could still taste his lips - the faintly sweet tang from the liquor - and the scent she had associated with him was lingering around her. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth.

"Hermione," he began, his voice low, his other hand smoothing up and down her side. "I... I..."

She sighed, rubbing her forehead, trying to ease the softening warmth between her legs with sheer mental willpower. "I know," she replied. "Let's go back inside, yeah?"

His reaction betrayed a hint of disappointment, but he nodded, his hands dropping, and bent to pluck her cloak from the ground.

She reached for his hand and clasped it deliberately, knowing that her face was flushed and trying not to think about it as she led him carefully down the stairs and through the doors.

The noise of the orchestral music and the many loud voices in the room was overwhelming after such an intimate moment, and she pulled him, dazed, through the crowd, ignoring the many looks they got as they pushed past. Some of the tables had been cleared away to make way for swaying couples, twirling and chattering happily in the center of the room.
Hermione spotted a few people she knew, but made directly for Blaise, who was leaning on the bar, his drink threatening to spill.

Draco squeezed her hand in thanks as she pulled up next to Blaise.

He noticed Hermione first, and smiled at her, before his gaze dropped to the pair's joined hands, and then finally up to Draco. His smile widened, his eyes glittering.

"Well, now," he murmured suggestively as Draco let go of her hand with some effort and took the drink away from Blaise.

"Not a word," Draco replied, eyeing the wizard tiredly. He swirled the firewhiskey around and downed the rest.

Blaise held up his hands innocently, though his grin could have blinded a basilisk.

It was odd to try to make small talk with Blaise after kissing Draco; Hermione's ears were still frosty from the cold night air, her lips still tingling, and she was now more aware of Draco's body language, more attuned to his proximity. Since she had sampled what it was like to move with him, to respond to him physically, she found herself drawn to him, like a plant reaching toward the sun.

Just as she had leaned into the side of his body, a familiar laugh got her attention.

"Hello, professor!"

"Alright there, Mr. Zabini!" Slughorn clasped Blaise's hand heartily, admiring his cloak; the professor was looking as dodgy as ever despite his tailored suit. "What's this I hear about you pioneering the art of composing?"

"Oh," Blaise said, glancing at Hermione and Draco, "I don't know if I'd call it 'composing'; more 'song-making', or 'messing around with noise,' actually - "

"And Hermione! There's talk of you replacing old Caticus in the Department of International Magical Cooperation!"

The young wizards snickered, glancing at each other.

"You know, he really isn't that old," Hermione said warmly, her smile somewhat plastic; she didn't want the familiar trappings of feeling like she couldn't escape from her career to bog her down, not now.

Slughorn scoffed. "He's an old soul, was that way even as a student. Wasn't the brightest at Potions but was such a pleasure to be around - "

"He's here tonight, I believe," Hermione cut in, attempting to save the professor before he overshared about his opinions, as he was prone to doing. Blaise hid a smile behind a fresh drink he had conjured while Draco wasn't looking.

"Hermione is actually doing some alchemic research in her spare time," Draco put forth. Hermione glanced at him.

"Really? And what are you researching?"

She took a breath. "I've found a way to transmute living human tissue using plant and creature ingredients."
Slughorn's face went blank; for a moment it looked like he might have a fit, before the spark returned to his eyes, that particular gleam he always got that reminded Hermione of a gambler drooling over gold. His smile returned slowly, increasing in intensity until he had an almost maniacal grin on his face.

"Dear Hermione, that's wonderful! And I suppose you are publishing this research, yes?"

"I'm writing a manuscript to submit to some journals."

"Simply excellent! You must send me a copy once it's published, I'll need to add it to my wall. Wonderful!"

"I had a lot of help from Draco, actually; he's on track to become a neurohealer."

Draco smirked down at her, and she met his gaze with raised eyebrows; she wasn't about to let him stir the pot, not without getting his feet wet.

"Uuhh," Slughorn responded, eyeing the wizard reluctantly; he was apparently at odds with his personal opinion of Draco and his clear interest in Draco's talents.

The hollow rumbling of recorded string instruments caught his attention then and he cried, "Oh, lovely! A new dance has started!" before bowing to them and scooting away.

"Next to you two I look like a twit banging on pots and pans in the corner," Blaise groaned, sipping his drink.

"Like you've ever cared what Slughorn thinks," Draco retorted, stealing Blaise's new cocktail and taking a swig, earning an exasperated sigh from the other wizard.

"He creates so much false desire with that bloody wall of his," Blaise defended. "But don't worry about me. You should go dance as well!"

Hermione cleared her throat, aware of the heat of Draco's body next to her.

Blaise rolled his eyes and shoed them toward the center of the room, plucking his drink out of Draco's hand at the last second.

Hermione hesitated, but before she could run through all the different reasons why this was a terrible idea Draco took her hand and pulled her towards the crowd of paired individuals, placing them in the middle of the other couples and somewhat shielding them from the view of the room at large.

Once there he faced her properly, taking her waist and pulling her closer.

Hermione was pretty sure that he could feel her heartbeat, though their chests weren't touching. He moved them in silence for a few seconds.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he started, his voice flat, his head turned to the side.

Hermione cracked a wry smile. "You're making quite a habit of apologizing these days."

He nodded, letting go so she could twist, and then drawing her back in.

Hermione sighed, acutely aware of the pressure of his hand on her waist, gripping her with intention. She drew him closer to her body, repositioning his hand in hers; he took the cue and moved them silently, placing them back into the rhythm of the dance and flowing between the other couples.
When the dance ended, his hand lingered on her waist for a moment - just long enough for her to memorize the weight and sensation of his hand - before he released her and clapped with the crowd.

As he made to turn away, she stopped him with a hand on his arm. Now that he had touched her more intimately, she was craving that touch, missing it as soon as it was gone. She wanted more of it, endlessly more, and would settle for grasping his robes until she could figure out what she wanted.

"Let's grab a drink," Hermione said, pulling.

She led him off of the dance floor and through the many witches and wizards gathered around the remaining standing tables. Her heart thumped wildly as her hand slid down to clasp in his, and he returned her grip solidly.

When she reached the bar, she extracted two fresh sake cups and filled them, placing a warm hand on Blaise's shoulder in greeting. A quick glance left and right told her that a lot of her classmates were at the bar also; Ron and Seamus were laughing a little further down, with a particularly large glob of glowing sake suspended in the air in front of them; Luna Lovegood was standing near them, her long blonde waves and gathered silk dress making her look like a renaissance goddess, an effect amplified by the basket of rare fruit she was holding. Anthony Goldstein, Parvati, Ernie, and some former prefects were clinking glasses near them as well.

Hermione waved and smiled, and they came over; everyone's spirits seemed to be a lot higher than expected - perhaps as a result of the glowing cups everyone was holding. It actually seemed a lot dimmer in the room than when she had initially walked in; perhaps the organizers had lowered the intensity of the lanterns now that it was late evening?

"Merlin's pants, Hermione, I would never have guessed that was you," Anthony said when he neared.

"I know - give us a twirl, darling!" Parvati lifted Hermione's hand into the air, and the curly-haired witch dutifully twirled once, her face hot.

Their group let out a few low whistles and chuckles, deepening her embarrassment. She sought out Draco's eyes; that private expression of calm interest was dotting his face, that particular look like he was trying to figure her out.

"This ball is really amazing," Parvati said wistfully, leaning into her date. "Easily better than last year."

"They could stand to have some better music though," Blaise commented, "like something with a beat!"

Hermione listened for a moment; the music was currently something that sounded suspiciously like an orchestral version of Greensleeves.

"And you have something in mind?"

Blaise considered the statement, looking into his glass for answers. Finally, he said, "I'll be right back."

He left towards the temporary portkey journey room, and the group shrugged and went back to their drinks. Draco was silent next to her, and she unconsciously brushed her shoulder against him.

Anthony waved over her other shoulder, and she turned as Padma joined them, Daphne and Hannah not far behind; Ron had found Yin, his coworker, and the two boys were playing with Ron's sake
blob, poking at it and licking their fingers. Unfortunately Harry was standing near them but unable to engage, as he was entertaining a group of diplomats from America; Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes at Ambassador Gibbon's judgmental expression.

A few seconds later, a song began, with a steady beat and weaving melody. The chatter in the room died down briefly as people looked around in confusion, their heads already beginning to bob.

When Blaise sidled up to them again, a mischievous glint in his almond eyes, he said, "That should get people moving."

"Is this one of yours?"

Blaise mocked offense and shook his head. "Goodness no. This is basic shit. I had to play something simple, you know, palatable, for all the old geezers in here. They're just not ready for my music."

"In a band, Zabini?"

"No, I soundweave."

"Oh, I didn't know that you soundweave!"

"How does soundweaving work exactly?" Hermione asked.

"Picture this," Blaise said, his eyes lighting up at the opportunity to break it down. "You're the conductor of your own orchestra. But instead of live people, instead of instruments, you have a collection of sounds in each section. You can manipulate the sounds any way you want - mutate the pitch, repeat them, set them on a loop. And when you combine the sections of your orchestra, create a piece - that's soundweaving."

"So it's... sound mutation, automation magic... and I suppose if you're doing this for a performance, the setup would have to be practical, so it's probably small. And you could employ the science of sound, what is most pleasing to the ear - "

"Woah there, Granger," Blaise said, his hands raised. "Don't go putting me out of business."

She held up her own hands. "I'll leave you to it, I promise."

"Still soundweaving at The Chimera?" Daphne asked.

Blaise grinned. "Much to my mother's protests, yes."

"Which room?"

"London, of course, where else?"

"I hear they're creating one in Shibuya."

"Ever been there, Granger?"

She shook her head and said, "I don't go clubbing that much."

Blaise looked around in mock shock. "Well, we'll have to rectify that soon, won't we?"

"Yes, you have to see Blaise soundweave, it's incredible."

"Now now," Blaise chided, "don't raise her expectations."
Hermione nodded in time with the music. The alcohol was already working on her stiffness, loosening her up and making it easier for her to sway. "This is really good, Blaise."

Blaise eyed her swaying movements, his eyes sparkling. "Since when does Hermione Granger dance?"

She scoffed, still dancing, bumping into Draco slightly with each movement. "Don't test me, Blaise."

"Goody Granger is skilled at everything, didn't you know?"

"No, but I feel like you do," Blaise retorted.

"I hope to find out," Draco murmured, his arm snaking around her waist. Oh, he was bold, very bold; while she knew that everyone was feeling the liquor pretty strongly, she was still vaguely aware that such overt attention on her was probably unwise, especially given their current company. But it felt so good that she hushed these feelings and allowed herself to enjoy the arm now cradling her waist.

She leaned into the bar and poured another round of sake - oh, *that's* why it seemed darker in here, everyone was drinking the light, how interesting - and gestured around with the carafe, filling up her companion's cups as well.

She thought back to her list of things she needed to accomplish tonight, and she vaguely felt like she had completed most of it, but somewhere in the back of her mind she knew that she was missing something. She briefly considered conjuring the list, but knew that the swotty side of her would earn some teasing from her companions, and so she refrained. Surely, if she spoke to all the diplomats she'd meant to - she couldn't quite remember if she'd managed to talk to them all, but whatever - then she could continue to drink and fool around with her former classmates.

Yes; she needed this. She worked very hard after all, and a break was well deserved.

Hermione turned and observed her schoolmates happily. They were getting on so well now, talking like there was not a history of animosity between them, reminiscing over the shared good times and making fun of each other without wounding each other's pride. Some of the Gryffindors weren't faring as well; for example, Ron was still avoiding looking at any of the Slytherins directly, and Seamus hadn't tried to make conversation with any of them since he had talked to Draco earlier, but they were still hanging around each other without any overt hostility. The Gryffindors and Slytherins were definitely a surprise, though Hermione shouldn't have expected the Ravenclaws in the group to suffer; Ravenclaws tended to see beyond the lines of house, even in school.

This was apparent in the way that Padma dealt with the Slytherins versus the way that Parvati talked to them. Padma was very comfortable talking to both Daphne and Blaise, and even Draco to some degree, while Parvati was ostensibly making a considerable effort.

Actually, the differences between the twins seemed to deepen with age, as Parvati's overdone hair, makeup, and style made her easily distinguishable from Padma. Hermione had never really liked Parvati, though she respected her more now that she was close friends with her sister.

Draco squeezed her waist one last time and dropped his arm; despite the mild disappointment at the lost of contact Hermione was rather relieved, as it seemed like her classmates would notice if he kept at it, and she was trying to have a little discretion in this particular environment.

Warmth was kindling in her heart, and she looked up at Draco and smiled; he smirked down at her, and she realized just how much she craved that smile, the smug upturn of his lips that looked so
boyish and innocent somehow, combined with the joy evident in his eyes. His arm lifted to cradle her waist again.

The warmth was dashed a second later however as she glanced around and saw Ron leaning against the bar in front of her.

There was a brief moment where she met Ron's eyes; he was looking at her like he'd never seen her before, like she was someone foreign to him entirely. Fear spiked in her heart, and she opened her mouth to say something... but then he departed without warning, pushing off from the bar and squeezing out of the group.

Irritation clouded Hermione's mind. Despite Ron's prickly behavior, which truth be told tended to rear after a few drinks, even on the best of nights, she recognized that he was upset, and as a friend she needed to make sure he was okay. Hermione took a swig of her drink and turned to follow him, feeling Draco's embrace loosen and release her entirely.

When she caught up with him, she could tell that something had happened; he wasn't just upset about the situation, or just tired of conversing; it looked like he had reacted to something to make him walk away, reacted to her. She just hoped that it wasn't because of Malfoy.

Before she could make an effort to smooth over her irritation however, Hermione blurted out, "What the hell is your problem?"

Ron scoffed harshly. "You know exactly what it is."

He threw his hand out, gesturing over to where Draco was standing.

She glanced at the tall Slytherin, noting that he was looking at them with narrowed eyes, like he wanted to intervene. She shook her head imperceptibly, trying to compel him to stay out of it.

"Fucking... I just can't. Not here, not now," he muttered, his voice breaking slightly.

She rubbed her temple, trying to calm her anger, and Ron let out an exasperated sigh; oh, he hated it when she rubbed her temple when they were arguing -

"I don't understand; he's trying to make an effort to be decent -"

"How can you just - after everything he did to us? After we saved his bloody life and he -"

"He's different now, Ron -"

"People don't change like that, Hermione. He looks like he's on some kind of calming draught, like he'll burst -"

"People can change. We have! And besides, even if he was a prick you can still be the bigger person and -"

"Why do we always have to do that? Always have to be the ones to forgive and forget?!"

"Because we won."

"Nobody wins in a war, Hermione, you know that -"

"This isn't about the War -"

"Isn't it?"
She stopped, looking at him incredulously. "Do you think he really wanted to kill Dumbledore? To wipe out muggleborns?" Ron flinched away from the memory.

"He was 'complicit'; isn't that what you always say?"

Hermione sighed, angrily shaking her head. "I'm not arguing with you about this right now. If you don't want to deal, you don't have to."

But he wasn't listening to her; he was staring at her closely, his eyes narrowed.

"You do fancy him," he said suddenly.

Her stomach dropped. "What?!"

"You fancy him!"

She resisted the urge to refute it, knowing that if she tried to underline her lack of feelings it would sound unconvincing... and also probably be a lie. Instead, she sputtered, "I'm trying to make an effort to be nice, Ronald. It's a small world!"

He didn't appear to have heard her, because red spots were blooming across his cheeks, a telltale sign that he was getting past the point of reason.

"Are you mental?" he scathed, gesturing wildly, his voice low and tight. "Don't let him have you!"

A cold feeling flowed through Hermione, chilling her core; she had been operating on a high from Draco's warmth, drugged off his proximity and the promise there, and that had briefly shrouded her in contentment, excitement even. But now that curtain was lifted, no, demolished by Ron's simple comment.

She had forgotten about her own reservations, why she still felt an itch like all of this was a terrible idea, why the danger associated with him had a particular edge to it. It wasn't just the idea of being with him and potentially facing the social ramifications of seeing him properly; it was the idea of bearing her heart, bearing her body, to someone who historically would take that opportunity to destroy her. And that nagging part of her was telling her that if she took this thing between them too far, and let Draco have sex with her, she would lose something, lose a game that they had started in school.

While she now had a much thicker skin than she'd had as a teenager - years of arguing with people who thought you weren't fully wizard did that to a person - she wasn't sure she would be able to bounce back if he burned her romantically.

She met Ron's eyes, angry at him for filling her with doubt, angry at him for his particular brand of controlling faux-protectiveness, angry at him for twisting everything and making it impossible for her to just let go and feel good.

"How dare you," she said lowly. "Even if I did want to see him, that's none of your concern anymore."

"None of my concern? I still care about your safety!"

"Bollocks."

"You can't just let him - "
"I can do whatever I want!"

"You know that - "

She was losing patience. "What if I do like him? Huh? What if I don't care about what you think?"

He shook his head, his eyes squeezed shut. "Really, Hermione? Him? Over - "

He trailed off, but she heard the implication in his unfinished statement anyway.

Before she could do more than furrow her brows at him, he turned and stalked away, leaving her with her hands up.

"I'm so sick of your shit, Ron, you always do this - " she said after him, following for a moment, but his strides were too long for her and he was out of the main doors before she could catch up.

She took deep breaths, schooling her features in case anyone around her had noticed the tiff, trying to keep the deep frustration from showing on her face. She deposited her empty sake cup on a nearby table as steadily as she could and went after Ron, grasping her cloak in a tight fist.

As she walked through the corridor, sidestepping groups of individuals laughing together, she became aware of a set of footsteps matching her own, following the same path. She turned into the less occupied corridor leading to the temporary transportation room, but the steps behind her weren't lessening.

"Not right now, Draco - " she warned, trying to keep tears from brimming in her eyes.

"You know what?" he said, still keeping up with her quick strides, "I lied earlier."

She stopped, not turning to face him yet but pausing all the same. Because her heart was going crazy and she needed him to finish.

"Lied?" she breathed.

"I'm not sorry about what happened." He stepped forward, his presence now warming her back. She briefly regretted not putting on her cloak, and clutched the garment a little tighter in her fist.

"I'm... fuck, I'm not sorry. Not at all."

She nodded coolly, trying to keep herself from falling apart. It was a miracle that she hadn't burst by now, with all the torture she was putting her heart through.

"I know we said we weren't going to pretend, but I've been pretending. And I... I can't anymore."

Her skin tingled as he took her arm, gently turning her to face him. She obliged, her arms crossed and gaze fixed to the floor.

He sighed, a sound that made her look up, though a second later she regretted it deeply; he was gazing at her with the same intensity that he had when he'd first seen her across the room at that lecture, but it was deeper somehow, more volatile, the difference between seeing a fire in the distance and being in front of it, feeling the heat and the flames licking your face.

Despite feeling like she knew him a little better now, she felt like she was witnessing something raw, something real, like he was vulnerable in a way that he hadn't been before.

This was unknown and somewhat forbidden territory for them, because it wasn't just about the
alchemy, or the honesty, or the camaraderie - it was about *them*, him and her, and their bodies and their wants.

She didn't know why she had been denying it, she had been feeling the pull towards him for weeks, *months*, and had just been too afraid to address it, to understand what it meant.

"Say something," he said quietly, holding her gaze.

Emotion was prickling the corner of her eyes; whatever she had been expecting him to say, this was not it. His hand on her arm should have felt amazing, but she couldn't even appreciate the heat of his touch right now, not when she was starting to realize what she needed to do, feeling the dejection and loss already, already preparing to suppress her yearning for the sake of what was smart.

She let out a slow breath, and finally managed to croak out, "I can't explain it, but... I can't."

She let this statement hang, trying not to cringe outwardly as she could practically feel his disappointment.

"You *can* explain it," he replied, "but you don't want to."

She shook her head, absolutely hating herself. "Not right now, Draco."

He pursed his lips. "If it's because of Weasley -"

"It's not him," she said quickly.

"Don't defend him, I know he upset you -"

"It's not him," she repeated. "I just... I have a lot to think about, and... I can't right now."

His hand moved towards her waist and he lightly caressed her back, as if to remind her what it felt like earlier; naturally the feeling of his fingertips ghosting across her skin was intoxicating, and her resolve faltered. All she wanted was to continue, drag him to her bed, strip him of his clothes and bathe in this feeling, indulge in more intense intimacy -

"That's not helping," she murmured.

He dropped his hand, and she reached for it and clasped it for a moment, looking into his eyes and trying to make him understand, trying to impart how much she hated this, how much she wished it could be different.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. And with that, she turned and stalked away.

As she steadily made her way down the corridor, consciously putting one foot in front of the other, she tried to close the floodgates of emotions currently harassing her.

She knew she had been seeking something good to fill that fissure in her heart, to ease the overwhelming pain of what she had lost, what she'd had to do when she was still just a teenager. And so when the opportunity to feel better had presented itself, in the form of Draco's touch, his kiss, she had jumped at the chance. Something about him always had a way of making her less concerned about the thoughts constantly turning over in her mind, and made her more present, more grounded, more aware of her own body, her own skin.

But she couldn't decide if that was a good thing yet.

What they had was already so fragile, she tried not to feel dismayed that she had ruined any chances
between them; if she did decide to give in sometime later it would be forever colored by this experience, forever tarnished by her doubt.

As she passed by the south entrance to the Great Hall, she was surprised to see Harry standing in the doorway, waiting for her to notice him.

"Hermione, are -"

She waved Harry off, striding determinedly; it didn't help that though she knew she should talk through this with someone there was literally no one that she could talk to about Draco. Harry was out of the question, as was any of her Gryffindor mates, and Jazzy and Mari would be quick to reject Draco based on his struggles with pureblood mania. Even Padma was so logical and protective of Hermione that she would likely agree with her, that it was a terrible idea to get involved with him, despite her encouragement to flirt with him earlier.

She had to pause in her trek towards the travel room to get her emotions under control; she was already attracting some attention with the echoing click of her heels, and did not also want people to notice her barely contained despair.

She quickly stepped to the platform and gave her address to the man in uniform, waiting patiently for the portkey assignment official to finish casting the charm; he had barely held the little figurine out to her before she snatched it up and felt the familiar pull against her navel.

Her apartment was oddly silent when she entered, a sharp contrast to the echoing cacophony of the ball. Hermione immediately dropped her cloak and unclasped her gown, throwing her wand aside unceremoniously and letting gravity take the dress to the floor as she trudged to her bedroom.

All of the intense things she had been feeling were so overwhelming, she couldn't help herself. She fell onto her bed, and before she knew what was happening, started to cry - for the first time in years.
The Opening

Hermione's apartment

South London Wizard District

May 3rd

That night Hermione dreamt vividly of her childhood; vacations with her parents, adventures with her favorite stuffed toys, reading her books under the covers at night. The visions, the nostalgia, were so real she could remember the precise color of the sunrise, or the exact smell of her mother's jumper, or the texture of the waxy cover of her favorite book.

When she awoke, thankfully not to her usual alarm of owls tapping at her window, she actually felt fully rested, content, for a moment.

And then she remembered the previous night, and her expression clouded over.

She sighed, rolling over and burrowing back under her covers. Somehow getting out of bed was aligned with facing that mishap, and she wanted to avoid doing both if possible.

And so by late morning she was still there, trying to concentrate on the book she was reading about alchemic circles, exasperated that it was taking more than one reread of each paragraph to make any sense of it.

Around the fifth time she caught her thoughts drifting toward the previous night, she threw down the book, ripping off her covers.

She couldn't help the anger she was feeling towards Ron, how he had ruined so much with his antics. The sad part was that he had a tendency to do that; he was always angry when things didn't go his way or people didn't pay enough attention to him.

She grumbled about insecure ex-partners dejectedly as she ran a bath, pulling off her knickers and hugging her arms to her chest as she waited for the water.

The bath gave her an opportunity to calm down a bit, and afterward, as she squeezed the water from her hair, she managed to reach a quiet mental state. She took some comfort in the routine of drying her hair and skin, indulging in some self-care in order to elevate her thoughts. To finish she swiped a quick layer of moisturizer on her face and stepped back into her room.

Her dress from the previous night was coiled in a heap on the floor, in a perfect ring from where she had stepped out of it; Hermione retrieved her wand grudgingly and began to put away her things, hanging the dress and cloak and putting away her heels.

This done, she returned to her bed, wrapping her dressing gown around her tighter and picking up her book.

"Hermione?" a voice called out. "It's me. Can I come in?"

She lowered her book with an exasperated sigh, wanting to be angry at Padma for coming to her door without owling first, but also knowing that it was her fear of talking to the other witch about Draco that was underneath it all.
"No," Hermione replied, her voice carrying through the apartment.

"I'm coming in," Padma called cheerily, and Hermione waited, having no energy to prevent it, as Padma's spare key slid into the lock and she opened the door.

She listened half-heartedly to the sounds of Padma setting down her things in the kitchen. Crookshanks meowed from his spot on the couch, probably wondering if Padma had brought anything for him.

"Girl, you need a bloody table. And some chairs!" the witch called out.

Hermione rolled her eyes; she hadn't had time to continue to furnish this flat, and so besides a bed, nightstand, wardrobe, and couch, she had no other furniture other than the bookcases that lined nearly every wall.

"I know," Hermione answered, picking her book back up. "I had to get another bookcase."

Padma appeared in the doorway with a plate and a steaming cup of tea. "I brought you a scone," she said, sitting on the edge of Hermione's bed and handing her the plate. "As a peace offering for coming unannounced."

Hermione nodded grudgingly, her hunger spiking as she saw the tiny pastry. Padma knew her far too well. "Thanks, love."

The dark-haired witch settled as Hermione took a small bite, waiting until Hermione set down the plate before she took up her own scone and took a bite herself.

They sat like this for a few minutes, and Hermione was able to return to her quiet headspace and enjoy the silent company for a bit, letting the tea warm her hands.

As Hermione finished the pastry, she could tell that Padma was getting antsy.

"What happened last night?" Padma finally put forth.

She shook her head. "I had a tiff with Ron, that's all."

Padma stared at her, and Hermione carefully avoided the other girl's deep gaze.

"What was it about?"

"The usual possessive rubbish. If someone so much as looks at me he gets all - " she waved her hand wildly in the air. "He's... still being a prick about the breakup."

Padma sighed heavily. "Dammit, Ron... it's been years, what's his problem?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know. It wasn't always this bad."

"Even when you dated Viktor?"

Hermione cringed. "Okay, yes, it was bad then. But he was tolerable, because he thought I was dating Viktor to mess with him."

Padma scoffed, adding "as if," darkly.

"And with Dirk, or Jonsey, he seemed... fine. Good, even. He was dating that one drip -"
"Yes, with the freckles."

"And he seemed stable. I'm not sure what's happened since."

Padma played with the end of her braid thoughtfully. "Well, Harry has been busy with the baby and work, and I'm sure the second Weasley Wizard Wheezes location is keeping George busy... who else does he spend time with?"

"I suppose he gets on with his coworkers, and maybe Seamus, but with Harry gone all the time... I'm not sure what he does. And him and me... honestly, we're not even friends anymore. We try, for Harry's sake, but... only because it's harder not to be."

Padma sighed. "Because all of your mates are mates."

"Exactly."

"So was he mad that you were talking to the Slytherins last night?"

"Kind of... I'll be honest, I don't know quite what happened."

Padma sighed again, thumbing over the plush duvet. "I... I think I know."

"What did you see?"

Padma looked into Hermione's eyes, and the curly-haired witch felt like she already knew, but even acknowledging it was so frightening, as it made the situation real, the possibilities real. She wasn't ready for either.

"I'm pretty sure he saw the way Draco touched you."

Hermione groaned, turning and burying her face into her pillow.

Padma nodded silently. "It doesn't matter, you know. He has no say in who you want to date."

"Yes, but knowing him he'll... evangelize his perspective and - oh, this is just - urgh." Hermione let out a muffled curse.

"Hermione," Padma said seriously, "you're going to stress yourself out by beating yourself up over him. He's being a prick, that's it. Don't let him make you feel bad about what you want."

"But I'm not even... sure if Draco's what I want."

"Either way. It's none of Ron's business." Padma paused. "And don't you want him?"

Ah, the question, a question that had been so simple for everyone else she had eventually dated, a question that she kept turning over in her mind.

"Come on, Hermione. You two weren't exactly subtle. Even at the ballet."

Hermione covered her face with her hands, groaning again. She hadn't really thought through what they had been projecting to everyone else at the ball, but between having close, intense conversations, holding his hand, dancing with him, and him following her out of the hall...

"Urgh, you're right." She paused. "I do want him... and I don't. I do because... I just do. And I don't because I feel like it won't end well."
"Why does the end have to matter at the beginning?"

Hermione stopped. That was a fair perspective; she was torturing herself over things that may not even be relevant when it came down to it. She was frozen with fear before they even did anything.

"Sometimes fighting something can make it stronger, Hermione," Padma said. "And why are you so afraid of the possibilities? Nothing has even happened yet."

"I mean... but - "

Padma looked at her squarely. "You need to talk to him. For real."

But what would she say? What would she accomplish? Hermione felt like seeing him again, talking to him, would just make it harder for her to make a decision.

"Lucky for you, I happen to know where he'll be today."

"Today?"

"Yes."

"It's... it's too soon - "

"You're really going to sleep on this? Let him wait to hear from you, after he made his intentions clear?" Padma paused. "He made his intentions clear, didn't he?"

Hermione nodded numbly. "We kissed."

The dark haired witch let out a low, interested whistle, grabbing and hugging one of Hermione's decorative pillows to her chest. "And?"

A smile wriggled out of Hermione's stricken expression, and she found herself giggling with the other witch.

"Hermione, love," Padma swooned, squeezing the pillow. "That's amazing."

She sighed, nodding; it was rather amazing to feel close to someone again, even though she had reservations about seeing Draco properly; the prospect of having the option to do it was very comforting. And she was happy that Padma was excited for her - she shouldn't have assumed that the other woman would judge her.

Hermione always had the tendency to hold things inside, try to figure things out for herself; even when it came to recovering from her trauma, she'd spent years struggling with it before she'd finally decided to get therapy.

"Alright, up you get," Padma urged, rising on her knees and pulling Hermione up.

Hermione obliged with a groan and crawled off her bed, stretching.

"He's going to be at the Chopra Institute opening today. But I'd hurry, as the official opening is within the hour and I don't know how long he will be sticking around."

Hermione nodded, going to her wardrobe and pulling out a dress. "Are you going as well?"

"Of course, it's my job," Padma replied, rolling her eyes playfully. "And I can get you in. But you have to get dressed now."
"Okay, okay, I'm moving," Hermione said, stripping off her robe and pulling on the dress. "Where are we going?"

"Mumbai. I always told you I'd take you there myself," Padma said, smirking.

"Oh," Hermione eyed her dress. "Something breezier then."

"I'm going to summon my notes. If you aren't done in twenty minutes I'm leaving without you," Padma called as Hermione struggled with the garment on her way to the bathroom.

Once Hermione was dressed in her breeziest shirt-pants ensemble and heaviest robe, in anticipation for the vast temperature change between rainy London and scorching Mumbai, Padma brought them via fireplace from Hermione's apartment building to the Ministry in order to access the broader fireplace network, then to the British Embassy's Mumbai consulate.

The Mumbai heat was immediate when they stepped through the fireplace of the embassy, so much that for a moment Hermione wondered if the flames had been real. As she walked through the sunbathed hall she was minorly panicked to see that she and Padma attracted some attention; Padma was the British ambassador to India for wizardkind, and so whenever she made an appearance here everyone dropped what they were doing to meet with her.

"No, not on official business today," she told a man who had come up to her quickly from behind a desk. "Goodwill chaperone for St. Mungo's. Anything to report?"

While Padma was updated on diplomatic matters Hermione looked aimlessly through the open doors at the city beyond. The city was active, vibrating with energy, but it was a gentle buzz of lively activity in the calm spirit of leisure, not the drudgery of corporate pursuits on a busy weekday. Piles of buildings rose in a line, stacked on top of each other haphazardly and connected by exposed wire and rope, and there were skyscrapers nestled beyond, blurred and hazy in the distance.

Padma got her attention and they continued out of the doors, sidestepping witches and wizards as they crossed in front of the consulate.

"Should we get some proper food?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

"We can eat on the way," Padma called back to her.

Hermione floundered, suddenly nervous as she realized that she hadn't really given this excursion the proper thought. "Padma, I should have just sent an owl - "

"No way," she admonished. "Hermione, that's the worst! You can't have a conversation like that over owl. What are we, politicians?" She stopped and looked back at the curly-haired witch. "Hey. Don't chicken out, it will be fine. It was either this or going to his house."

Hermione cringed.

"Trust me. Come on, love." Padma leveled her with a deep gaze, and under the direct assault of Padma's eyes Hermione couldn't refuse.

She sighed. "Only if you get me vada pav."

"Done."

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With slightly more food in her system Hermione felt less dread. As they walked, munching on their vada pav, she mentally made a checklist of the things she wanted to say.

She would start by apologizing, that was a no-brainer. She'd been angry at Ron and she knew that though she liked to think of herself as a fair and rational person, some of her exasperation had manifested in the way she had dealt with Draco.

Next, she would let him know that a situation like that would not be happening again. She didn't know if she wanted to see Draco properly, but she did know that advertising her lack of self-control and personal conflicts while at a public event was out-of-bounds. What if her boss had seen her arguing? The Minister?

Lastly, she would reaffirm some boundaries between them.

Something about his touches turned her from a logical woman into a sex-obsessed tart, and she wasn't sure if she liked that yet. There was no other way, she would have to tell him not to touch her. At least until she got to know him better.

No, no, she had to be strong - she didn't anticipate ever not being wary of him, and so leaving the door open even a crack made it easier to push it open all the way. She'd have to be firm about her wishes.

Satisfied and honestly comforted by the organization of her thoughts, Hermione concentrated on gathering her resolve as she and Padma walked.

By the time they made it to their destination, healers were already pouring through the doors, gaping at the tall ceilings. The Chopra Institute was fantastically modern in a way that no building in wizard London was yet - all glass and marble with cultural touches in the decorative motifs and archways within.

There were so many people in the building it was a miracle that Hermione even made it inside, and she anxiously thought that surely it would be impossible to find Draco in this crowd, but almost immediately she spotted the only head of blond hair in the entire room, just as he had turned in her direction.

From the wildly surprised look in his eye, she could tell that her appearance was incredibly unexpected, and her heart dropped.

Had she really thought this all the way through?

How must it look to him, that she had rejected him the previous night only to show up unannounced at an event she wasn't invited to the next day? Halfway across the world, at that?

Oh shit, this was such a horribly bad idea, and now it was too late, he'd seen her and there really was no reason for her to be here except to see him. She couldn't escape now, she had no choice but to talk to him.

"Hey, you're here," he said when he neared.
She nodded. "Can we talk?"

He looked around, scanning the other healers and researchers around him. "Uh, yeah. Give me... give me ten minutes, can I meet you outside?"

"Of course. I'll be there."

He squeezed her arm and she turned to leave, her breath shallow as she navigated through the eager healers and stepped onto the busy street.

Thank Merlin for Padma, who was standing at the large glass doors greeting healers. Hermione caught her eye and she stepped aside.

"Did you see him?"

Hermione nodded numbly. "He's coming out in a bit."

Padma looked like she wanted to give her a hug, but refrained, clutching her satchel a little tighter. "Remember - whatever you decide to tell him - you have to do what you want. What you want."

"What I want," Hermione echoed dejectedly.

Padma gave her a look but went back to the entrance, and Hermione was left with her thoughts as she watched all the lab coats swishing into and out of the building, her hand up to shield herself from the scorching sun.

This was a new challenge, nothing more, and if her hands were shaking it was from a slight hangover and not the thought of talking about her feelings.

When she finally saw Draco appear in the doorway, searching for her familiar face, she had nearly convinced herself to leave, head back to England and avoid this situation that she had not thought through. As he entered the sun, he swapped his frames for a pair of elegant sunshades, and she was momentarily caught off-guard by the new look.

"Granger," he greeted when he stepped in front of her. "Where do you want to go?"

She thought quickly, kicking herself for not considering where she wanted to take him, where was a good place to have the conversation she wanted. The first location that popped into her mind was her flat, but - dear god, she couldn't bring him there, not when she didn't trust herself to be alone with him with a bed nearby. She didn't know the layout of Mumbai that well, and wasn't sure where Padma's favorite restaurant was in relation to where they were... so even apparating there seemed ill-advised.

"Um, are you hungry?" she asked, trying to buy some time.

"Not particularly, but I could go for some tea."

She sighed, holding out her arm. "Great. Pot and the Kettle?"

"There's a great chai spot close-by," he murmured, an amused eyebrow raised at the assumption that he would side-along apparate to the embassy. "Want to try something new?"

She floundered for a moment - the point was to go somewhere where they could sit and talk...

"I know you're eager to get back to England, but I don't leave the country that much for anything outside of research or work, so... " 
"No, that sounds good," she sighed, "I could use a bit of caffeine."

They walked in silence up the busy stone street, sidestepping colorful stands filled with wares of every type, from swaying saris in iridescent silks to steaming snacks, crackling with oil and bathed in spices. Draco easily stood out, his hair reflecting the falling sun and his healer robes draped casually over his shoulder.

This was the most casual she'd ever seen him, in fact; his top buttons were undone on his textured button down, his sleeves rolled, and his shirt untucked over his light pants.

Draco in sunglasses was quite a sight as well; with his intense gaze covered he was shrouded in a cool mystery that had Hermione sneaking glances at him. A part of her was vexed by his confident nonchalance, irritated that he appeared so effortlessly comfortable in his own skin, but she suspected that she was not actually angry at him, but angry at herself for liking it.

They came upon a bright purple stand that smelled of cardamom and cloves, and Hermione breathed in the warm, spicy notes with a sigh as they got in line.

"What should I get?" she asked.

Draco smiled to himself, and replied, "I'll get you something I know you'll like."

When it was his turn he pressed his wand to his throat and ordered two chais and bun maska, his words flowing out in Hindi, and Hermione took that opportunity to glance around and take in this magical community, a community that she hadn't had the privilege of interacting with that much. That was probably a good thing though - not having to work with the Indian ministry was largely due to their somewhat integrated society. In India the wizard and muggle communities flowed into and out of each other, as both were grounded in deep roots of spirituality. She didn't have to argue with Indian diplomats about bias in their legal system against muggleborns, not when they had such a high respect for their fellow man.

She would love to explore right now, but it probably wasn't a good idea when she had emotionally confusing business to take care of.

In fact, she was starting to realize what a huge mistake she had made, traveling all the way here just to have a conversation with Draco when she could just as easily have sent him an owl, or penned him into her schedule.

She already was having trouble getting her bearings in this city - which she didn't know very well - and that combined with her lack of footing in this situation was really making her question her decision to come here.

Regardless, she was already here, she had to get on with it. And despite her nervousness, the fact that there was a chai place that Draco liked, here in Mumbai, peaked her curiosity.

Trying to go with the flow, Hermione asked, "How did you hear about this place?"

"Healer Shamsi was going on about it - actually, he gave me a whole list of things to try while I was here..."

"Oh, that's nice," Hermione said, slightly disappointed that she had probably ruined his sightseeing with her sudden appearance.

When their chai came, Draco handed one to her, as well as a wrapped paper bundle with a spot of bread in it.
He gestured, and they continued up the busy street, weaving in the cracks in the crowd. Hermione took a small sip of her chai, and was rewarded with a warm, pleasant sensation, spreading from her throat down to her belly. There was something familiar about the taste, like a hazy, sweet memory she hadn't accessed in a long time; she took another sip, sighing.

"Wow," she murmured.

Draco looked over at her. "Yeah, it's quite good, isn't it?"

"How did you know that I like ginger?" she asked.

He smirked. "I'm not good at many things, but I can usually tell what kind of food people like. It's a rather useless talent, picked up from years of dining out with my family's acquaintances." He took another sip. "Besides, the chocolate mousse I sent you at Her Unbreakable Vow had ginger in it, and you were positively melting over it."

Her eyebrows shot up. "That was you?"

"Of course."

There was no way, it was impossible - how had she missed that? "How... why -?"

She couldn't see his eyes behind his frames, but she knew based on the upturn of his lips and his raised eyebrows that he was amused. "It's their specialty, I thought you should try it."

"But... why?"

He took a sip of his chai, picking back up their slow pace down the street. "I didn't know how to make you less afraid of me, less suspicious... and I tried to keep my distance, especially after you were still so prickly. So I tried to do something simple to show kindness - something that I knew I wouldn't botch, something that couldn't backfire."

"Unless I was allergic to chocolate, or dairy."

He stopped, his expression clouding over.

"Oh, shit," he chuckled, covering his face. "I didn't think about that."

"I'm just messing with you," Hermione said, smiling. "You should learn not to play into my hands so easily." She raised an eyebrow, challenging him with deliberate mimicry of his attitude the night before.

"Damn, I'm a prick," he returned, shaking his head.

She was smiling, but her thoughts were treading back to the previous night and all that had transpired, and she was reminded of why she was here with him at all.

He must have sensed her mood switch, for they walked in silence down the uneven cobblestone, moving through the busy square and observing the goings-on of the community. Hermione munched on her bun maskka covertly, trying to puzzle through what she wanted to say some more, what she was actually hoping to accomplish by being here.

The crowd started to thin out as the sun turned from hot and white to a warm yellow, scorching the side of Hermione's face as she squinted.

"I have a few more suggestions on my list," Draco said, clearing this throat, "But I'm not sure you'd
"You could try asking," Hermione chided lightly.

"Well, there are a few clothing boutiques," he replied, pulling out the folded parchment. Hermione peered over at it; it contained a detailed map, which had been marked over in red ink with stars and lines, notes and suggestions. Their location was a pulsing dot in the center. "And a restaurant that's in the opposite direction from where we walked. There's also a hookah lounge pretty close to us..."

She looked at him sharply. "Hookah?"

"Uh, yes, it's this - "

"I know what it is, just - since when do you smoke?"

He smirked. "I don't, but it was recommended."

"So you're just going to blindly try things based on your coworker's suggestions?"

He let out a humorless snort. "I'm done rotting in my bubble, Granger. And I feel like trying something new. Don't you get sick of the same old haunts back in London? Trudging home after work, drinking glass after glass of brandy over a book and passing out?"

"Who says I do that," she grumbled.

"I'm telling you, that's what I do," he explained. "I'm trying to get out more. Come on, Granger, where is that courageous Gryffindor?"

She sighed, gesturing her affirmation with her chai cup, and they continued up the street, crossing between men on bikes and old witches carrying heapfulls of goods.

They eventually came upon a doorway framed in lush vegetation; once they stepped through, finally shielded from the intensity of the sun - the cool relief of the shade was instant - a squat house-elf with a spattering of earrings impaling every available inch of his ears was waiting there.

With a slightly disgruntled look at the pair, the elf hobbled away, and Draco followed, Hermione close behind.

Hermione looked around curiously; the haze of dissipated smoke was hovering like a blanket over the low tables and well-worn cushions lining the outer walls. The space was rather empty, with sheer curtains that moved gently between each section, though she could still see that a few of the sections were occupied. As she followed the house elf in, she glanced at the patrons; old gentlemen with pockmarked faces and rumpled, breezy robes were lounging, blowing thick plumes of smoke that twisted and curled in the air. Near them a group of young women were eagerly conversing and taking pinches of food from a large platter.

They stopped at an empty section situated between two large bloodferns, and Hermione sat apprehensively, buzzing with energy from the chai and vaguely bewildered that Draco had managed to talk her into doing this. Despite the present company she was still grateful for the drapes shielding them from the brunt of the sun, as well as the still serenity of this patio and the soft cushion she was now sitting on. If she listened closely, she could just make out the sound of the water hitting the beach in the distance.

Five years ago if she had known that she would be smoking hookah with Draco Malfoy in Mumbai, she would have questioned the trajectory of her life. Even when Padma had first introduced her to
the pastime, the dark-haired witch was met with raised eyebrows and scoffs until Hermione had said fine and given it a go. And then Hermione realized - smoking was actually very pleasant, especially given how wound-up she was all the time.

She could not have anticipated the things she had learned since she had left school, the new experiences that would change her world view, expand her horizons. Even just traveling to different parts of the world had exposed her to new ways of thinking, new ways of being, and she couldn't operate in the same kind of absolutes that she had before; abstaining from sexual activity, not drinking or trying new things, only consuming food she knew she would like - it was no way to live life to its fullest.

When she looked back at Draco, she was happy to see a hookah already waiting between them. He had traded his sunshades for his regular eyeglasses, and she was momentarily started by the intensely light eyes that she hadn't seen in a while.

"My coworker said to get apple, and stay away from the combination flavors," he said, smirking at her. "They've got enough odd ones to fill a Bertie Bott's box."

Hermione relaxed her posture, noticing his smirk and wondering if he found her discomfort amusing or if he was just this cocky all the time.

"Don't worry, Goody Granger - it's fun to try new things," he continued smoothly.

"New?" she asked innocently, raising her eyebrows.

He was about to say something else, but he stopped, examining her expression closely, and his eyes grew wide. "Dear Merlin, Granger, you've done this before! Why didn't you tell me?"

"It didn't seem relevant."

"Didn't seem relevant?" He shook his head, chuckling. "All this time, you let me be an arse, meanwhile you were an expert?"

"I'm hardly an expert. This isn't really a pastime that you have to master."

"So how does this work, then?" he asked, gesturing at the contraption in front of him. "Teach me."

"You just... inhale. For a few seconds. I can get it going if you want."

"Please."

She didn't want to see his interested gaze out of the corner of her eye as she fitted the hose with the provided lip guards and checked the coals.

That sorted, she put the end of the hose to her mouth and inhaled, trying not to feel like he was staring at her pursed lips, and just concentrated on inhaling and blowing out the air until she finally blew a thick cloud of smoke in his direction.

He waved it away, and she said apologetically - or maybe not so apologetically, given his cheek earlier, "Sorry. Should be good now."

He tried his own hose, and when he finally exhaled and smoke curled over his lips and up the side of his face, Hermione didn't think she had ever seen something sexier than his slow breath, the smoke caressing the angles of his cheeks.
"So," he said, drawing one ankle over his knee and bringing her attention to his attire for a brief moment - she hadn't noticed his muted loafers, lack of socks and slightly cropped pants, probably chosen in anticipation for the heat. "Here we are."

She polished off her chai and set the cup down. "Here we are."

Yes. It was time to get on with it.

Hermione floundered for a moment, suddenly feeling unprepared, as through the course of walking the streets with him she had forgotten exactly what she was meant to do.

Noting her uncomfortable silence, he said, "Before you say anything, I have something to tell you."

She didn't want to overthink it, but there was a resignation in his voice that gave her pause, and Hermione automatically gave him her full attention.

"I'm going to help on the ground. In the east."

"You're... you're going to help treat the aqualorum epidemic?"

"Yes. I'll either be in Nepal on the edge of the quarantine... or in Chengdu administering transfiguration therapy. There's... they just need more help. They aren't able to help the infected fast enough, and people are dying because of it."

His expression was carefully impassive, but knowing how much he cared about his patients, it must have been awful for him to learn that people were still dying under his containment plan. Her heart clenched.

"When?"

"With the next rotation. It's still two weeks out, but... I thought you should know."

"Is it... is it safe?"

He nodded vigorously, clearly trying to assuage the fear that crept into her voice. "Of course - I'll be taking the potions and have the spell on at all times. If anything I'll just come back with dry skin and a headache."

She chuckled nervously. "But you'll still come back often."

"Oh yeah," he affirmed. "Most likely every few days. I'm only apprenticed, so I'm not expected to heal full time. Merlin knows they need me though."

"I'm sure your expertise will be appreciated."

"I also wanted to say... thank you. For your suggestions. We're cultivating some of the ingredients on location now, and it's really sped up the brewing."

"That's wonderful," she said sincerely.

For the first time since she'd met up with him, he looked vaguely apprehensive, playing with the hose in his hands. "I'm not sure if this new information has any bearing on what you wanted to talk about, but... I thought you should know."

She couldn't quite identify the tightening feeling in her chest; she felt like there was a timer over their heads now, and that their relationship was even more fragile, more uncertain.
"It does... I mean, thank you for telling me. Let me know if I can help at all."

"Maybe with your gift for diplomacy," he commented.

"Which I apparently didn't use last night."

He cocked his head slightly, and he was watching Hermione expectantly now, waiting for her to get on with it as he placed the hose back on the table and took up his chai.

"I'm... I'm sorry about what I did," she finally admitted. "Ron was being a prick, and I... I just needed to be alone."

He nodded, sipping his chai. "Don't worry. I understand." He paused. "Honestly, I had a lot to drink... and if I put any pressure on you, it wasn't what I wanted."

"No, it's fine. I didn't exactly push you away."

A wry smile crept into his expression. "Actually, you did, at the end there."

She looked away, cringing.

This was good; they were talking about it.

Good, yes.

"After the ball, we ended up going back to the Manor," Draco continued, setting down his cup. "The house is rather creepy at night, but the gardens... the gardens have always been great."

"That sounds lovely," she said, hoping she sounded sincere.

"I don't think you would have been okay," he said softly, rubbing his palms together. "It was probably for the best that we parted early."

Hermione nodded, though some part of her felt disappointed. Yes, probably for the best.

"Besides, the way you looked last night..." He raised a hand, his breath leaving his mouth in a low whistle. "I can't promise that if you'd been there, I could have resisted inviting you to spend the night."

She tried to nod nonchalantly, playing off this comment, but her insides felt like someone had just set off fireworks.

Oh Merlin, if she had gone home with him, even in the company of his friends, it would have been a done thing, there was no question.

In fact, if Ron hadn't swooped in with a cold reminder of the games they and Malfoy had payed, the cruel one-upmanship and petty backstabbing that was the world of hating your classmate, she didn't doubt that she would have continued being flirty with him for the rest of the evening. He'd been so bold with her towards the end of the night that it wasn't a stretch to think that he'd wanted to take her home and shag her.

And if she was being honest with herself, at least a small part of her wanted that. Very much.

But Ron had spoiled her mood, reminding her of their history, their incompatibility, and even the certain disapproval of their friends. And then she had been cold to Draco at a very vulnerable point.
So here they were.

She could reconcile her own behavior, and Ron's, but she couldn't make excuses for the inevitable disapproval of her friends. She couldn't pretend that her friends wouldn't stomp the longevity of a relationship with Draco.

Hermione sighed, taking up a formerly unnoticed cup of water as Draco watched his own smoke dissipate.

One of the things she liked about trying new things, about going to new places, was the freedom to be and do as she pleased. It was a fantastic benefit to her job - most days at least, when she didn't have back-to-back meetings across the world. She could plan a meeting in Warsaw and then stop by the Archives and talk to the researchers there. After she met with Gibbons in New York City she could go shopping, then pick up some pizza to bring back to Padma, who couldn't get enough of it. And if she was lucky, she would spend time with antsy, fire-starting young lobbyists and activists all over the world whose passion and spritely disregard for archaic ideals bloomed so much love and determination in her heart, and made her remember why she went to work every day, why she argued over the value of diversity, why she insisted on taking on more challenges.

It also made her feel like she wasn't confined to who she used to be, what she did during the War. Being away from all of that terrible baggage was refreshing.

In fact, she had noticed that even though Draco was somewhat hesitant in this new environment, with this new activity, he appeared to be quite content sitting there, examining the glass of the hookah, or watching the patterns the smoke made in the air.

As he took another soft inhale, the water bubbling, Hermione looked through the sheer, billowing curtains at the other wizards and witches on the patio, and noted that even though she and Draco were attracting a bit of attention - he stood out for his pale skin and hair, and both of them easily looked like tourists - it was clear that the other patrons didn't necessarily know who they were.

Something about this was so freeing; she felt as though she was casting aside her name, her history, her legacy, and was just enjoying a smoke with a friend. And he could be here also, free from the suspicious eyes of his English patients and fellow citizens, just enjoying life.

It could also have been the new environment that was freeing, an environment that had made her apprehensive earlier but now made her feel like she was on holiday. And Merlin did she need a vacation - even now she was tensed up and leaning forward, and hadn't even bothered to really smoke yet.

Sighing at herself, she picked up the other hose and took a hit, deciding that it was too late to pretend that she was as uptight as she liked to project, and at this point she might as well enjoy the situation. Her therapist at one point had talked to her about roles, and how you could maintain a certain dynamic with someone for so long that even if you don't see them for many years, when you got reacquainted it was easy to slip back into the self you were when you last knew them. It was unconscious continuity, continuity that Hermione had spent a long time trying to break. She was no longer the swotty bookworm everyone knew her as, but she couldn't help but act like it sometimes when she ran into old acquaintances.

When she looked back at Draco he was watching her in that calm, devilish way that always made her feel like he was cataloging her. She blew the smoke out of her mouth.

"What?" she asked.
"I'm just a little surprised by you, as usual," he replied.

"I'm surprised by you," she echoed, gesturing at him as the remainder of her last hit curled around his body. "So what brought you to the Chopra opening?"

"There was talk of starting a healing research study to determine the impact of PTSD on a person's magic. I came to put my name in."

"That sounds fascinating. So you're interested in the brain part of that, I'm guessing?"

"Of course - though the other manifestations sound interesting as well. I've heard that wandless magic is more volatile for extreme cases - with this study we could actually document the effects and understand why."

"So you'd be focusing on the 'intention' side of the pyramid."

The magic pyramid was the basis for all spell-oriented magic, a system to understand the complexity of magic. Magic that combined all three parts of the pyramid - intention, incantation, and catalyst - tended to be the most refined, and could be powerfully precise, as with specific charms or curses. Other methods of using magic, like apparition or wandless magic, used one or two of the three sides, and so was still useful, but not as controllable or specific.

It was why you could create a flame without a wand, but couldn't necessarily make a candle.

"Yes. When your mind is warped by traumatic experiences, it becomes harder to control one's intention. All the negativity reveals itself when you least want it to."

"Which is what therapy is supposed to help with," Hermione murmured. "Is that why you decided to get therapy?"

He smiled humorlessly, a hint of bitterness in his expression. "I wish I had been self-aware enough to seek therapy out myself. No, it was 'suggested' to me by the Jilner Institute's board."

She furrowed her brows. "'Suggested?' How did your school's board get involved?"

"I told you that my behavior at university nearly got me expelled."

"What happened?"

He waved his hand, a grimace ghosting across his features. "Rather not get into it right now. But let's just say, it was therapy or expulsion."

That sounded dreadfully ominous, but Hermione recognized an untouchable topic when she heard one, so she filed away her curiosity. "I'm sorry that happened. But at least something good came of it."

"Trust me, you don't need to be sorry. Therapy has been... essential. I mean, I literally study psychology and brains... and I can't imagine doing that without her - my therapist. And the amount of nonsense she has put up with from me over the years..." he shook his head, trailing off.

"Well, you can't have delicate sensibilities as a therapist," Hermione commented.

"She even told me what she thought of me in the beginning - and hearing my own worst fears about myself explained to me so calmly and non-judgmentally, just... purely informationally... I couldn't reject those things. I mean, I tried. Merlin did I try. But I couldn't hide from it in the end." He paused,
then said, "I never asked you this, and feel free to tell me to bugger off - but what is therapy like for you?"

Hermione sighed, tapping her cheek with the hose, wondering for the millionth time what made him so interested in her. It was possible that he was curious, just given the fact that he studied mental illness and psychology... but she couldn't be sure. "I mean, we spend a lot of time talking about things that are okay and things that are not okay. I have a hard time distinguishing sometimes."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... I've put up with so much over the years, and taught myself not to react, not to hurt, not to let those things get to me... and as a result it's honestly hard to know what I'm truly feeling about anything."

Draco nodded, taking up his chai and draining it.

"I know you get the impression that I'm all... principled or whatever. But it's taken me a long time to not put up with other people's ignorance, to not internalize their bias, or worse, ignore it. It's obvious when someone says to me, 'you're not a real wizard'. And I can say, okay, that's bad. But when someone doesn't introduce me at an event, or questions my knowledge of basic magic, or assumes that I'm a secretary... I don't know where their bias ends and my own anger begins. We talk about anger a lot, actually."

"Interesting," he said softly.

"And then beyond that, I just go there and... unravel. Just talk about what I think I'm feeling. You know, because I can never be sure."

Draco nodded encouragingly; in the silence she found herself drawn to the realization of how much she had shared with him, and she was vaguely bewildered at herself for opening up the way she had.

He must have been thinking similarly, for a second later he said softly, "How is it that we always get here?"

Hermione shook her head. She had no idea herself - talking with him was so easy sometimes. "I don't know. I'm not usually this... open."

"I didn't expect that, no."

He nodded, his gaze fixed on her as he exhaled, and Hermione stared at the smoke, determined to focus on something other than how much she had just revealed about herself.

There was something so beautiful about smoke, and she took another hit and concentrated on watching the smoke flow out of her mouth, curl under her vision, twist and weave in the air. The aroma of incense was thick here, as was the scent of their and other patron's smoke, and she breathed in and out, letting the lightweight body high relax her tense muscles.

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the cushions, drifting, pretending that she was someone else, a new person who did this with no fear or expectation, who could live carefree and uninhibited by the confines of the past.

And Draco was just another spirit, another soul who had come to this place to unwind and enjoy the simplicity of innocent relaxation. He was familiar, yes, but that was because his purpose was the same as hers. He wasn't familiar because of years of torment, or his picture in the Prophet, or because of his menacing gaze as he stared her down in her memory... no. His familiarity was
security, a breadcrumb trail back to a solid reality that she could get home to if she wanted.

In this new place, this new setting, his familiarity was actually working in his favor. She felt more comfort in his presence than ever before. In the back of her mind she knew that she only felt comfortable with him in contrast to her vague apprehension about being in an unfamiliar area, or perhaps as a result of this incredibly romantic, colorful setting... or it could have been the smoke. But she couldn't deny it - she felt good.

"You know, this stuff is amazing. I feel totally relaxed," he commented, examining the glass pipe. "I should get one of these."

Hermione chuckled, brushing back her curls. "Or you could just come back to this place."

"Only with you, Hermione," he replied. "You make it even better."

Her eyes flickered up to his, and she was brought back to the reality of the moment by the intensity of his gaze, his wolf-like attention and curiosity. She became aware of her heartbeat, and then she couldn't indulge in the fantasy anymore, the fantasy of being a carefree person who didn't overanalyze everything and think entirely too much until she had squashed any possibility into nothing. Now she was once again herself, Hermione Granger, and he was Draco Malfoy, and she had shared entirely too much of herself with him, a fact that she would surely regret.

Why did she insist on making things so personal between them?

Perhaps she should navigate back to territory she understood - learning and discerning - so she could justify this meeting that had gone from a simple apology to something akin to a date. They were hanging out in a hookah lounge for god's sake.

And now that she was aware of the drift in her thoughts and could see how far off track she had gotten, a wave of disappointment washed over her. She hadn't been strong, hadn't come here to say what she needed to say, to say something to stop the madness that was their relationship.

"I'll be right back," she said distractedly and extricated her body from the low table, avoiding Draco's questioning gaze.

She easily found the hallway to the tiny restroom, and went in and shut the screen.

Her hands were shaking as she wet them at the mosaic sink, and she put her wet hands on her neck, trying to ease the discomfort of the heat, as well as the familiar nervousness at the situation.

Goodness, she had already realized that drinking with him around was somewhat dangerous, so why didn't she see smoking hookah the same way? While the bodily effects were different, the outcome was generally the same - she was more aware of her body and less of her thoughts.

And being with him even without the substances was simply intoxicating, and that intoxication only seemed to clear up when they were talking about something academic. All of this was rather unfortunate because then she wanted to talk about alchemy or thought magic theory if only to give herself a reason to be near him, a reason to look at him, anticipate a bold remark that would have her shivering.

It was a vicious cycle by now, keeping her elevated at some divine point between scholarly awakening and excruciating temptation.

Also, everything he did captivated her and she couldn't maintain space from him, not engage him directly, when he was actually willing to open up. All he had to do was share a bit of himself, open
his heart just a bit and she crawled right in.

It was hard to cope with the pleasant feeling of being near him, talking to him, looking at him, fantasizing about him, and then also hear the headmistress in her head reminding her of how dangerous he was, how much of a bad idea it was to be with him.

Why was it so hard for her to figure out what she should do? She knew the right thing to do, the smart thing, as she couldn't kid herself there - but she was not excited by it, not as excited she was by the prospect of touching him, kissing him.

She wondered if she could apparate back to the Chopra Institute from here, find Padma and get back to the safety of her flat, the safety of being silent and not needing to talk about anything, not needing to feel anything.

Maybe that's why she liked doing research so much - she didn't have to determine what she was feeling, she just had her intuition, her knowledge, and her powers of deduction and could just forget everything else.

Hermione dejectedly dried her hands on the provided cloth and went back to the doorway, trying to sort through the mess of feelings, trying to force herself back to reality and the logical path.

As she pushed aside the partition quickly, ready to exit and make excuses for why she had to leave, she was stunned to see Draco blocking the doorway, his hand poised to knock.

Her mind went blank instantly; his body was suddenly too close, and the abstract notion of telling him not to be near her was hard to conjure when he was standing right in front of her.

She opened her mouth to say something, perhaps, 'sorry' or 'excuse me', but no words would come out.

He must have taken her silence as something else, for he looked down at her body, his hand coming up to the edge of her shirt.

"You know, I still stand by what I said," he murmured conversationally, touching the thin linen softly. "I'm not sorry about kissing you."

Her eyes flickered up to his, and she became aware of his breath on her face, the rise and fall of his chest so close to hers, and before she could make sense of what she was feeling she automatically drew closer, if only just to drink him in more, get a few precious seconds of closeness.

If she was completely honest with herself, she was tired of feeling like a ripe piece of fruit, just waiting for the pleasure of being taken, rolled against lips and tongue, ready for someone to sink their teeth into her.

And as he drew his finger up her body, even closer now, she vaguely realized that she had just been delaying the inevitable. How could she possibly resist something that she enjoyed so much? Something like being close to him, touching him?

His thumb was now grazing over her jaw, and she tried to watch his hand, a hand that she felt both a familiar aversion to and a desperate need for... it was too confusing, seeing him in front of her and her mind supplying the memories of his hands gripping his wand as he hexed her friends, balled into fists or crossed over his chest as he belittled them -

But on her bare skin his touch was a sweet blessing, soft but deliberate; he was teasingly close now, and there was no definitive thought in her head besides the simple, natural logic of kissing this
amazing person who was touching her so wonderfully, who was perfectly in range and possibly waiting for her to do it. And as she tilted her head up, all of the memories melted away.

Then as he breathed against her mouth, kissing her back, her rational brain flickered off and she felt everything, felt more than she had in years - pent up desire and yearning, nothing like the vague contentment she was used to.

And then he was backing her into the restroom and fumbling behind him, shutting the screen, his other hand delved into her hair, and all she had to do was match his steps until she bumped into the mosaic sink, and then touch his chest, quickly finding that the smart cotton of his shirt was not the sensation she wanted but what was underneath, yes, the soft and pliable warmth of his skin.

She tried to will herself to pull away, to not feel so much at once, but it was impossible, like trying not to taste something that was already in her mouth, especially when that taste was all gingery and cinnamony and so hot and sweet. He was squeezing her hip and holding her head like he never wanted anything this badly, and his energy kept her elevated, encouraged her to touch his hair, even smile slightly at the feeling of his glasses touching the tops of her cheeks.

She could recognize his breath, the small catch of a moan in his throat, and through the haze in her brain she couldn't tell if it was a memory from the previous night... or one of the many memories of their shared childhood.

She certainly didn't want those memories. She wanted a blank slate, where there was no past behind them and she could just kiss Draco and feel no guilt, no reservations, no twinge of impending doom like all of this was a terrible idea, like she hadn't been about to tell him to not touch her again -

"Shit!" she burst out, pulling away and smacking into the wall behind her, her hands splayed over the peeling wallpaper.

What the fuck was she doing?!

"Granger - " he began, reaching for her.

"Don't," she warned, moving away and putting a dividing arm between them.

Draco held up his hands, his chest heaving as he watched her closely. The restroom that had been a needed escape from the emotions she'd been feeling now felt entirely too small, and their bodies were entirely too big for it as there was not a sufficient amount of space between them that would prevent her from feeling drawn to him.

"Because if you touch me again..." she swallowed, closing her eyes, "I'm not going to want you to stop."

He stared at her after this admission, his hands dropping.

"Would... would that be a problem?"

Yes, what was the problem? Perhaps it was that nothing about this felt safe - kissing him was stepping over the edge of a cliff and not knowing what was on the other side. Unfortunately the negative aspects of this feeling unsafe - fear of him ultimately rejecting her, making her feel inadequate at her most vulnerable - were also accompanied by the positive aspects of fear. The hot thrill of something new, something unknown, the urge to peer over the edge and find out for sure, just because she suspected that it would feel amazing.

But was he really the person she wanted to tumble over the edge with? She barely knew him - she
certainly didn't know him when they were kids and didn't know him well now - and so it was unclear if they were actually compatible, actually had anything in common besides a thirst for knowledge and a shared attraction. Plus the blood status divide was still very wide, especially considering that he was still struggling with those ideals, and she didn't want to date anyone who wouldn't respect her completely.

She looked back at him, and he seemed to understand her train of thought, for his expression fell.

"You're... afraid of me."

She shook her head. "I'll be honest, I didn't expect - "

"Why did you come here?" he questioned shortly. "What did you really want to talk about?"

"I was... I was going to apologize."

"And?"

And she was going to tell him... that they couldn't be near each other anymore, that they couldn't interact. Because if she removed the temptation and steered clear of him, she would move on and maybe they had a shot at being friends. She could barricade her feelings behind a wall that he couldn't penetrate.

She hadn't said anything yet, and she could tell as the seconds ticked by that the opportunity to come clean was slipping away.

Draco took a deep breath, rubbing a hand over his face. He seemed frustrated with her.

"How about this," he sighed, "you say what you... think you feel, and I'll say what I think I feel."

Her nervousness was vaguely soothed at the give-and-take approach she remembered from conversing with him in the apothecary. It was way easier to share something personal when there was an expectation of receiving something personal back.

But could she really tell him? Tell him that she was entirely smitten with him and that he needed to stay away from her so she could get over it?

She decided to tell a different truth. "I like you, but I'm afraid to get involved with you."

She took a deep breath. That hadn't been so hard.

But Draco looked as though she had just hexed him, and she quickly began, "I'm sorry - "

"When you showed up at the Institute, I thought..." He sighed, rubbing a hand over his face again. "Bloody hell, Granger," he said hollowly.

And then she understood something, something terrible, as she replayed the events of the day from his perspective. She had wondered why he seemed so carefree and at ease despite their awkward exchange the previous night. Because she hadn't immediately set context for her appearance, he had probably assumed that she wanted this, wanted him, and had come to him to mend the frayed pieces of their chemistry. She had wondered why he could so easily imply that he wanted to shag her last night.

"I'm - shit, Draco - "

"Granger, why did you really come here?" he asked evenly.
"I was going to say..." she swallowed, her next words dropping to a mumble, "that we probably shouldn't see each other anymore."

"And then you kiss me," he finished, his voice edged in sarcasm.

"I'm sorry, you're just - so bloody distracting - "

"Distracting?" he said disbelievingly.

"Yes, you're... I mean, we - "

"Look, I know what you mean, Granger, I look at you and all I can think about is the way you... how - " He paused, cursing, looking away as he visibly got his irritation under control. "It's just - if that's the case, why are you so afraid?"

Given the reveal of his feelings, she quickly answered, "Well, it's not that I don't like doing this with you, but this has never happened to me before and... I'm not sure what to make of it all."

"You've never been attracted to someone?"

"No - I mean yes, I have - but not like this."

"Not to me," he supplied.

She gestured wildly. "Exactly. It's bloody disarming." She paused. "I don't know what to do."

They were both rational adults, and so this made sense - they would figure it out together. They could talk about this. It wasn't even that much harder than other things they had discussed. In fact, being sexually interested in someone unexpected was the least of her emotional problems, and probably the least of his as well.

"I don't know what to tell you, Granger," Draco sighed, his hands open. "But regardless of this... whatever this is," he gestured between them, "I still like talking to you."

She nodded numbly. "Me too."

"Can we... can we at least be friendly? Try to be friends?"

"Of course, Draco. Of course."

"I can't make you any less afraid of me, or of what I might do... and I can't promise that I'm a good person. I'm really not," he admitted. "But how about we say, leave it, for now, and just try to be friends. See what happens."

"Leave it, yes," Hermione murmured.

"That means you have to keep your hands to yourself," he said teasingly, raising an eyebrow at her. "And I'll keep my claws away too."

She snorted, thankful for his odd self-deprecation and attempt at humor.

He gestured toward the screen, and Hermione carefully stepped around him and opened it, exiting the loo swiftly.

Though she had numbly regretted the tense exchange while it was happening, now that she was back on the cushions in their section she actually felt much better about coming to talk to him. It was
inevitable that something had to happen, and whatever happened would be hard, no question. At least now she knew where they stood, and she didn't feel like she had something to hide every time she talked to him.

While Draco sat, taking up his cup of water, Hermione busied herself with the coals, levitating them with her wand and tapping them on the top plate of the hookah to get the ash off. Concentrating on a menial task like this helped her calm down from the cringeworthy conversation she'd just had, and by the time she put away her wand she felt marginally better.

"How is your work going otherwise?" she asked Draco.

He laughed at this, his chuckles turned into light coughs as he blew out the smoke in his mouth. "Fine, Granger. Fine."

Her attempt at conversation a failure, they smoked in silence, Hermione doing it mostly to calm her continued nervousness and focus on something other than what had just happened.

The sun was starting to fall, the sky a vibrant orange, and she felt as though she had lost a significant portion of the day, despite knowing that it was still early in London.

"Merlin, Granger, I thought I was a mood killer," Draco said finally, a smirk turning up his lips.

"Nope, that job has been deferred to me today," she responded heavily.

Draco slapped his palms on his thighs with a resigned sigh. "Let me take you back to the embassy."

They didn't speak on the way out of the lounge and down the street, until Draco had found a suitable alley to apparate in.

Once they touched down in the embassy, she turned to face him properly.

"I'm so sorry about today," she began. "I'd trip over my own feet trying to figure out how to stand."

"Don't worry. My standards for our interactions are fairly low still," he replied cheekily. "Half the time I'm waiting for you to jinx me."

"Well that's not good."

"And apparently you are as well," he continued.

She smiled. "Not true. Forgetting the past is just... hard."

"Talking is hard. Believe me, I get it. But we don't have to make it harder than it needs to be."

"So we're still doing the thing?" she asked. "Where we try to be honest?"

"I feel like we get into trouble when we don't do that," he said.

He was still looking at her intently, and she was relieved to see that he didn't seem irritated at her anymore for botching their interaction. His calm exterior was actually somewhat alarming given how angry she knew he could get. That said, his expression was somewhat more guarded than it had been earlier in the day, and Hermione was still disappointed that she had been the one to cause this.

Determined to make them both feel better, she stepped forward and hugged him, and in the stiffness of his body, the unrelenting sharpness of his angles, she could tell that he wasn't used to giving - or receiving - hugs. It made her heart twinge. His arms came around her shoulders tentatively.
She tried to keep the hug chaste, and she could tell he was trying as well - but her nipples were hard against his chest and she inexplicably lingered in his embrace for a moment too long, and then it wasn't chaste anymore, not when the sensation of her nipples grazing her shirt sent another twinge of delight through her, not when she sighed involuntarily, not when she had to pull back just from the sheer embarrassment of her body's reaction.

If Draco noticed the indecent contact he gave no sign.

He took a step back and gestured to the waiting fireplace, and Hermione mutely grabbed a fistful of floo powder, walking into the fireplace and mumbling "British Ministry of Magic," like it was the last place she wanted to go.

And as she felt the familiar sensation of lukewarm flames engulfing her, she was for once not looking forward to being back in London, and thus in the confines of her life.
The next day, Hermione regretted her decision to remain friends with Draco very much.

She thought she was doing the logical thing, the *right* thing by agreeing that they should be friends, but now she wondered what she had been thinking.

Going outside always presented an opportunity for her to run into him, and when she had attended a lecture for alchemic stabilization on Saturday evening she had been looking around constantly, checking to see if he was there.

She was nervous because didn't want to push the interaction, encourage more situations where they were together, where they would have to resist temptation. And even though she hadn't tried to meet up with him at all, running into him unawares seemed unwise.

That should have kept him out of her thoughts really, since it wasn't like she didn't have a lot of work to do, but unfortunately if she wasn't actively engaging with something else her mind would drift, and then she'd have to shake herself back to reality, flushed and dizzy and... oh dear, turned on. Always turned on, to the point where she couldn't even wear pants comfortably without feeling like she was sweating through them, like the people around her could tell that she was hopelessly untouched.

The only way she could effectively clear her mind was to work on her manuscript, which should have been a safe endeavor, until Monday morning when she had decided to owl Draco with a specific question about structuring her paper. She had rationalized this by also owling Jasmine with a different question, and had justified her letters as "research".

When she had seen his owl waiting patiently on her desk not even two hours later - such a regal, easily recognizable creature - she was utterly disoriented by the sudden buzz of excitement that coursed through her. She had torn open the letter and read it quickly, barely registering his practical suggestions.

*Granger,*

*You can imagine my surprise to receive a letter from you in the early hours this morning... as I was not surprised at all. Who works on research before work? I hope you at least don't have any meetings today.*

*As for your question, I've found that it is okay to reuse examples that fit within the context of your experiment. The fewer declarations that other researchers can poke holes in, the better - greater understanding can come post-investment, and I think the editors, and other researchers, understand that.*

*You don't have to have everything buttoned up in this particular paper - and anyway, it's always better to leave them wanting more.*

*M*

The owl had not left yet, perhaps because it was told to wait for a reply, and Hermione quickly reread the letter, puzzling through the pros and cons of his suggestion and grabbing a fresh sheet of parchment to begin to articulate a response.

It had started innocently - she had asked a question and he had answered it, and in her response she
hadn't really given him an easy way to reply. 

But the next day she found herself stuck again as she tried to replicate the alchemic circles at small scale, and had owled him again for advice, an easier method than researching how to do it on her own. Draco had responded with clear and helpful direction. 

This was how she started a steady letter chain with Draco Malfoy. And thus, how she had made her situation worse. 

She was careful not to send him too much of the theory, keeping her questions and snippets fairly broad, but he didn't seem to mind and didn't press her for more information. It wasn't necessarily that she didn't trust him, but she felt that it was a smart thing to do until she knew him better. 

It was rather Slytherin of her, really. 

His correspondence actually amused her greatly, the way she could practically hear his drawl in his playful script. Sometimes she would read his letters and laugh to herself as she took down his suggestions, and then she would turn herself inside out trying to say something interesting in return. 

And after a while she could forget the fantasies about him, and resume concentrating on her work, or her research, but then given the slightest provocation - a mild innuendo in his letter, a light graze from a stranger, undressing at the end of the day - she would imagine the pleasure that he could give her, envision moving with him and gasping and pulling, and his skin and strength as he gripped her - 

It was maddening. 

With Draco's suggestions and steady attention, Hermione was able to finish her manuscript a lot more quickly than she had anticipated. Regardless of whether or not she got published, she had made an important innovation that, given iteration, could be beneficial to the academic community. And either way, it was important that she share her findings. 

Unfortunately she didn't have as much time to study thought magic, her true goal. She had already done a fair amount of research on occlumency and legilimency, as they were the most understood forms of thought magic, but she hadn't gotten as far on other forms, such as soul telepathy or intention. And as her boss trusted her with more projects, she got further away from the possibility of changing careers. 

She could sense that Richard was going to step down soon; he was already frequently on holiday and when he wasn't, he was merely figureheading projects, acting as a final stamp of approval. He was basically making himself useless and passing his responsibilities to other team members so that when he retired, the transition to a new head would be smooth. 

By Friday morning Hermione had put the finishing touches on her manuscript, but had reached a bit of a wall since she still hadn't done research on which journals to send it to. This was how, after rolling and unrolling her parchment several times in her indecision, she found herself stepping into the disused department store cloaking St. Mungo's from the muggle world and making her way into the hospital, forty minutes before her therapy appointment. 

It had been a week since the ball, since she had kissed Draco on the terrace, since they had decided to "leave it" and not pursue anything with each other. She was nervous to be in the same space as Draco once again, as she had been thinking about him for the better part of the week, but nevertheless she wanted to receive any final feedback he had in person and talk about what journals to send her research to. 

She knew vaguely that since letters were curated ways to have conversations, it had been easy to avoid a communication mishap like the one they'd had the last time they'd seen each other. Also, given time to think about his answers Draco was likely more charming on paper than he was in person, but it didn't stop her from thinking about his responses with a touch of a smile.

As she came upon the receptionist desk, the man behind the counter looked up from his magazine, fixing Hermione with an expression like she'd just interrupted something very important.

"I'm Hermione Granger, I'd like to see Healer Malfoy," Hermione requested quietly, leaning in. The receptionist nodded and scrawled a quick memo, folded it, and set it aflight. Hermione watched the little memo zip around the corner.

"He'll receive the summons in just a few minutes," the receptionist murmured, his lips barely moving, and went back to his *Witch Weekly*.

Hermione sat down on the provided chairs gingerly, her breath shallow as she waited.

She had normalized the idea of them being friends, and had calmed down from the point of regret she'd been at earlier in the week, but the anticipation of being bodily close to him was still making her nervous. She hadn't been very professional in her fantasies about him, so the medical setting of the hospital wasn't enough to make her forget those delectable thoughts.

Finally the sound of sharp footsteps coming down the hall got her attention and she looked up as Draco came to stand in front of her.

"Granger," he said. "It's nice to see you."

Urgh, she hated how he made her heart do that.

"Yes, I figured I should stop by before therapy," she answered, standing and shouldering her bag. "I wanted to show you the final manuscript."

"Perfect timing actually, I'm on break. Mind if I eat while we talk?"

"Not at all."

"Great. Follow me."

She followed him through the bright, winding corridors, sidestepping rushing healers and patients with odd maladies. The unburdened healers they passed greeted Draco warmly, their eyes flicking to Hermione in interest. She tried to keep her expression neutral.

They came at last to the healer's private area for this floor, which was a lot more warmly lit and homey, with leather couches and wooden tables that sported open research journals and half-finished cups of coffee.

He showed her into a smaller, book-lined office within, leaving the door open after she entered.

"We shouldn't be disturbed in here," he said. "Can I get you some tea?"

"No, thank you," she replied, eyeing the apple he was picking up. "Is that all you're eating?"

"Yes, for now," he said, a light touch of amusement on his mouth. "Unless you want to go out?"

She shook her head mutely, suddenly nervous again, and he chuckled at the expression on her face. "Relax, Granger. I haven't enough time anyway."
Hermione paused in opening her parchment case. "I can come back if -"

"Nonsense. You need to get this sent out if you're going to beat Le Jandre to the discovery, don't you?"

She narrowed her eyes at his feigned innocence, but handed him the parchment regardless. "Is helping me do this some ploy to take a shot at Le Jandre?"

Draco scoffed, unrolling the parchment and dropping into the sturdy armchair at the head of the room. "It's all a game, Granger. Even research. None of it truly comes down to who is the brightest or whose project has the most integrity. Usually it comes down to who you know, how well you're funded, and how lucky you are."

"Excellent," Hermione muttered.

"Don't worry, being exceptionally bright is a leg-up. Besides, the game is all part of it. It's strategy - which I know you could enjoy," he said, beginning to read.

Hermione didn't know how to answer, so she let him sink into the rhythm of reading as she absently looked around the little office. She immediately noticed the bookshelf on her left and tilted her head to read the spines of the books there.

She had considered studying healing more than a few times, as there were many magical techniques that were specifically used by healers. She was a fan of studying any and all magical methods, and so healing magic presented the biggest and most interesting challenge.

What she found however is that it was hard for her to be objective when faced with difficult healing decisions - the kind of decisions that made one choose the future of a patient, choose between a lifetime of chronic pain or death, between regular growth amputation appointments or growth-limiting curses with nasty side-effects. She couldn't force a certain kind of life on someone, couldn't make that decision for them, and certainly couldn't stomach people's cries of pain under her care.

Maybe someone like Draco was well suited for healing. He cared deeply about his patients - she could tell by how seriously he took his work, the way his voice curved when he talked about helping people - but he wasn't going to fawn over them and tear himself apart trying to choose what to do. He would do what he thought was the best thing - based on years of healing training - and whatever happened, happened.

Hermione looked over at Draco as he scanned her manuscript, taking occasional bites of his apple and rolling the end of the parchment carefully as he got further down.

She had just plucked a journal from the bookshelf and began flipping through it when Draco made a short humming noise and rolled the last of the parchment.

"This is ironclad," he said, handing the parchment roll back to her. "Absolutely perfect. I had a suspicion that you are a good writer."

Hermione shrugged, blushing as she fit the manuscript back inside her case.

"I honestly don't have any more suggestions. But based on your theory section, I feel like you've broadened the scope of your project, and thus have more options for journals. I hope you don't mind, but I've already reached out to a few on your behalf, to attempt to fast-track your manuscript."

"Oh, Draco, that's wonderful! Thank you!"
"Don't thank me, it was honestly just an opportunity for me to remind them of my own work," he said, smirking. "But hopefully it shouldn't take more than a few months for you to see your manuscript in print."

"So soon," she breathed.

"Yes," he said conversationally. "By summer you could be raking in a grant."

A grant... to lead her own research project... Hermione had so many feelings of joy and excitement that she didn't know what to do with. She felt like hugging him, like doing something, it was all just too much.

"I - I don't know what to say, this is incredible - "

He looked at her with his eyebrows raised, as though he was waiting for her to burst. "Hey, now, it's really nothing."

"But... why?" she questioned, at first to herself, and then to him with more gumption, "Why, Draco? Why this?"

He sighed, shaking his head at her. "Look - you may not believe this, but your research is fascinating. When I said it could really help healers, I meant it. I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it, trust me, we wouldn't even be here talking about it."

"Alright," Hermione said, her hand raised. "Let's say I believe you - why is this important to you? Why do you care?"

"We need this kind of thinking now, and the sooner you can get this out there, the sooner you and other researchers or healers can refine the method, make it even more precise, less time consuming, and - oh, cost less resources - could you imagine?" He crossed his arms, his apple core dangling from his hand. "This could be the foundation of a new magical technique."

The excitement buzzing in her veins twinged a bit with a different buzzing - the pressure of a large discovery, the anxiety of being at the core of something big.

"Hey - don't look scared now, Goody Gryffindor."

Hermione took a deep breath and fixed him with a look. "I hate that nickname."

He shrugged lightly, not looking the least bit sorry as he vanished his apple core with a wave of his hand and sat up. "Besides, this still has to make it past the editors. I reached out to The Alchemist, Journal of Herbology and Microbotany, and Healer's Digest already, but the process is the same, just expedited."

"Okay, okay," Hermione said, rustling in her satchel for her notebook and taking it out. Draco swiftly offered an ink-quill.

"Since your paper talks a lot about the theory, you could also try Alchemist Ego, and even The Nature of Progress. Also, I'd try all the herbological journals, as well as ones like Journal of Beast Magizoology - they might be interested in the use of kelpie and demiguise blood, and how you stabilized the shapeshifting cells."

Hermione nodded, scratching quickly with the quill as she kept up with his suggestions.

"And what was the one... oh, Journal of Microtransfiguration and Microtransmutation. Right up
their alley. And don't forget the big one - Healer Daily. That's where the galleons are," he finished.

"Got it," Hermione said, recording the last thoughts and closing her notebook.

After she put it away, she looked up to discover that he was watching her with that calm look that always made her tense. She pulled her strap further up on her shoulder.

"I can't believe I got this far - a month ago I was just fooling around, transmuting mandrakes with kelpie blood and making such a mess..."

"I can believe it," Draco mused. "You were doing transmutations at six o'clock in the morning earlier this week."

Hermione shrugged, gesturing weakly, but knew there was nothing she could say to justify her intensity, so she kept quiet.

"I think we should celebrate. There's an afterparty for the quidditch game tonight - I know you aren't into quidditch, but -"

"Oh, the England versus Bulgaria afterparty?"

He nodded, surprised. "Yes. If England wins it will be at the Leaky Cauldron, but if Bulgaria wins it will be in Varna at the waterfront bar. Personally, I'd rather be on the beach, but," he raised his hands, "I don't want to be called unpatriotic, so..."

"Yes, Varna is beautiful, especially at night," Hermione affirmed. "Although, I'm not sure how warm it will be right now."

"What brought you to Bulgaria?" he asked. "You don't look like the type to own a vacation home."

Hermione suddenly felt like a suspect revealing that they knew too much about a crime scene, and she fiddled with the edge of her satchel.


Of course he knew, everyone knew; it had been all over the Prophet at the time, and Witch Weekly had featured an article about them almost every issue both while they were together and even after they had broken up. It had taken months before Hermione didn't have the occasional witch giving her the side-eye.

"I could see if Ariana could procure another invite -"

"Ginny invited me already, perhaps I could join her?" she put forth quickly.

Draco cocked his head to the side, the way he did when he was considering something that they weren't really talking about, and Hermione wished she could open her mouth and put the words back in, because she had just opened the door again for them to hang out in a loud, crowded space overflowing with alcohol and she already knew how that was going to end.

"Wait," Hermione groaned, her hand covering her eyes. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't."

"Because... Krum might be there?"

"No, I can ignore him, that's fine, I just feel like... I don't know..." She uncovered her eyes and leveled him with a serious look. "I feel like we shouldn't drink together."
He crossed his arms again, leaning back in the chair as he considered this. "Because of last time?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah."

There was a few seconds of silence before he continued, "You can trust me, that I won't try anything."

"No, it's not that... it's not you I don't trust. It's the situation."

Yes... she didn't think he would make her uncomfortable, would push her to do anything she didn't want - she knew him well enough to understand this - but even given the best intentions on both sides, once there was alcohol involved there was no telling what would happen.

Initially they had agreed to 'no touching', which seemed like the most obvious rule, but she knew now that they would have to construct even more boundaries between them as they went, and potentially figure out what they could and couldn't do through trial and error.

So they couldn't touch each other, couldn't drink together... and hanging out at night seemed questionable... in fact, even being alone with him generally seemed like a bad idea -

Hermione stopped, her eyes narrowing. The whole business suddenly seemed positively exhausting.

Were they really about to put that much effort into maintaining a facsimile of a friendship? The only other friendship she had that had rules like that was... her friendship with Ron. But the boundaries between her and Ron were there for vastly different reasons... so why was she treating them the same way?

"Perhaps you should just take a day off then?" Draco asked softly. "You know, to treat yourself."

Hermione shook her head, her resolve strengthening. "No... you know what? It's fine, it will be fine. We should celebrate tonight - I'll owl Ginny."

She stared into his eyes, bright and calm behind his dark frames; it was a thin line they were walking, agreeing to meet up after-hours to "celebrate", and Hermione knew the risk.

In fact, she already felt like if her goal was to not get involved with him, this was a mistake. That given the slightest nudge tonight she would simply fall into him, fall for him.

And there was a slight uncertainty in his expression as well, and she could tell that he was questioning his suggestion, probably thinking the same thing.

The fact was, they both knew what the smart solution was, how they could maintain the shaky balance they had established the last time they had seen each other in person. But there was nothing exciting about that.

If she thought about it, she already knew where the safe road would lead: they would see each other sometimes, and eventually the sparks would die down, and they would both continue the trajectory of their lives. And it was certainly possible that they would still drift apart if they spent time together in questionable situations, or that they would get involved, rub each other raw, and eventually destroy each other. But it was also possible that everything would be okay - no, better than okay - extraordinary.

Her curiosity was starting to overpower her fear.
Maybe she should push this boundary - after all, how could they maintain a true friendship if she couldn't even hang out with him outside of work environments, if she didn't even feel good about being alone with him?

"I'll be there with Ariana, the only other serious quidditch fan I know of... " Draco said, almost to himself, "And if your friends are there..."

"Yes, yes, it should be fun," she agreed, deftly avoiding what they were really talking about, "and we'll do a proper send-off shot for the research."

"I'm doing a twelve-hour shift tomorrow night, so maybe no shots," he said, his playful smirk returning.

"I finally have a weekend where I'm not working, so... I might still do it."

"Be my guest, Granger," he said, standing up and coming around the desk. "But I do not envy the hangover you'll have if you take shots with Ariana."

There was a soft rap at the doorframe - goodness, Hermione hadn't even heard anyone enter the other room - and the pair turned to the man standing in the doorway.

"Draco," the man said, "Madame Lombardi is asking for you. Room 192A."

"Another bite from the pet pixie?"

The healer nodded ominously, and Draco sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Alright, be there in a minute."

After the healer departed, Draco rolled down his sleeves and shouldered on his healer robe; Hermione watched him do this curiously. It was mildly fascinating watching him do basic tasks, and she observed the way he adjusted his robe by pulling the front collar down, how he pushed his glasses up from the bridge, and the little twirl he did with his wand before he deposited it into his inside wand pocket.

"Here, let me walk you out," Draco said, snapping Hermione out of her trance.

They exited the lounge and strolled back down the pristine corridors of the hospital, their footsteps echoing off the polished tiles. When they reached the reception area, where Draco had retrieved Hermione from, he stopped and turned to her with a note of finality.

"Until tonight, Granger," he said, just loud enough that the receptionist looked up curiously.

"Right, see you," Hermione answered, tucking a curl behind her ear.

Hermione watched him disappear around the corner and sighed, shrugging her bag further up on her shoulder and walking the opposite direction towards the lifts.

After a rather intense therapy session - she'd finally talked to her therapist about Draco, and that had lead to thirty minutes of probing conversation about what had lead up to their kiss last week - Hermione trudged back to her office to send her manuscript, finish up her work, and close out her day. Therapy days were difficult enough already, as she was always emotionally useless afterward, but on top of that her evening was only just beginning.

Hermione closed and locked her drawers, then neatly shuffled her manuscripts together; as she was sending out more than a dozen copies, the stack was rather tall, and swayed to the side when she was
Hermione held her hand on top of the perilous tower and drew a fresh sheet of parchment towards her to write a short letter to Ginny. When she was done, she quickly exited her office and heaved the stack of letters onto her secretary’s desk.

"These are a little heavy, they may need to go through the parcel system," she began, indicating the tower. "This little one is for Mrs. Weasley-Potter, can you send that right away?" The girl nodded cheerily, taking the note and whistling for the office owl.

"Thank you; have a great night Celes."

"You too, Miss Granger."

And with that, Hermione made her way to the lifts, breathing a sigh of relief and trying not to think about the night ahead.

Ginny,

I’ll take you up on that party invitation.

Hermione

By the time Hermione made it inside her flat she found herself completely exhausted and unprepared for the evening’s festivities.

An owl was waiting at her window; Ginny had replied to her earlier note with the special ticket and the address - Bulgaria must have won, as it was at the bar in Varna - and Hermione gave the owl a treat and tossed the ticket onto her bed.

She sighed, looking down at the ticket and trying to reorient her thoughts.

In therapy today, her therapist had made her evaluate not only why she was so nervous around Draco all the time, but also why she had such difficulty letting go of all the other things she was feeling about him and just feeling good.

The conversation had drifted from Draco to her inability to consider her own feelings, as usual, but it had been different this time, as her therapist had uncovered just how far this sentiment extended. It wasn’t just with her past relationships, or with her work, it was how she engaged with the handsome blond as well.

Hermione hadn’t really thought of her situation with Malfoy this way before, and breaking it apart in this new manner made her feel better about going out with him tonight. Her feeling of fatigue at the prospect of orchestrating rules between them had been a good instinct in retrospect, given all that she had discussed with her therapist. The verdict there had basically been that it was okay to make mistakes, and okay to live in the moment without rigorous testing and analysis. She had already learned that lesson in relation to her work - how it was important to balance the stress with relaxation and new experiences - and now it seemed she needed to apply that elsewhere.

Hermione sighed and stripped off her work clothes slowly as she discarded those thoughts and concentrated on determining what to wear tonight; it would be windy by the water, so she would need to wear layers, and potentially something that was good for walking in the sand...
Thinking through logical outfit choices was somewhat calming, and by the time she had laid out a simple ensemble on her bed, sliding her boots under it to evaluate the look, she was actually starting to get a little excited about hanging out with Ginny. She felt constantly trapped by her job, even though she got to travel frequently, so being able to travel somewhere for an event that had nothing to do with equality or fundraising - or if she was being honest, research also - was a nice change. She wasn't particularly interested in quidditch, but usually the quidditch parties were a great time, as she enjoyed being around other passionate individuals, even if she wasn't crazy about the same thing.

There was no group quite as impassioned as quidditch fans, and she fully expected there to be dancing, singing, heavy drinking, and other debauchery happening around her. It made her feel like finishing her unexpected manuscript was really something to celebrate, as she could secretly latch onto the celebratory spirit of the other folks in the room.

Unless Viktor ruined it somehow. But if she avoided him, that shouldn't be a problem.

With her outfit solidified, Hermione rifled through her delicates and consciously pressed down nervousness as she pulled out the only bra-panty set she owned, a set that made her feel slightly more confident and assured when she wore it, like a small suit of armor hidden under her clothes. She didn't want to think on this too much, as there were other practical reasons for wearing it that she didn't want to dwell on, so she pulled on her undergarments and the rest of her clothing quickly.

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*England versus Bulgaria Official Afterparty*

**Vtori Shans Waterfront Bar, Varna, Bulgaria**

**May 10th**

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The bar had closed the incoming floo, probably because the event was somewhat private, and so once Hermione flooed from her apartment building to the English transportation hub in downtown London, and then cross-flooed to the Bulgarian network hub in Sofia, she had to floo to a community fireplace in the market district. Given better planning she would have registered a portkey ahead of time, but it was a last minute decision for her to go.

Standing in a line for the international fireplaces for fifteen minutes gave her an opportunity to read, and she used this to calm herself and focus her mind on her academic pursuits.

From the Varna Market fireplace - a fireplace she had taken often to visit Viktor a lifetime ago - it was a short walk to the waterfront bar. She could hear the chatter and laughing of quidditch enthusiasts already as she walked up the brick street quickly. The sun was falling into the sea, and tiny twinkling lights were lining the streets, casting a glow over the victorian-style buildings.

She already knew the way there, as this had been - well, it probably still was - Viktor's favorite bar. They had frequently met there for drinks while they had been dating, before Viktor had been spoiled by his fame, before they had fallen apart, before he had damaged their relationship beyond mendability.

Hermione shook off thoughts of the past as she joined the queue of people standing outside the bar, clutching her ticket.

She looked around, wondering if Draco would also be in the line or if he was already inside, or if he hadn't arrived yet at all. How he had managed to get on the guest list for this party was beyond her.
Actually, now that she thought of it, Ariana had probably swung that with her connections down in the Department of Magical Games and Sports.

It suddenly occurred to Hermione that both Ginny and Draco would be somewhat chaperoning her tonight, and she cringed at the potential for mishaps there. She hadn’t talked to Ginny about any of the... personal things happening in her life, as both of them had been pretty busy, and she wasn’t sure that she wanted to ruin Ginny's first night out since she got back in town with the surprises there.

This was supposed to be a safe endeavor, where the worst thing she’d have to deal with is running into Viktor, and she could drink with Ginny and her teammates and enjoy the change in scenery. But now she would be there with Draco also, and Ginny would probably see them together, and oh god, what if Viktor tried to talk to him?

No, no, she was picturing the worst-case scenario as usual; everything would be fine. She could keep them separated as much as possible, and then if worst came to worst, she could mediate any conflict between Ginny and Draco by the one thing everyone could agree on - quidditch. Hermione pictured Ariana and Ginny talking about quidditch excitedly, and smiled.

"Hermione!" Ginny called, waving at her from the front of the line and beckoning her forward.

Hermione's jumbled thoughts melted away at the recognition of her friend, and she stepped to her quickly, hugging her. "So good to see you, love."

They made their way into the bar, glancing apologetically at the people Hermione had queue-jumped, and before Hermione knew it she was seated comfortably at the bar, watching the bottles glitter and dance with light behind the barmaid as she made their cocktails. Ginny had ordered a Boggart, a drink that sported four different kinds of liquor and was strictly off-limits to Hermione - even the smell of it made her stomach clench from bad memories. She instead ordered her usual at this bar, the Shadowmare, as it was sweet and gingery from the ginger beer but dark and throat-burning from the firewhiskey.

"I'm surprised you decided to come, honestly," Ginny said, sipping her drink. "I'll try to keep the quidditch talk to a minimum."

"Nonsense," Hermione waved. "Don't worry about me, I want you to have fun with your teammates too. I may run into some friends here myself."

Ginny raised her eyebrows mockingly and Hermione swatted at her, not quite keeping the smile out of her expression.

Hermione relaxed as Ginny updated her on the status of her life; James had started talking a lot, and had discovered the word "no", much to her and Harry's exasperation. With the complex schedules both of them kept it was often that James was with Molly for more than a day at a time, which was something that Ginny felt bad about but couldn't help until the season died down towards the end of the summer. Harry was thankfully not putting himself in harm's way on a daily basis since the Dark Lord copycats had been found and imprisoned; he was mostly just helping Kingsley and Dawlish reform the Auror program to be more proactive and less reactive. Ginny briefly complained about how seriously she and Harry needed a date night.

"It might be nice to take a vacation," Hermione suggested, taking a healthy sip. "Maybe during a slow match week?"

"Yes, I was thinking of maybe Thailand, once the aqualorum epidemic dies down."
"You've always talked about visiting Iceland as well."

"Yes, that was second - I want to see the scenery there. Supposed to be incredibly beautiful."

"There are some rare minerals in the volcanic formations there, I'd love to get my hands on those for some experiments," Hermione mused.

Ginny laughed. "Maybe you should go then."

Hermione waved her hand. "I certainly don't have time. Maybe later this year."

The girls turned as a sudden round of cheers and clapping sounded, and Hermione's heart fell as she recognized the man at source of the noise.

His hair was different, buzzed very close to his head, but that jawline was unmistakeable, as were the permanent smirk lines on his cheeks.

And... oh god, it looked like Viktor was here with someone, a petite thing wearing a little business suit number, hanging off his arm like she was a bigger prize than him.

Hermione turned away with a roll of her eyes and downed her drink.

"Merlin, Hermione, you're on a mission," Ginny commented, eyeing her.

Hermione gave the girl a look and tilted her head to the side, indicating her former boyfriend and his date. Ginny's eyes narrowed as she tried to figure out what she was supposed to be looking at, and as recognition filled her eyes, her expression dropped.

"Oh great, a different one again," she sighed. "I thought hitting on me was a low point for him."

"Apparently it was a high point," Hermione grumbled.

"Oh, don't you dare sweat it, Hermione. Don't you remember what it was like, dating him?"

Oh yes, she remembered. She remembered the Witch Weekly articles especially, pointless and flowery, fawning over their tiniest interactions and making pages out of a look. It had been exhausting to spend the whole day debating with lawmakers, trying to convince them that no, muggleborns didn't need to pay more taxes to make up for their "strain" on the economy, and then come home to frivolous pieces about how much he missed her, she was so busy with work, so inattentive to her stunningly famous and handsome boyfriend. Meanwhile he was off in Portugal for a match, probably shagging every witch that so much as glanced at him.

Dating Viktor, she realized later, was mostly about closure. He was her first date, her first kiss, and some part of her needed to remember that part of her life and finish what they had started. She could never have anticipated how much his fame would eventually go to his head however; the confident, somewhat quiet boy she had liked when she was young - a boy who was just content to stroke her hair while she studied - had become a caricature of his famous self, boisterous and arrogant and spoiled.

"Here, let's refresh that," Ginny said, slapping a galleon on the bar and tapping Hermione's glass twice to the wood to refill it. Hermione raised the new drink to Ginny in thanks and took a sip.

"It was a risk, coming here," Hermione sighed, "but I knew this could happen."

Ginny nodded, patting her. "I'm glad you came out; I haven't been able to hang out since the season
"I saw your article in the *Prophet*."

"What did you think?"

"Doesn't do you justice, I'm sure."

Ginny waved, her face glowing. "I'm just happy to represent the team. I don't want to be one of those celebrity Seekers - you know, the Krum path - so I'm trying to keep a low profile. Might chase next season, honestly; I'm getting more into it."

"Who would seek for your team then?"

"Probably some fresh blood out of Hogwarts," she said. "I hear the Hufflepuff team is the one to beat the last few years."

"Who says that?"

"Angelina, of course; checking up on the talent so she can poach players as well." Ginny adjusted in her seat. "By the way, I'm sorry I wasn't at the memorial ball - match that night - but I heard it was beautiful."

Hermione sipped her cocktail as nonchalantly as she could. "Yes, it was brilliant."

Ginny pursed her lips wryly. "And... Harry told me about what happened with Ron, and we've already talked to the prick about it."

Hermione tried to ignore the sinking feeling in her gut. "How did that go?"

Ginny took a deliberate sip, swallowed, and continued, "He remembers arguing with you, but doesn't remember why. Harry thought it had something to do with the former Slytherins."

"It wasn't their fault, Ron was being awful," Hermione said immediately.

Ginny looked surprised by how quickly Hermione responded, and asked, "What did he do?"

Hermione cringed, consciously dialing back her anger at Ron in the presence of his sister. "Well, he didn't do anything, per se... he thought I shouldn't talk to them because of... you know, the War."

"That's ridiculous," Ginny glowered, "it was years ago, he knows what it was like for them - "

Hermione shrugged, sipping her drink. "I was talking to Malfoy and Zabini and he just took off."

"You were talking to *Malfoy?* Draco Malfoy?" Ginny asked incredulously. "How?"

"Uhh... well he was there, and we had been talking - "

"You *had* been talking? Since when?"

Hermione let out a heavy sigh, realizing just how little she had seen her friend recently.

"Hermione," Ginny said warningly, eyeing her, "Come on, you can tell me. What really happened? I know Ron gets belligerent sometimes, but Harry said that he was really torn up."

"I don't know, Ginny," she said guardedly. "Malfoy and I have been talking and he's been..."
pleasant. And... you know how jealous Ron gets."

Ginny nodded slowly, thinking about this. "So he assumed the worst, as usual."

"And didn't want to listen to me, as usual."

"Oh, and I bet he left you feeling like you did something wrong."

Hermione rubbed her temple, leaning on the bar. "Can we actually not talk about your brother right now? I'm getting a headache just thinking about it."

"Fine, fine," Ginny waved, brushing her heavy locks off her shoulder. "I already feel bad enough about taking you to this event instead of him, but he's been unbearable since the league tryouts. I can't wait until they publish the lists for next season."

"Do you think he made it this year?"

"He's definitely good enough now, but may have killed his chances by being such a pest to Angelina."

"Talking about your brother?" a voice suddenly chimed in, and Ginny gasped and embraced the witch eagerly.

"Oh, Hermione, this is Goldie, our previous captain - "

"I remember - nice to see you," Hermione said sincerely.

"Oh Goldie, we must get you a drink!"

"You should catch up, I'm going to find my friends," Hermione sighed, getting off her stool. "See you in a bit."

Ginny waved apologetically as she leaned into the bar, and Hermione disappeared into the fold of people around them.

She really just needed space for a minute or two as she made her way slowly through the growing crowd. She shouldn't have been so flippant about the possibility of seeing Viktor tonight, but the best she could do now was avoid him and try to find Ariana and Draco.

She didn't want to think about Viktor, expend any mental energy on him; she didn't want to dwell on someone she knew wasn't giving her any thought at all.

Avoiding the area where Viktor was being overrun with congratulations and hugs, Hermione scanned the heads around her, looking for the telltale blond hair belonging to Draco. While earlier she had felt panicked at the idea of seeing Draco tonight, now she was starting to fear what would happen if he didn't come. She would once again have put too much effort into being around him, a fact that revealed too much about how she truly felt.

Thankfully, or perhaps not, Hermione recognized the honey frames and blond fade drifting through the crowd, the dark waterfall of Ariana's hair just behind him.

Her heart jumped a little as his gaze met hers; in his eyes she could plainly see the same thought he'd had earlier, the uncertainty and calm interest, and then a private smile turned up the corner of his lips.

He squeezed through the wizards surrounding her and immediately wrapped an arm around her waist, pressing her side against him in greeting. He had presumably done this because he was
holding multiple drinks, but Hermione had still not been prepared for such a comfortable gesture, and was overwhelmed with the sensation of his body.

"I'm glad you're here, I wasn't sure you'd come," Draco said. He looked behind him and moved aside, and Ariana came at Hermione, arms outstretched, her fist clenched over a tiny glass.

"Hermione! I can't believe it's you!" she squealed.

Hermione hugged her tentatively, still unsure of what made her so interesting to the other woman. "I made it," she answered weakly.

"Draco told me all about the research you finished - congratulations!"

"Thank you, Ariana."

"You know what this means!" she said mischievously, and procured an extra shot out of nowhere, putting the little glass into Hermione's free hand. Hermione looked at the shot incredulously, wondering where the hell it had come from - had it been hovering above them?

Draco noticed the puzzled look on Hermione's face and laughed, raising his glass and prompting Ariana to do the same.

The headmistress in Hermione's head gave her a disapproving look at her current state - a drink in each hand, her dangerously handsome and untouchable "friend" in front of her.

... And before Hermione could think, she made a show of clinking Draco and Ariana's shots, downing her own, and chasing it with a sip of her cocktail. Ariana positively lost it, clapping excitedly.

"Yesssss! You deserve to relax, you worked so hard, girl!"

"Everything sort of fell into place," Hermione defended, her throat burning from the firewhiskey.

"I was thinking - once you get published, you should have a release party - you know, to get other researchers interested in your project, bring in some grants, that kind of thing."

"Ah, well, I haven't really thought that far," Hermione said anxiously, glancing at Draco, "I'm not sure what kind of study I would lead past what I've already done."

"You mentioned in one of your letters that you'd like to explore how to actually transfer and attach a transmuted limb to a real human - I know tons of healers who would love to try that," Draco commented, handing Ariana her other drink. "Myself included."

"What about your neuropsychology studies?"

"I have the same problem as you, frankly, I'm interested in everything."

"Wait," Hermione said, thinking, "if you're interested in the intersection of healing transfiguration and neuropsychology, and I'm interested in thought magic and intention... perhaps there is some overlap?"

"I mean, my goal is more psychology oriented... therapy oriented, and I thought yours was more practical - for understanding magic and that."

"Yes, but improving one's connection with magic is always the ultimate goal - therapy is important for general wellbeing, yes, but our magic is always better when we are."
"True, but... actually, now that you mention it, I wonder if thought magic has been considered for psychology or therapy."

Hermione picked up on his train of thought immediately. "Yes, interesting - could you imagine it? Using soul telepathy in therapy? Maybe even group therapy? Where it is easier to form a bond with someone, understand how they are feeling, when you yourself could feel it?"

"Or even sharing *memories* directly. I mean, everyone understands why you shouldn't do that without a pensieve, but in a therapy context it makes a lot of sense."

"Yes - I mean, my gut reaction was to say, 'no way, that's too private', but in therapy, private is sort of what you're going for, no?"

Ariana looked between them, her eyes dancing with both admiration and a sly interest. Hermione took a sip of her drink, suddenly finding Draco's gaze to be too intense.

Working together, with Draco, on a project... it sounded both incredible and dangerous.

"...Anyway, I think Ariana just wants to host a party on her estate."

Ariana perked up. "It's so beautiful, I never understand why everyone is hesitant to come out - "

"Because it's all the way across the world," Draco replied swiftly. "Doesn't it take you more than forty-five minutes to get home every day?"

"Well, yes, but they're improving the transport hub, and whenever Dirk Winston improves the portable portkey magic I will be able to go straight there from London, rather than having to transfer in Washington D.C and Dallas."

Hermione sipped her drink, not meeting her companions eyes at the mention of her former lover. "You said that your estate is on the beach," she put forth, "that sounds lovely."

"Yes, my family owns a lot of the coastal land - we're trying to give it back to the community though, we've already got enough in Mexico City."

"Very different approach than the English well-to-do," Hermione commented. Draco was silent.

"Yes, well, that's mostly me and my brothers' idea... and honestly, it's a good investment in our people. And if we can build out the coastal community, long-term we can open it up to imports and exports, stack the galleons, and then control a major trade town - compete properly with Panama and the States..."

Hermione nodded, entranced at high-stakes games played by the rich and powerful, games she knew existed but never thought about much. "How, um, did your family come to own so much land?"

"Ariana is basically Mexican royalty," Draco explained. "Why she chose to move to London is completely unknown to me."

"Why does anyone move? I was dating someone," she answered flippantly, waving the cocktail in her other hand. Hermione watched the liquid slosh dangerously.

"No way - you moved here for Travers?"

"Travers...?" Hermione asked, trying to remember where she had heard the name.

"Ireland's Keeper," Draco supplied.
"We met at a match," Ariana said heavily, pressing her glass against her cheek. "And it was all wonderful until we moved in together. It's been six months since I moved out and I'm still commuting from Mexico while my house is being remodeled."

"You have a house in London?" Hermione asked.

Ariana waved. "It's a small place in Kensington, not that I've been able to enjoy it yet - oh," Ariana stopped, her eyes fixed over Hermione's shoulder as she muttered something in Spanish. "And he's here of course."

All of the exes seemed to be coming out of the woodwork tonight. "My ex is here too," Hermione put forth. "If you need help with that, just let me know."

Ariana gave her a thankful look and raised her glass. "To exes of quidditch players," she sing-songed.

Hermione felt odd clinking glasses over that title, a title she didn't want herself or Ariana for that matter to ascribe to, but she touched glasses with the other witch and sipped her cocktail regardless. The standing room in the bar was getting rather tight so she was forced to stand very close to her companions as she ignored the people brushing against her back.

"Moving here is probably the best thing that came of that. Not that I mind that much, England is very nice. Except for the weather. Hate that part," she commented.

"You didn't have to stay though."

"And leave you and Blaise here all alone? I would never! Besides, I can't do much financial analysis for the quidditch league over there. The Mexican team is terrible, they never qualify."

"They did in '94," Draco reminded.

She snorted. " Didn't make it to the World Cup though. All the good teams are in this hemisphere the last few years."

"What about Argentina?"

"Yes, well, without Carrizo catching the snitch every game their Chasers would be."

"Aaaand you lost me," Hermione said mildly.

Ariana giggled and lightly tapped the underside of Hermione's glass to get her to drink. "Suck another one of those down and it will all make sense, I promise."

"No, it makes sense, I just..."

"Don't give a shit?"

Hermione nodded sheepishly.

"That's okay, I still love you," Ariana said playfully, looking over Hermione's shoulder again.

"I know you're spying on him, stop it," Draco chided.

"I'm not spying, just hoping to snag another player or two," Ariana answered cheekily, elbowing Draco. He moved away deftly, sipping his cocktail.
"I wouldn't touch the Bulgarian team," Hermione said seriously. "You don't know what their parties are like."

"Oh heavens no, I've read Witch Weekly. I mean from England - oh, is that Muran?! I have to say hi!" she exclaimed, gathering her purse and darting away.

Ariana all but apparated to the other side of the bar, and Hermione brought her drink to her lips, glancing up at Draco.

That had been the wrong decision, Hermione determined vaguely, as his eyes softened and she found that she was quite at a loss for what to say.

Her heart skipped a beat as she could sense the silence becoming heavy... her awareness of the many bodies around them diminished as she found herself caught in the vortex of his gaze; as her breath shallowed, and she consciously made herself breathe in and out, he suddenly seemed much closer to her than he had been before.

*Be strong. Don't fall. Be strong...*

But it was significantly harder here, with the crowd practically shoving them together, the alcohol starting to work on her mind, and the memory of what had happened last time they had stood together like this, each a little tipsy.

Hermione's hand tightened around her glass, for she needed *something* to do, and needed to *not* think about what she'd rather be taking hold of in this crowded bar.

"I should go get her," Draco said finally, "before some poor sod gets caught in her grip."

*And before you get caught in mine,* the naughty part of Hermione's mind said.

Hermione let out a heavy breath once he departed, running a hand over her curls and trying to sort herself out. As she maneuvered back to the wooden bar, mostly to have something solid and stable to lean on, she let her imagination roll into the wonderful sensations she'd been trying to ignore. With Draco out of her direct line of sight, she felt safer indulging in thoughts of how good it felt to be near him, how sweet his alcoholic kiss would be.

Feeling wanted, even if it was somewhat forbidden, felt very nice. And it wasn't just that he wanted her, but the *way* he did, where it was both a physical recognition of who she was now and a distant fantasy of who she had been when they were younger.

She didn't like to feel wanted in that *other* way, the way Ron made her feel, where she was very conscious of keeping him at arms length at all times, conscious of having to reinforce so many barriers between them. Barriers that honestly made it hard for them to maintain a decent friendship - not allowing him in her flat, only hanging out with him in the presence of other friends, never hugging him for more than a few seconds.

She didn't want that kind of friendship with Draco, and so her decision to do away with the barriers she had started to conjure actually felt like the right move.

She also didn't want to feel wanted in the way Viktor had made her feel, like she was some kind of unsoiled, pure and dainty goddess that he could treat like an innocent child romantically, but then sexually she was reduced to an apparatus designed to give him orgasms. She had taken some amount of pleasure in it at the time, but it had been a chore to get him to have sex with her in a way that wasn't centered around what he wanted, and in retrospect the sex could have been so much better.
A man leaned against the bar next to her and ordered a pint, and Hermione shifted to make room, watching the ice cubes tumble around at the bottom of her glass as she twirled it on the polished wood.

She couldn't help but feel like she was in her sexual prime now; she had learned what not to do from both Ron and Viktor, and had really opened up, loosened up, after going to therapy. She had learned to accept things that she had previously thought were "immoral" or "inappropriate", and had learned that it was okay to feel good, okay to enjoy sex and be an active participant in it, okay to ask for what she wanted. As a result, her sexual relationship with her other long-term partners had been significantly more comfortable for her.

Not fiery though, not like the way she was imagining her and Draco together.

Maybe it was because she detected some anger issues buried deep within him, or that she sometimes had the urge to close her hand around his throat - violently, perhaps, but mostly sexually - or maybe it was because she wanted to stop being so comfortable and nice with him for a little bit, just enough for him to grab her, spread her open, and give it to her like he meant it -

Oh dear, that had been a bit much, Hermione thought as her core clenched.

He had been in the corner of her thoughts for weeks, and she'd been building him up constantly; it had almost become a game to her, trying to keep him out of her head. It was really hard to let him go, just be patient and not overthink it all. Her therapist's suggestion once again played in her mind, and Hermione looked over to where Ariana had gone.

She watched Draco and Ariana talk to the players on the other side of the bar, leaning and sipping her cocktail thoughtfully. Watching him voyeuristically had a certain pleasure to it; studying the way he always shook his glass after he took a sip, the way he smirked when he found something ridiculous but was trying to be cordial, the way he wet his lips before he smiled.

It was humanizing to see him perform small actions like that; after all, he was trying to make his way through the world, just like she was. He wasn't someone to hold up to a magnifying glass or put on a pedestal, he wasn't a fixture growing to godlike proportions in her memories because of how awful he'd been a decade ago or conversely, how attractive she found him now; he was as just a man, a boy, who was sipping his drink and nodding as Ariana entertained her new friends.

He was just... Draco. There was nothing to over-analyze.

After a moment she realized that the man next to her was looking at her, and she turned her head, grounding her thoughts.

The man smiled at her and she smiled back, her eyes lingering because he looked vaguely familiar.

"Darian," he said in a thick accent, extending his hand. "You don't look like a quidditch player."

Normally she wouldn't give a stranger any room to speak to her, but he had kind eyes and a winning smile, and she was supposed to be living in the moment a little tonight. She shook his hand firmly.

"I'm not a player, my friend is one," she said. "She's the Seeker for the Harpies."

"Oh, yes, I've seen them play - very fierce."

Hermione gestured at his red and gold shirt, and said, "I'm assuming you're a fan of Bulgaria?"

"I'm on the team. Chaser," he said.
Hermione's heart fell.

"Hey Krum, isn't that your girl?" someone said behind him, and Hermione blanched as a man she definitely recognized - Antony, one of the Beaters - leaned on Darian's shoulder. "were you trying to talk to her, you goof?"

Viktor was suddenly there, his head appearing between the other men's. He locked eyes with her, and Hermione defiantly looked away.

"Viktor's girl? But isn't that Joselin?" Darian asked his teammate.

"No, no, this is Harmony. She was his a while ago, you wouldn't know - "

"Oh! You're the one he talks about," Darian said, suddenly excited. "Always comparing them to you, even now!"

That was apparently enough for Viktor, as he clapped his teammates on their shoulders and gripped them, irritation creasing his brow. "Thanks, you're good friends," Viktor growled.

His mates grinned and patted him on the back as they moved, giving Viktor space to lean on the bar next to her. Hermione backed up as much as she could, which was only a step, and looked around her, trying to find one of her friends as Viktor took a slow sip of his drink, eyes fixed on her.

"Do not listen to them," he said. "They're idiots."

Resigned to having to talk to him, she settled, deciding to ignore the easy comeback. Instead, she said flatly, "I heard you won."

Viktor gestured around at the bar. "Yes, I did."

Hermione rolled her eyes as a mild annoyance settled in her gut; he was so hopelessly arrogant sometimes it was almost laughable.

She was not an especially combative person, but the last time they had spoken had been no more pleasant than their explosive breakup, and the years since hadn't quite diminished her anger at him. She had seen him since but it had been far removed from a casual setting like this - far away at a quidditch event with Ginny, fundraisers where he was throwing galleons around, or even Weasley family reunions, where he mostly just talked to Fleur and Bill.

She looked across the bar at where Draco and Ariana were standing, and she thought she saw Draco glance at her, but she couldn't be sure.

It suddenly struck her that she actually felt more anger, more disgust, and if she was being honest, more distrust toward Viktor than she thought she'd felt toward Draco. Sure, there were moments where she could feel a deep ire, like an old wound flaring up when she was with Draco, but it was nothing compared to the active rage she felt towards Viktor, or even towards Ron. She was like a cat that had been bitten not once but twice, and this had made her wary of complicated men who gave her a lot of mixed feelings.

In Viktor's eyes she had been the same outspoken, bookish girl that he'd asked to the Yule Ball all those years ago, and it had taken more than a year of dating him before she'd realized that being his girlfriend was a very specific role he had chosen for a girl like her, and that all of the wild things he did with his team or other women were out of her territory.

A lot had changed for her since then though, as that was when she had started taking on more
diplomatic and humanitarian work, and she'd started to really travel and enjoy life. Viktor had been the last person to be with her in her old shell, the bushy-haired girl with the wrinkled robes and S.P.E.W. badges at the ready.

The Bulgarian team was mostly standing around them, sipping their pints and occasionally slapping Viktor on the head or shoulder. Hermione looked behind them, wondering where Ginny had gone to.

"Looking for someone?" Viktor asked.

"Why, is it not obvious that I don't want to talk to you?"

He smirked, looking around mildly at his teammates and fans around them. "Don't worry Harmony, I'm on my best behavior tonight."

Hermione scoffed quietly, covering it behind her glass.

"How have you been?" he asked.

"Fantastic," she remarked, wishing she didn't sound so sarcastic, because it was true - compared to when he knew her, she was doing much better.

He was still looking at her intently, clearly trying to have a larger conversation than she was allowing with her clipped answers. He sighed, throwing back the rest of his drink - it looked like he still did straight vodka as his go-to - and set down his empty glass solidly.

"Vell, I hope you know that you vere the most understanding woman I have ever been with," he said.

Hermione squinted at him, wondering what his angle was. "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

He laughed at that, his eyes roaming her features, and he took in her hair, her eyes, her lips, and even what she was wearing. His appraisal was not lost on her, and she looked away determinedly, her skin crawling.

Hermione shook her head, her next breath coming out as an angry huff - this was not how she wanted to spend her night, making clipped conversation with him, tressing up old feelings.

She looked back at him as she could suddenly feel his hand on her chin; he was staring at her thoughtfully, his eyes crinkled, as though he was remembering something good.

"You vere always so beautiful when you vere angry," he murmured, tracing a finger over her jaw.

Hermione shuddered away from his touch, glaring at him incredulously. "You should get back to your date," she replied shortly.

"She is nothing to me," Viktor said with a wave of his hand, bringing his thumb back to her jaw. "You vere always... everything."

This time Hermione slapped his hand away, her glare turning icy. "Don't touch me," she scathed.

Viktor sighed heavily, glancing at his friends - like he was used to dealing with bouts of anger from her and found it funny - and in that moment Hermione felt that familiar feeling of being small and unimportant, of being an amusing inconvenience to him, and she turned and quickly pushed her way through the crowd, circling the bar and closing in on Draco and Ariana. Ariana was telling some
story that had the two men in front of her weak with laughter, and Draco was chuckling as well.

Seeing Draco's smile was so confusing given what had just happened, and Hermione stopped near them, trying to quell her irritation. After a second, Draco looked up, happiness still crinkling his eyes, and her heart fell even more as the humor died from his face.

She met Draco's questioning gaze, and before she knew what was happening, her throat was constricting and her eyes were prickling. She concentrated on her breathing, trying to get her emotions under control as she turned and exited onto the patio.

As it wasn't particularly warm this evening, the patio was mostly empty, with only a few guests grappling at their cold arms and sipping their cocktails. Hermione snorted at them, indulging in a less-than-admirable impulse to be haughty while she was fighting back tears, and plucked an empty glass from one of the tables to make herself a flame.

Besides, the breeze broke through the haze of the alcohol in her system, and she relished the opportunity to feel something more potent than the resentment and fatigue at that last interaction.

"It sure is loud in there," Draco said behind her.

Hermione didn't bother turning around, for she knew that Draco would come to stand next to her anyway. And he did, pulling up with his somewhat fresh cocktail as the breeze blew through his clothing. Hermione busied herself with her flame, increasing the intensity of the little fire in the glass until she could feel the warmth. She tried to imagine the warmth melting her anger away, dissolving the lump that had formed in her throat.

They stayed side by side on the overhang, watching the spattering of muggles traipse up and down the beach. The dusk was low and heavy on the horizon, just a strip of orange over the sea, cloaked in deep blue and purple.

"Beautiful night," Draco commented, looking out over the water.

Hermione nodded absently, not turning to face him.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Want me to jinx him for you?"

"No need," she replied. "Being a brute is punishment enough."

"I wonder if he realizes that though," Draco said lightly.

"No, he doesn't. Apparently being able to catch a tiny gold ball while flying in the air makes one worthy of all their selfish wants."

"Oh, Granger, don't be like that," he admonished. "You know you're talking to a Seeker here."

She scrunched up her face. "I know, I know. Harry would be upset if he heard me say that. I just... I hate feeling like this."

"Feeling...?"

She looked at him, her emotion finally buried enough to do so. "Like... I don't know. Condescended to, violated. And like trying to be a good person doesn't do me any good."

"Like some people just do whatever they want, and never face real consequences?"

She nodded, turning back to the water.
"It's easy to not see the consequences when you don't care about anyone but yourself. But once you
start to care..." he thumbed over his glass thoughtfully. "The ramifications are amplified ten-fold."

Hermione said nothing, still seething.

"If you don't mind me asking... what made you see him again? He doesn't strike me as your type."

The curly-haired witch sighed, looking into her glass. "I don't know. I think I needed closure, from
him. To be sure it wouldn't work. Urgh, he said I was the most understanding woman he'd ever
met," Hermione groaned. "More like I was the softest doormat."

"I can't imagine you as a doormat," he commented, "but go on."

"No, you don't want to hear about this," she waved.

Draco looked at her solidly. "I'm asking because I'm interested. If I wasn't, I wouldn't ask."

She looked into his eyes, slightly clouded, yes, but still concerned, and found that he was waiting for
her to speak. She tentatively began, "Well, being 'understanding' and 'nice'... I used to enjoy
that, pride myself on that. But what I realized is that it made it harder for me to escape something that
wasn't fulfilling. I just... I don't want to feel like I'm always making space for everyone else."

"You are very understanding, actually, Krum has a point. You got coffee with me, remember?" He
took a sip of his drink, eying her.

She palmed her face, shaking her head. "You're right. I should have hexed you where you stood."

"I thought you were going to, after that meeting at the Ministry."

"No, I wouldn't do that," she said, "no matter how much you deserved it."

"And... I'm guessing it was the same with Weasley?"

"Oh, of course! You saw him at the ball, he can be so unbearable sometimes," she declared, her hand
flying out in her irritation. "I miss the old Ron, who was so... funny, and warm, and... sweet. He just
became so bitter."

Draco nodded, somewhat uncomfortable looking at this description of Ron, and Hermione leaned on
the railing, her volatile feelings finally reducing to a simmer.

"I'm sorry, I had therapy today and it has me all... messed up," she sighed, brushing her curls away
from her face as the breeze took them into her vision. "Thanks for listening to me ramble."

He waved his hand, looking out over the sand. "Don't worry; I appreciate any information to fuel my
general dislike of both Krum and Weasley."

"Don't take my word for it, they really aren't so bad," she said quickly, and then cringed. "No, I take
that back, they're the worst. I mean - oh! I don't know!"

Draco chuckled, his eyes squinty as he watched her struggle for the words.

"Being an arsehole is complicated," Hermione finally mused.

"It's pretty simple, actually," he said. "You can't empathize with others if you aren't in touch with
how you feel. Which I guarantee they aren't."
"No, they certainly aren't..." she muttered.

"Well, congratulations on finishing your manuscript," he said, raising his cocktail and apparently not being subtle about trying to lift her spirits. "Cheers."

"Cheers," she echoed, clinking his glass with her own.

As she sipped the remains of her watered-down drink she tried to concentrate on the waves and elevate her mood. She shouldn't have spoken to Viktor, she understood that now, as the way they had ended demanded that she never talk to the prick again. She had never been cheated on before, but she knew now that it was the lowest thing a partner could do, it was completely unacceptable. And those feelings she had felt when she found out - the anger and helplessness, the confusion and doubt and self-blame - were not something she wanted to relive.

"Can I ask you something?" Hermione began tentatively.

"Depends," Draco answered, the corner of his lips twitching.

She sighed, ignoring the urge to roll her eyes at him. "Where do you think people go wrong? When they're looking for love?"

Draco set down his empty glass, looking out over the water. "I can't pretend to know what... 'love' is," he started, his lips curving around the word like he wasn't used to saying it, "but I do know that sometimes people date because they like the idea of someone else, and not who they really are. And conversely... don't date because they don't like the idea of someone."

Hermione adjusted the flame in front of her thoughtfully.

"Anyway, my theory has always been: sex and friendship. If you have those two things, that is good enough."

"That's rather pessimistic, don't you think?"

He shrugged, thumbing over his glass. "I've never hoped for more. The friendship part is already hard enough."

"Makes me wonder if you should just shag Blaise," Hermione commented, sipping.

Draco laughed at that, shaking his head. "Merlin Granger, what did they put in that drink?"

She cringed, squeezing her eyes shut. "Sorry, not sure where that came from."

"No, you're right, it would be easier. Blaise could stop chasing after Ariana, and I never have to try to make friends with anyone ever again."

"Well, when you put it like that..."

"Yeah, 'easy' doesn't always equal 'best', does it?"

And 'best' doesn't always equal 'easy', she thought.

"There you are," a feminine voice said behind her, and Hermione turned to see Ginny coming towards her, one of her quidditch teammates with her. "I thought you would have left - " She stopped when Malfoy turned around as well, and Hermione blanched as she could see a few things click in her friend's brain.
"I, um -"

"Ah, Ginny Weasley and Gwyneth Devereaux. A pleasure," Draco said, extending his hand. Gwyneth took his hand without hesitation, but Ginny narrowed her eyes at him as he nodded to her.

"Another fan?" Gwyneth asked. "I thought there were only England and Bulgaria fans here!"

"I'm a fan of whoever is winning," Draco said with a smirk, "And that makes the Harpies the best in the national league."

"And the international league, but the Minister insists on capping the lists," Ginny corrected.

"You just missed Genevieve, she was singing on the bar just a few minutes ago..."

"Nonsense, it's a pleasure to meet the captain," Draco said smoothly. Gwyneth preened and clinked his empty glass.

"Well, um, Hermione, I brought you this," Ginny interjected, handing Hermione a fresh cocktail. Hermione thanked her quietly, not meeting her eyes as the other girl gave her a knowing look.

"I'm going to grab a new one for myself," Draco put forth, setting down his empty glass. "I'll leave you ladies to it."

After Draco departed both women turned to Hermione, much to her embarrassment.

"He seems nice," Gwyneth commented, eyeing her. The curly-haired witch felt like melting into the floor.

Ginny snorted. "I know - his memory is as gone as ever. It's like he doesn't remember calling me 'she-weasel' for the better part of my schooling."

"Hmm. He could have just shortened it to 'sheasel'," Gwyneth said thoughtfully.

Ginny swatted at her, and the girl giggled, leaning away and sipping her fruity cocktail. Hermione smiled shakily at the pair and sipped her own drink, barely making it into her mouth. The headmistress in her head frowned.

Gwyneth noticed the almost-accident and nudged her. "My goodness, Hermione here is drunk!"

"I told you to slow down, love."

"I'm not drunk!" Hermione protested, defiantly taking another sip. "This is only... my third?" She wasn't quite sure, so she couldn't really say this with the conviction that she needed to. Ginny gave her another look, as if she wasn't usually the one that drank too much.

"Three? I never would have figured," Gwyneth said, surprised.

"Does it seem like I don't drink?"

"I just figured you'd be more uptight. Aren't you going to be Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation?"

Oh boy, had some article come out about her that she wasn't aware of? "Ahhh, I'm not sure. That's up to Richard and the rest of the board."

"My girl, a department head! And at only 26!" Ginny exclaimed, squeezing Hermione's arm.
The ladies swooned, clinking glasses and chatting about Hermione's accomplishments; Hermione brushed off their praise, trying to lead them back to talking about quidditch. After a few minutes her distraction paid off, as they got into a heated discussion about offensive versus defensive Beater strategy.

"But if our Beaters are just trying to protect us, it makes the other team have an easy go at the Keeper."

"But it's necessary sometimes, when were trying to reorient the field. And then we can push - "

"Our plays aren't designed to be both offensive and defensive," Ginny said, thinking. "Perhaps for the Anderson Two-Step we need a signal to switch for the Beaters. So they can go from covering to taking out the other Chasers mid-play."

"I don't know, we don't want to overcomplicate it..."

Over Gwyneth's shoulder Hermione saw Draco coming towards them again, this time with Ariana in tow, who was radiant with anticipation as she stared at Gwyneth and Ginny.

"Did you see the roll that Peters did at the match earlier?"

"Yes, it was fantastic, he evolved the Liberson roll, it was basically a lift-off. So cool," Ariana put forth. The girls turned, nodding in agreement, their eyebrows raised.

"This is Ariana, she's a big fan of yours," Draco said, his hand on the small of Ariana's back.

Ariana eagerly shook hands with the other ladies, swiftly complimenting Ginny on her *Prophet* article and complimenting Gwyneth on both the new plays she had introduced into the league and her sparkling, flowy camisole. Gwyneth thanked her, aglow as she squeezed Ariana's hand.

Draco raised his fresh drink, which looked to be straight firewhiskey, in greeting to Hermione, and she smiled at him.

"Oh, I and just met Genevieve Baker, she's lovely," Ariana gushed, brushing her dark hair way from her face.

Draco cut in, "Actually, I thought it might interest you all to know that Genevieve was," he glanced behind him, "...is standing on the bar."

"Singing again?" Ginny asked, taking a disinterested sip.

"Ah, no, she's sort of... um, dancing..."

Gwyneth cursed in French as Ginny almost choked on her alcohol.

"We have to get her," Gwyneth sighed, "before she starts doing flips and breaks something."

There was a great hooping sound and cheers from the bar - it seemed as if their teammate had already landed a backflip on the narrow bar. At the sound of a glass breaking against the tile floor, Gwyneth tugged at Ginny's sleeve, panic in her eyes.

Ginny looked torn but conceded, "Urgh, *what* is Goldie doing, she's supposed to be keeping an eye on her - sorry, we've got to take care of this. Hermione, I'll see you inside."

"That's all right. Thanks for the drink."
Ginny gave Malfoy her fiercest that's-my-best-friend-you've-got-there look before she followed Gwyneth back into the crowded bar as the patrons started to clap in time.

"And I wouldn't miss Genevieve Baker doing flips for anything," Ariana announced, glancing between Draco and Hermione with a note of mischief in her eyes.

As Ariana turned away, Hermione realized too late what had just happened, and she once again found herself alone with Draco, facing him, trying to avoid his eyes. Her hand clenched around her glass automatically.

She and Draco weren't supposed to be without their friends together, that was the whole point... Ginny was supposed to prevent this from happening: her being alone with him, nothing stopping her from pulling him towards her and snogging him thoroughly.

And it was happening again, that feeling of being incredibly drawn to him, like a plant growing towards the sunlight. She wanted, no she needed to be closer to him, to... hell, she already knew what she wanted to do, she couldn't pretend like she just wanted to kiss him.

Dammit, why wouldn't he say something?

She finally looked into his eyes to discover that he was watching her with hint of amusement in his expression as he sipped his firewhiskey. Her fingers where white over her glass as she took a calculated sip as well.

She'd forgotten how deceptively strong they made the cocktails here, and she'd downed more, she suspected, than her three-drink limit. In fact, she wasn't the only one - she could tell from the way Draco's eyes were lidded that he was getting drunk as well.

Oh dear, she had been right. With the alcohol clearing a path to what she wanted, their whole plan about having an innocent celebration out with friends hadn't stood a chance.

"So much for our friends being around," she commented dryly.

Draco looked at her, his resigned sigh indicating that he was thinking the same thing. "Yeah, Ariana can't be relied upon to stay in one place."

They had been doing just fine twenty minutes ago, when Hermione had been distracted by Viktor's subtle condescension and inappropriate behavior. What happened?

Oh, she must have noticed... how fantastically fit Draco looked in his casual wear - his soft button down and dark jeans. Rather muggle-influenced, in fact, to wear jeans, but he was pulling it off admirably. Hermione's muggle upbringing had brought with it a penchant for muggle men's clothing on the masculine body, and so seeing Draco in these easily sexualizable garments made for simple sensual fodder.

God, he was so fit.

Oh boy. No, she had to focus. She needed... she needed some air.

"Interested in walking down to the water?" Hermione asked, setting down her now empty glass.

Draco affirmed, gesturing toward the short steps leading directly down the the waiting sand as he plucked his cloak from a nearby chair. Hermione lead the way, stepping down carefully onto the moonlit beach.
"The wind is really going," she murmured, wrapping her arms around herself and holding the flaps of her lightweight cloak closed. "I should have brought the flame." She instinctively reached for her wand, but thought better of it due to her current - oh dear, incredibly inebriated - state.

Out on the beach there was almost no one, and under the cloak of darkness there was an intimacy that there wouldn't have been an hour before. Passerby didn't even glance at them as Draco and Hermione took uneven steps in the loose sand, kicking it up.

They came upon the dark edge of the wet shore, and Hermione listened to the waves crash as she held her arms around herself.

She didn't realize that she was shivering until Draco stepped a little closer to her and pulled the edge of his cloak over her shoulder, and she was suddenly engulfed in the warmth of the interior of his robe.

"Thanks," she whispered.

He nodded in acknowledgment, staring out over the horizon.

She tried to go back to concentrating on the water, but with his arm brushing against hers, the warmth of his body inviting her to stand closer to him, she was quickly loosing the battle against the sensual fantasies that had been assaulting her all night. The more she tried to not want it, the more she was beginning to realize that she needed it - needed the release, the closeness, even the danger. It was exhilarating.

She was confused at the conflicting feelings, and a stranger to not understanding her motivations.

But what her therapist had brought up earlier - and what Draco had said - made her question the whole situation.

Why did she always have to do the "right" thing, the smart thing? Why was she so afraid to feel something powerful?

And - when did she start... censoring what she wanted?

It had been a practical sort of pursuit, to do the romantic dating thing, eventually finding someone to marry and continue the trajectory of her life with. Someone who could deal with her long hours, her public appearances, someone who could be on her arm at diplomatic banquets and hold a conversation with the Mexican president while she tried to butter up the diplomats from Columbia.

She wasn't blinded enough to think that this calculated approach to dating was conducive to finding someone she loved in a vigorous, us-against-the-world sort of way. But she didn't have time to hope anymore, only time to be logical and practical, and so that's what she did.

She hadn't really needed anyone romantically for a while, though - she had leaned heavily on her friends and developed the necessary skills on her own. She was a powerhouse now, and didn't need anyone beyond the people she had surrounded herself with. She had compartmentalized her life such that whenever she needed a particular kind of interaction she knew exactly who to go to. If she wanted an elegant night out she could owl Ginny or Padma. If she wanted to complain about anti-muggleborn bias or venture deep into the muggle world she had Jasmine and Marielle. And if she wanted something calmer and more family-oriented she could always visit Mrs. Weasley or Harry.

What she hadn't factored in was what the lack of a romantic partner would do to her long-term. While she leaned on her friends for trust, companionship and care, her body had begun to scream for attention, the kind of attention that a quick session in the bath couldn't cure. She hadn't really thought
about it, but even before she'd begun talking to Draco there had been days where she felt absolutely untouched and yet so ripe and ready for it. Maybe it was as simple as a good hair day, or donning her tiny silk dress for a night out, or even catching her body in the mirror after a shower.

She thought that she'd had it all figured out, but now she couldn't help but see how narrow-minded she had been, discarding passion for contentment. In reality she just wanted to feel something real, something raw. Something that overpowered her senses, clouded her overly-analytical mind.

She turned in the cloak and observed the rise and fall of Draco's chest, the drag of his skin against his collarbones, the way his shirt rustled with the wind.

As she looked at him, she wondered for the millionth time what it was about him that made her fall so utterly out of orbit, why he could pause all of the mental noise and really focus her on the moment.

It had been a long time since she had felt special just for being her, and had held someone's attention not for her policies or her recommendations, not for her intelligence or her problem-solving, but for her personality and appearance, her body. It had been a while since someone had gotten under her skin, someone whose deep attraction to her went beyond a quick shag or a half-formed fantasy.

And now the opportunity to feel good, to quell that ever-present fire, was right here next to her, it was right here and all she had to do was lean in and take it.

Her stance unsteadied for a moment, and she readjusted on the loose sand, her hand coming up to use his chest as leverage.

Even just this simple touch was so electrifying, Hermione found herself clutching the fabric completely unapologetically as she found her footing.

"Are you drunk, Granger?" Draco murmured, eyeing her as he put a steadying hand on her arm.

"A little, yes," she replied, smoothing her fingers along the seam of the buttons on his shirt. "Why?"

He looked down at the hand now smoothing over his chest, his own hand coming to rest on her waist. "No reason," he said, his eyes dancing with humor.

She stepped forward, and the cloak rested more comfortably around her shoulders as she neared him and the warmth encasing her refreshed from the source.

"Hermione," he said warningly, his breath pooling on her face.

She should have pulled away, given Draco's reminder of the boundaries they had agreed upon, but she found herself following her instincts instead, smoothing her hands down his front. His exhales were intoxicatingly sweet, honeyed and alcoholic, just like they had been a week ago, and she briefly recalled how delicious his kiss had been.

And oh god, it was happening; he was in her personal space and she was in his, and he was already touching her waist, she his abs, and their breath was starting to swirl together between them.

Once again his lips were teasingly close, he was close, and there was a natural logic to what she should do next, what was so easy to do.

As she wavered, her lips dancing near his, Draco chuckled softly and said, "I'm trying to be strong here, but you're making it... very hard."
She smiled, breathless, and pulled away so she could look into his eyes.

With the wind blowing his hair around, his eyes lidded and warm, he was so devilishly inviting, the epitome of sensual indulgence, and she could plainly see what it would be like to take this to the next level, engage in midnight tryst with him.

He experimentally slipped a few fingers under the hem of her shirt; his cool fingers on her flesh practically burned. After a moment he was caressing the skin beneath the seam, tracing the dip in the middle of her back, and Hermione responded eagerly, moving closer. Surely a simple touch like this wasn't supposed to feel this good? She leaned into it, a sigh falling from her lips.

"Would it be so bad if we weren't?" he asked, his other hand coming to her cheek. "Strong, I mean."

"No," she responded, swallowing. "I suspect it would actually be very good." *But we said we were going to leave it. We said we were going to leave it...*

"Then tell me what you really want to do," he commanded softly.

As he touched her face, holding her head in his hand, she knew she was done for. It was so easy to press her face against his hand, lean into his touch as he rubbed a thumb over her lip.

And so she was faced with a choice. She could continue to dream, probably drive herself crazy trying to keep away...

Or she could fall in step.

Finally she understood. Why had she spent all that time trying to rationalize a future with him, imagine a real relationship? She didn't actually want that, she didn't have to do that.

She didn't even *need* that.

It was unclear who initiated the kiss but it didn't matter; his lips and tongue were smoothed from the alcohol, and the sensation of both was richly vivid in the chill of the wind. Hermione eagerly threaded her fingers in his hair as his grip on her waist became more intentioned; she was vaguely aware of the consequences of what she was doing but actively ignoring those thoughts in favor of just feeling, and it was working well.

Nothing remained of what she'd been confused about earlier; right now there was just his lips and warm touch, the wind, and the sound of the waves beside them.

As she pulled him closer, her hips suddenly connected with his, and a curse rose in his throat that sounded both overwhelmed and apologetic.

"We should probably stop," he whispered against her lips.

But there was no possibility of that anymore; she'd had a taste of him again and wouldn't stop, she needed all of it, all of him, and she needed it *now*.

"Yeah, probably," she answered, and kissed him again.

He was less hesitant now, more demanding, as he fully untucked her shirt from her trousers and raked his cool fingers over her sides; god, she had been fantasizing about this for a week and she was *so* done with simply thinking about it, wondering about him. She wanted to *experience* this - intimately understanding his breathing patterns, the strength in his grip, the way his stubble felt as she rubbed her thumb over his jaw. She wanted to document and catalogue all this sensual information,
and discover more of it, all over him.

And there was no-one here to stop them from falling to the ground, right here, and tumbling over each other, ripping off as little clothing as possible to maintain protection from the wind but just enough to make love - him gripping her wrists in the damp sand as she arched into him -

No, she didn't have to think anymore... he was right here, and a fantasy like that was better saved for the books when she had a living body against her, who's heartbeat was heavy against her chest and who was slowing down their kisses, caressing her skin, rubbing a thumb over the lacy bottom edge of her bra.

Finally he stopped actively kissing her, his hands still as he took a few shaky breaths, his gaze cast between their touching bodies.

After a moment she could feel him lightly pulling away, and she released him slowly, bashful as she bit her lip.

Draco was still touching her side, lightly drawing his fingers down her skin, and she realized that she very much wanted him to slip his fingers lower, into her trousers, and ease this tickling ache she'd been feeling for so long.

He pulled away fully now, an exhasperated sigh escaping his lips as he dropped his grip. "I just... I just can't keep my hands off of you," he said. He sounded apologetic, uncertain, but it was in a way of wanting what he wasn't allowed to have, not at all how Hermione had been uncertain.

But she was tired of having to be sure, of not making decisions simply because she didn't want to bet on the outcome.

And she knew that she was drunk, and that this probably wouldn't be happening otherwise, but... damn, it felt good to feel like this. Wanted and wanting, exhilarated and unafraid. She wasn't sure of where this could go - him and her - but she was sure of this feeling.

"Fuck it, then," she breathed, her hands sliding down his abdomen. "Come home with me."

He pressed his forehead against hers, chuckling softly as the wind blew through his hair. "Merlin, Granger, I've been dying to hear you say that," he said, his breath warming her face.

She reached down and clasped his hand, took one last breath, and turned back towards the bar. As they quickly traversed the sand and wooden patio, she was shaking from excitement, relief flooding her as she processed her decision, normalized it in her own mind.

And god, she really did feel so relieved. Relieved that she was getting what she wanted, relieved to feel the flutery anticipation of more intimacy, relieved to give in to something so wickedly promising.

She turned it into a game, trying to figure out the quickest and smoothest way to the fireplaces.

"Don't have a pocket portkey?" Draco asked into her hair.

"Fireplace is safer," she called back to him.

She knew fireplaces were a dirty and somewhat disorienting way to travel, but she also had one in the lobby of her flat and didn't feel like spinning around in a portkey pull at the moment, especially since she'd never used her portable portkey from this distance.
"Just as well," he replied, following. "If I spin I might lose my dinner."

She carefully avoided the area where her friends were standing, cutting between the many bodies and giving them a wide berth through the crowd. She passed Ginny, eagerly conversing with her quidditch team; Ariana, raking her nails through a young man’s hair as he laughed; even the rambunctious Bulgarian players didn’t notice her since Viktor was leading a Bulgarian song to honor their victory, and the attention of the majority of the room was directed towards his raucous cantor.

Looks like he could do something right for her after all.

This amused Hermione for a few seconds while she stepped into the fireplace, pulling Draco in beside her.

And as the flames flared, Hermione pulled him down for a kiss again, and the pair disappeared, engulfed in flames.
The Aftermath

Hermione's apartment

London

May 10th

The silence after Hermione stepped out of the fireplace was uncanny; their shuffling seemed too loud as they climbed up the creaking stairs to the third floor, Draco's sharp steps just behind hers.

He hadn't said anything yet, and as she fumbled with her keys, attempting to get her and her companion inside her flat before she could think too much on what she was doing, she tried to hold onto the energy that had made her kiss him so deeply not a few minutes before. Unfortunately, kissing the handsome wizard in a public space was very different from having sex with him, and despite wanting it so badly she couldn't help but feel stricken.

She tried to remember the last time she had brought a lover back to her apartment, but it was so long ago that what she had done then seemed irrelevant to her current situation.

Urgh, what am I doing?

She finally pried the door open and sighed heavily, going through the motions of hanging her cloak on the hook and dropping her keys on her kitchen counter.

"Wow, Granger... this is an intense book collection," Draco murmured, looking around.

She followed his gaze, admiring her books in the dim light. The embossed gold of the spines glittered in the moonlight streaming in from her compact sitting room window.

"Yeah, it's where all my money goes unfortunately... what I wouldn't give for a Wikipedia for wizards," she joked. Stepping into her apartment was sort of like stepping into a library, where the shelves reached all the way to the ceiling and the only wall-space not covered by bookshelves were doors and windows.

"Wiki-pedia?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's a muggle thing," she sighed, mentally kicking herself; she usually had such a good filter on her muggle references when she was around her wizard friends, but the alcohol had really loosened her tongue. Being able to speak freely and not check her muggle knowledge at the door when she was with Jazzy and Mari was one of the reasons why she valued their friendship so much. Sometimes it was nice to talk about muggle books, current events, and technology...

She started slightly when she realized that Draco was still standing in the middle of her small sitting room, looking vaguely unsure of himself. Regardless of his confident swagger tonight, she could still detect a level of nervousness from him that was somewhat soothing for her; she couldn't be the only one who was nervous about what they were going to do.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked.

He nodded silently, glancing around her mostly-unfurnished apartment.

Hermione busied herself by going into the moonlit kitchen and opening a cabinet. "I'd make tea, but I
feel like I shouldn't use magic right now," she said lightly.

Whenever she went out drinking, she always didn't realize how drunk she was getting until she arrived back home; something about being in the safety of her flat allowed her to relax and not have tight control over her actions, and as a result she usually found herself swaying around, clumsily removing clothing and laughing at herself.

She felt her drunkenness threaten to do the same to her now, but knew that this would likely be horribly unattractive.

"I'll take some water, actually," Draco sighed, his palm covering part of his face, his eyes closed.

Hermione retrieved two large glasses and filled them with water from the tap. She could hear him entering the kitchen behind her slowly, probably looking around.

"Where's the light?" he asked.

She turned and handed him the heavy glass carefully, nodding at his murmured thanks, and felt her way to the switch. As soon as she flicked it, the blinding white light caused both of them to groan in surprise; Hermione flipped it off immediately, her eyes burning.

Draco laughed, shaking his head. "We're drunk," he said, and Hermione laughed as well, her chuckles filling the small space and lifting her spirits. The light coming in through her tiny kitchen window from the outside - a mixture of blue glow from the moon and yellow glare from the streetlamps - was enough to illuminate the narrow space.

"I couldn't help but notice that you have no furniture," Draco put forth, taking a sip.

"Yup," Hermione answered, hopping onto her counter and kicking her legs. She wouldn't do that normally, but... well, she wanted to sit down. "I have some, just no chairs."

He nodded, sipping.

"Oh shit, I have a couch!" she cursed, hopping down. "Do you want to sit on the couch?"

Draco laughed, shaking his head. "No, that's alright. Most of it is taken up by your... cat?"

"Oh, that's Crookshanks. He's getting a little old, so he doesn't do much anymore." She sat back on the counter and took a big swig of her water. She briefly wondered if in the silence Draco could hear her swallow.

"My mother used to have spells to keep our cat off the furniture," he said.

"Well, he's here more than I am, so I feel like he deserves his own space."

Draco backed up and leaned against the counter opposite her. "I see... so you're living in your cat's apartment?"

"No, I'm just traveling and working a lot, and when I'm not working I'm usually doing research, so..."

"So since only the cat uses the furniture, you don't have any."

"I have furniture! I have bookshelves, and a couch... " She thought for a second, and he chuckled again.
"Please tell me that's not it."

"No! I have a wardrobe, you know. I need that. And a nightstand - "

"But no desk? Where do you do your research?"

"On the floor mostly. Alchemic circles need to be drawn very large, you know, to get them nice and precise."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "Dear Merlin, the floor? You need an alchemy table for circles. That way you can safely store your ingredients... catalogue your circles easily... and hell, save your back from the strain!"

She snorted. "I don't even have a regular table. Why would I get an alchemy table?"

"Alright, that settles it. Your next purchase needs to be a table." He crossed his arms. "Is that all of your furniture?"

"No, I also have - " She stopped, her voice catching, and looked down into her glass. "A bed."

She didn't have to look up to know that he was gazing at her with that wolf-like look.

Draco took a sip of his water and set it down, his eyes never leaving her. "Yes, that's important," he murmured.

The original purpose of him being here, in her apartment, resurfaced to the forefront of Hermione's thoughts, as did the desire, washing through her like warm water.

She rested her head on the cabinet behind her, kicking her legs lightly as she steadied her breathing and tried to wrangle her thoughts.

As much as she had set this up and had dreamed about this, she really had no idea what to expect. She never could have imagined that the opportunity would even come up - what was this going to be like, sleeping with Draco Malfoy?

She had no-doubt worked up quite a fantasy that this was going to ruin her, but she knew that drunken sex always seemed like a good idea in the beginning, but once it got down to it it was all roaming hands, clumsy mouths, and wet, sloppy kisses. Kissing Draco in her inebriated state had been nothing like this, but experience had told her what to expect from one night stands.

Hermione knew that Draco was still watching her; she rubbed a thumb over her glass, smearing oily fingerprints as she studied the clear liquid.

The air shifted around her as he pushed off from the opposite counter and stepped closer to her; the blurred edges of her vision darkened as his form came into view.

She looked up as he took the glass from her hand and set it on the counter next to her; with her glass out of the way, he stepped even closer, until her legs parted on either side of his torso.

Feeling his warmth on the insides of her thighs, even through the fabric of her pants, was sinfully good, and she automatically squeezed her legs around him; despite the vague reservations that were starting to dissipate, she was still wildly oversexed, her body inviting any kind of attention. Her hand slid up his body to clutch the front of his shirt lightly.

"Not having second thoughts, are you?" he murmured, gliding his hand up her neck and threading in
her hair. His touches on her bare skin were so warm and soft, Hermione found herself losing touch with her mind already, her thoughts hazy and far away.

She shook her head, unable to speak.

"Hmm?" he asked again, his other hand slipping beneath her shirt.

"No," she breathed.

"Okay," he whispered, and kissed her.

All of the feelings she'd had on the beach started to trickle back - the desperation and desire, the lack of fear, the sheer relief of receiving bodily attention - all heightened and amplified due to the privacy and silence surrounding them.

There was no-one to pretend for here, no one to hide from or tell them to stop, and the freedom to let go of all of those social constraints and just touch him, kiss him, was incredibly liberating.

This was her private space, and she could be or do anything here and somehow the consequences didn't manifest in the rest of her life. She could practice alchemy magic here, she could study thought magic, she could read and write, she could play records, order muggle take-out, drink, smoke, or shag her childhood bully, it didn't matter.

As he curled his fingers in her hair, pulling some of the ringlets straight, she automatically wrapped her arms around his neck, arching into his embrace eagerly. She had never let anyone touch her hair this much, but the way he was delving his hands in, holding her head, she didn't want him to stop; her hair was so off-limits to everyone that there was a certain pleasure in feeling his fingers against her scalp, the curls as they bounced back.

The more he pulled her against him, the more her body rejoiced and demanded more; she was starved for this, the attention, and she didn't want the barrier of their clothing anymore, she'd already had enough of that. She wanted him to touch her skin.

Hermione tore her lips away from his to focus on undoing his shirt as he slid kisses down her throat. She fumbled with the buttons, her fingers slipping and shaking as she fidgeted the little manicured discs out of their holes. It was a high-quality shirt - she could tell by the raised details of each button, the thick stitches protecting each button hole. Draco distracted her from her task briefly with a deeper kiss, and her breath caught in her throat as he pulled her waist forward and she easily slid toward him on the slick counter. She gasped as his pelvis slammed into hers, and - dear Merlin, he was turned on, she could feel it -

She made an impatient noise in her throat; she couldn't figure out how to get his stupid shirt open fast enough, but that was quickly solved when she grabbed two fist-fulls of the fabric and pulled, and all the seams unwound, threads loosened and holes gaping as she ripped the shirt apart. She'd always had less control of her magic when she wanted something, and sometimes she actualized what she wanted without expressly meaning to.

Draco clenched her skin, sparing no tears over his shirt, his energy elevated by her excitement; Hermione reached up and back to stabilize herself with the underside of the cabinet as he kissed the side of her neck hungrily, pulling her own shirt down her arms, his lips turned up in a smirk.

The alcohol in her system was starting to consume her, and her impatience to get to the core of what she wanted was blinding as she grappled with his belt, her hand leaving the cabinet corner as she pulled at the leather. It was only a second before she gave up and pulled his trouser buttons open,
settling for tugging on the buckle until it gave in.

She finally created enough space in the waistband of his jeans to dip her hand into them; she sighed when she encountered smooth, hot skin. She rubbed her hand over him slowly, grasping, and his next exhale in her ear was rather sharp.

"Wait, wait," he murmured, barely above a whisper.

He gently slid her hand out of his trousers, even as her mischievous fingers tried to grip anything they could; she found herself trailing lingering touches over his navel as he pulled her from the counter, hands braced under her bum. With her body in his arms, he slowly backed out of the kitchen, holding her firmly as Hermione squirmed, squeezing his torso with her thighs.

She pressed her lips across his neck, drawing breath against him, inhaling deeply; he smelled like his herby soap, with a twinge of his natural body smell, reminding her of fresh coffee.

She wouldn't care if he laid her on the floor at this point, or shoved her against the bookshelves, or even just stripped her naked and held her; anything was fair game, anything he wanted to do.

Then he released her unexpectedly and she fell across her duvet - she was too sodden to notice where he'd been heading - and Draco reached over his shoulder and pulled his undershirt over his head. Hermione eagerly took in the lean muscles of his torso, defined in the moonlight streaming through her bedroom window as she properly pulled his belt out, throwing it behind her and not even cringing when it smacked against the back wall.

Before she could pull off his bottoms he had reached down and lifted her foot, and she fell back again, her hair splayed out in curly sunrays.

Draco was undoing her boots already, pulling the lacings swiftly and dislodging her feet. The trickling sound of sand raining on her hardwood floor broke through Hermione's ravenous haze and she smiled breathlessly; Draco was chuckling as he emptied her boots of the remaining sand and dropped them unceremoniously behind him.

Her pants were next; he undid the zipper and pulled them down inch by inch as she stretched out, like he was carefully unwrapping a present, slowly revealing the skin of her hips... the lacy triangle between her thighs... the length of her legs... her knees bending and rubbing together slowly.

Draco balled the garment in a fist as he drew it away, and as he finally stripped the fabric off her feet, he just stared at her for a moment, watching her twist and arch on the covers in her bra and knickers.

It was seductive, bearing her body to him like this, a body she would never have dreamed of showing him when they were in school, would never have felt safe doing so. As he took in her exposed throat, the swell of her lace covered breasts, the slope of her belly and curve of her hip, the tickling warmth she'd been feeling uncoiled and spread through her; this wasn't safe still, but the danger was more erotic than unsettling, and she vaguely felt a bit of exhibitionary boldness as she arched in the moonlight.

Draco just stood there, breathing in and out... a flash of impatient desire went through her, and she lifted a pointed foot to his hip, stroking the side of his body with the inside of her calf and hooking her leg to draw him closer.

Finally he leaned forward, took her knees in his hands, and spread her legs. Hermione stared at his smooth torso as he bared her to the covers, dropping his body into hers.

It was overwhelming to feel so much of his skin when she had barely gotten to touch it before, barely
memorized the feel of what had been available; now she was determined to make up for this and
discover what every part of his body felt like as she smoothed her hands up and down his sides,
pulling her nails across his back, sliding her inner thighs over his hips.

His pleasure was deep and deliberate, full of promise and intention; as he caressed her harder, she
responded in kind, fingers curling and nails biting into his skin. He grasped palmfuls of her curves,
squeezing her skin as she arched and bent in his embrace.

Kissing him, touching him, and feeling his weight on top of her was already making her delirious,
and at this point she couldn't even imagine this feeling any better; surely this was as good as this
would feel, or so she thought until he rolled his hips against her and she knew that greater pleasure
was waiting to be unlocked.

"Oh shit," she cursed quietly; she had been fantasizing about this since he'd kissed her the first time,
her insides clenching as she thought about him, but this was entirely different; feeling him against
her, solid and strong, she found herself almost annoyed at him for making her feel so good, for
elevating her expectations, being so fit under his robes and so confident in his body, his actions. He
wasn't supposed to be like this, he was supposed to rot in his miserable mansion and be lonely and
unhappy forever, while she explored, opened up new worlds of magic, and elevated her people.
Instead his breath was heavy against her neck, his body solid against hers, and the twirling of his hips
was making her dizzy with desire.

A familiar sense of dark ire flickered in her heart, only for a moment, and before she could stop
herself she glided her hand up his chest and squeezed his throat.

There he is, her mind supplied distantly as Draco's eyes darkened, his glasses slipping down his
nose. She knew she had gotten through to him - the cloudiness in his eyes had dissipated, and the
intensity that had scared her on more than one occasion came back.

He grabbed her wrist and forced it against the bed, shoving his hips against her so hard she gasped as
the previous pleasure doubled.

She thought they were toeing the line between pleasure and pain before, but now there was real fire
behind his kisses, real force, the kind of uncaring force she craved from him. He wasn't overly
concerned about hurting her anymore, wasn't censoring himself in order to reassure her; Hermione
had made it clear that she actually wanted him, without restraint, and wanted it as bruising or rough
as he wanted to give it to her.

A part of her still hated him, hated the way he made her feel when she was younger, and wanted to
make him pay for all that had happened in school. That hate easily transformed and flowed through
her as she pulled her nails up his back, so hard she could feel his skin dragging under them, hear the
scratch over their breathy exhales and the rustling of the bedsheets.

She channeled her aggression through her touches and kisses, loving the discomfort and tightness of
her wrist against the bed so she couldn't quite move freely; he was restraining her, holding her back,
in a way that had excited her to think about at the ballet. But he didn't need the ropes, he was strong
enough to hold her down without them -

She made a sound that could only be classified as a growl, and bit down on whatever was in front of
her, the skewed logic of her inebriated brain convincing her that it would taste as good as his breath,
as good as his scent. She wanted to know what all of him tasted like, she wanted to eat him if it were possible.

There was nothing other than this, this human, this body, this skin that was blue and yellow in the moonlight, that tasted like the light saltiness of his sweat as she bit him even harder. She couldn't pretend to be the uptight bookworm she had been long ago, that wasn't who she was right now, not with the alcohol smoothing out her thoughts, making it difficult to lock onto a single reservation or concern, a single insecurity or question about this. Her mind was blank, her only thoughts a jumbled continuation of what she wanted: more.

She tried to reach between them again, determined to touch him, but with their bodies pressed together it was impossible; instead she rolled her hips against him, pressing her damp knickers against the bare skin of his navel.

Something seemed to snap within him then; he pulled her up and pushed her against the headboard, pressing her into the cold wall as he kissed her hungrily.

And then he leaned back and spun her body to face the other way, fitting her backside against him, and through her surprise at being flipped around an excited gasp left her lips - yes, this was exactly what she wanted, she wanted that wicked fantasy of what it was like to be with him, not just kiss and touch and make love but be fucked.

She pressed her hands against the wall, looking back at him as he pulled her hips toward him, his hands already smoothing up and over her curves.

"I thought you said you'd never turn your back on me," he breathed into her ear, his voice carrying that seductive and dangerous tone as his hand connected with her arse. She inhaled sharply, her skin stinging.

She could feel the darkness coming off of him, a mixture of arrogant anger and desperation; it was erotic to him, to sleep with her, and she knew then that the dark fantasy was mutual. She could always feel a twinge of this whenever he said something bold, but now she had truly gotten confirmation - shagging the nerdy Hermione Granger had a novelty that he couldn't shake, just like she had her own ideas of him.

And she was so ready to indulge in that fantasy with him, to turn this into another game like the ones they had played in school.

If this was a game, though, he was currently winning, as she knew that if he shagged her like this she would lose her mind.

He wasn't being tentative anymore; he was holding her throat as he pulled his nails up her body, and she pressed back against him impatiently, blind in the dark, deprived of any anchoring visuals as she breathed against the wall; Draco scraped her arms, dragging her bra straps off her shoulders.

"Well?" he whispered, his lips ghosting across her ear as the bra straps stretched downward.

Hermione unclasped the restricting garment and threw it against the wall, shoving back against him as she finally gasped, "Oh god, I lied, you prick, hurry up - "

He was already kissing the skin of her back, rubbing his thumbs over the welted skin finally freed from confinement; Hermione was well past this however. She had already put her hand down his pants and touched him in her kitchen; she couldn't act like she was suddenly shy now.

She caught one of his roaming hands and drew it around her body, pressing it down her navel and
"Take them off," she ordered, breathless as she pressed back against him.

He withdrew his hand, capturing the bands of stretchy lace and pulling them down, not bothering to take her knickers all the way off; they stayed suspended just above her knees, pulled taught beneath her.

She could feel his lips and breath on the dimples of her back, and as she steadied her spread limbs, a flare of nervousness and anticipation flickered in her chest; she hadn't been prepared for how good simply touching him would be, it was hard to imagine this at the next level.

The thing she had been fantasizing about was finally about to happen; her heart was thumping as Draco pulled her flush against him, holding her hip and sliding against the wet center of her body.

It took a few seconds of pressure on his part - it had been a while since she'd had sex with a man, and this fact was showing rather physically in this moment - but after a breath she could feel herself enveloping him. Hermione braced her hands against the wall, her fingernails digging into the drywall; she was delirious, her only clear thought something like please, or more, or now.

And then there was nothing but an indescribable bliss, twinged with a sweet agony as her pleasure transformed from a warm feeling all over her body to hot and centralized where their bodies were joined; she couldn't help but gasp, her forehead pressed against the wall, her breath fogging the surface with condensation.

She was grateful that Draco moved slowly because it was so much after being empty for so long, after feeling nothing for so long, especially from this angle. She focused on her breath, her eyes closed.

After a few moments he hooked his arm around her and pulled her back against him; her legs stopped shaking as he smoothed a hand up her nude side.

"Yeah?" he breathed into her ear, his voice rough, and in this simple question lay a complexity of thought that she untangled easily because of the intimacy, and the many things he was asking, both reassuring and naughty, became clear: was this okay, was she still sure, did this feel as good to her as it did to him, she liked it didn't she, did she want more -

"Yeah," she answered, nodding breathlessly.

And then he pushed forward, and she had to brace her hands against the wall again just to get her bearings - nothing had truly prepared her for this, not fantasizing about him, not kissing him, not touching him in her kitchen, not even his hand in her knickers. This was what she had been missing, the pure fire of sharing pleasure with another person, of shagging Draco Malfoy.

She regained her sense of place and pressed back against him once, twice, three times, and before she could do it harder Draco was smoothing his hand up her curved spine, up the back of her neck and gathering her curls in a fist to draw her head back.

She gasped as her scalp smarted, and his lips were once again caressing her neck, breath hot; they weren't face-to-face but it didn't matter - she could feel him breathing, feel him shift behind her, and most of all feel him inside her, spreading her open past her limit, blessing her body with raw feeling. She'd never thought of this position as being intimate, but the way he smoothed his hands down her back, the ghosting of his breath... it was all quietly perfect, like a secret revealed.

Facing away from him was much easier somehow; she didn't have to wonder at how it had come to
this, how she was letting Draco Malfoy of all people fuck her, because with her back to him he was just a glorious lover bestowing pleasure upon her, and if anything else she could just rock into his body and feel good.

That said, the thought of him specifically doing these things - pressing into her, holding her throat, blindly tracing his lips over the side of her neck - it was bringing up feelings she didn't think she'd have to deal with right now, not while they were both naked and he was shagging her, not while she could feel every quake of his body, could sense the dark fantasy slipping into something else for him as well.

She could feel a deep appreciation, or wonder coming from him, like sweet karma that she could never have felt without doing this; it was like he was determined to both punish her for being a swotty, annoying pain in his arse and yet also reward her for who she was despite that.

As she flew closer and closer to the sun, it became clear that they were finishing something that they'd started probably much before tonight, maybe even before she'd seen him across the room at that first lecture.

She was already there, had been there, and as she processed the intense sensations rippling through her body, the obviousness of this union settled in; it felt ridiculously right, almost inevitable - over a decade in the making - and yet continuously bewildering.

It was a powerful paradox: how was this possibly happening? How could it not have happened?

This wasn't a dream, but a memory coming full circle; this was the familiar pain of his words manifesting as rough strokes and slaps like branding irons on her flesh, but then soft pleasure like an apology, like there was real innocence left in him. The truth was revealed: beneath the surface of all of that sticky tension between them was two people who were hurting, people who were desperately powerless then but not now, not as they released those repressed feelings.

They had been bound by an inescapable doom, both of them, and could now take that out on each other, simultaneously punishing each other but also just reveling in the deep catharsis of letting go.

There was something about it, something - dare she say it - therapeutic.

As Draco dipped his fingers into her mouth, held her throat as she blindly bit his fingers, she thought she heard her surname wafting toward her, breathless and broken; the ecstasy in his voice was drugging in and of itself, but that compounded with his touches on her skin, his grip on her hip, and the raw fire of him sliding into her was sensory overload.

Hermione was contracting her muscles so hard she was actually gritting her teeth, and all of it was riding the edge of too much, not because she didn't like it but because she did, desperately, and the pleasure was so vibrant that was unreal that she hadn't broken apart already. She let out a frustrated moan, and Draco braced her with a clenched grip, his nails scoring her hip.

And then he took one of her hands away from his hair and pressed it to her throat, is own hand covering hers as he slowly moved it down.

A hazy confusion pervaded her senses for a moment, until he guided her hand over her breast and squeezed, and then she understood, and in the clarity of his intentions an unintelligible curse dropped from her lips:
Oh god, he was going to make her touch herself.

She had a moment of demure innocence at the situation as Draco pressed her hand over her ribs, down her belly, around the curve of her navel as it sloped backwards toward him. She was so close, and knew that given any more friction she would be completely fall apart, there was no escaping it.

When she finally touched herself, her head dropped back against his shoulder.

It was all she needed; it was like her desire split open, allowing pleasure to gush; she was filling the space with breathless moans, and he was cursing into her neck, and this wasn't about who they were or their history anymore, now it was just about the pleasure and the feeling, the collection of attractive attributes that were now free to touch, to explore.

Hermione wasn't usually one to be this vocal, but she couldn't help herself, the sounds were just coming out of her mouth, thoughtless and breathless. Her hand was shaking as it moved - Draco was still holding the top of her wrist, and she just knew he could feel what she was doing with her fingers by the way the bones in her hand peaked and valleyed under his grip.

The idea of his pleasure, combined with the very real truth of her own pleasure was intoxicating, and despite the volatile emotions she was overcome by purely physical longing.

In fact she could no longer feel anything but that; she had long since lost track of her limbs, her awareness of where they were, and even her perception of up and down.

And then she was irrevocably lost, and had no name and no home, just feeling, and her only purpose in this moment, in life was to chase the pleasure as it started to break.

There was a moment of utter clarity as she flooded with erotic ecstasy, bright and white; the drunken pleasure of being close to another human was stripped away, revealing a clearer, bolder pleasure of who was giving this, who was receiving it, and what it meant to be here. In that instant she could feel so much more: the power of his glare so long ago, his look of despair as she had been tortured, the fear in his eyes in the Room of Requirement, everything that ever happened between them, flowing and blending into pure release.

And then she was free, free to melt all the tension away and see a glimmer of hope for them, like happiness was no further away than sunlight visible through the trees.

There was a calm serenity in the silence that followed, only broken by her breath and his.

After she could sense and control her facial muscles again, Hermione opened her eyes, and as they readjusted to the darkness she became aware of Draco's arms around her, holding her against him as she shuddered, her breathing hoarse.

She blinked, noting vaguely that there were tears trailing down her cheeks; it seemed that at some point she had begun to cry, perhaps in yearning for release, but most likely because of the sheer power of what she had been feeling.

Her head dropped back against his shoulder, her limbs heavy as she was finally able to process more of what was happening around her.

As she felt a drop of sweat slide between them, the slick skin of Draco's chest expanding and contracting under her shoulder blades, she was briefly disoriented by the intimacy, the lack of boundaries between them. In the closeness of his body she could even feel his pleasure... he was shaking too as he breathed against her neck, his arms encasing her in what was both a protective embrace and a possessive prism.
Engulfed in this hazy delirium, she realized that everything about this was sheer perfection: the way she felt, his solid warmth, hot skin, the angles of his hips against the back of her thighs, even the damp swirls of his breath against her neck.

As she caught her breath his grip loosened slowly, and she blearily watched his contracted arm muscles relax and slide away, his hands coming to rest on her hips loosely.

She just couldn't be upright without his support, not after that intense orgasm, and she fell to her hands, unable to prevent it. A second later he collapsed as well, and then he was pulling her limp body into his, guiding one leg over his hip as she weakly wrapped her arms around his neck.

"You're so beautiful when you let go like that," he whispered.

There were no words yet for what had happened, how it had felt, so Hermione stayed silent, riding out the last notes and shudders as Draco stroked her skin. He didn't seem to mind her silence, and let her get her bearings.

As her heartbeat slowed, she let her mind mellow, enjoying the hazy post-orgasm disconnection from worldly troubles. Draco breathed evenly as he smoothed his hand up the side of her body, tracing her shape all the way up to her neck. He rubbed a thumb over the wet trails left behind by her tears, and she shook her head, to reassure him maybe, but mostly to barricade the emotion beyond her heart, keep it from disrupting the moment. He didn't comment on the tears, just stroked the wet paths until they dried, tight and salty across her cheeks.

After a minute or two, he sighed and said, "I can't believe you finished that manuscript in three weeks."

Hermione cracked a smile, finally conscious enough to indulge in the familiar resigned yet affectionate annoyance she felt whenever he said something smug.

"Was this... my reward?" she asked, her throat hoarse, her voice shallow.

"Depends," he replied. "How do you feel?"

She didn't know what else to do, so she playfully pushed his face away, and he chuckled, drawing her closer as the chill of her room started to dry her sweat.

"Sweet Merlin, Granger... who knew you could be so sexy," he murmured, his hand sliding over her hip.

"Who knew you could be so..." she trailed off as her eyes focused on his; damn, she almost regretted not being able to look into his eyes while they had been shagging, they were so vibrant, softer than they'd been earlier but still so clear.

All of those feelings she'd been incapacitated by when he had been inside her came rushing back, and before she could tear up again she leaned in and kissed him, tightening her embrace around his neck. He responded instantly, taking hold of her waist and pressing her flush against him.

As he smoothed his hand down her naked side, her arousal renewed and changed tones, becoming hazy and deep. But it wasn't the alcohol anymore, that had made it easy to ignore the tangle of reservations holding her back; it wasn't the blind urgency that had made her bite him, made him drive into her, gripping her with clenched fingers as years of unresolved tension and anger exploded, finally expressed through rough strokes and nails.

This was something else entirely - exploratory and sensual and devoid of all trappings of the past.
All sense of thought and care had long since slipped through Hermione's fingers; there was nothing but this left - a body she could touch, who was touching her back.

It was so easy now to just melt into Draco, turn and slide against him. Kissing him was like falling, she just had to lean over the edge just a little and he was there to catch her, capture her lips with his, breathe into her mouth, pull her body across his.

Even as he rolled them over, the moonlight catching their tangled limbs, it wasn't about emotion, or technique, or anything deliberate, but just movement and feeling and awareness.

He was methodical, yes, and his hands slow and deliberate - she felt each sensation individually - but he wasn't trying to show her anything, prove anything, express anything; he was just an active party to this passion, whose investment was purely the pursuit of ecstasy.

Hermione was finally able to cast aside the familiarity and just feel good - so good, too good, she determined as her eyes were practically rolling in her head.

And after building up their intimacy again, he dropped into her again and elicited more pleasure, especially now that his weight was on her once more, and she had free access to explore his body.

They fell into each other over and over, sometimes punctuated with a biting slap that drew her back down to Earth, her arse stinging. It was unclear to her if she came again, or if he did at all, but the feeling and sensation was still glorious as it ebbed and flowed through them, between them.

She couldn't be sure of the passage of time now; they were trapped in a delirious cycle of sex and skin, tangled with half-formed fantasies and dreams. If she didn't have the stinging in her hip she wouldn't know absolutely that she was still awake and wasn't just entertaining her slumberous mind with visions of what she wanted.

But soon she could actually feel herself slipping away, and Draco's touches slowed down as the curls of darkness started to edge into her vision; as she drifted, her body sinking, the last sensation she was truly cognizant of was a damp kiss under her ear.

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May 11th

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Hermione awoke groggily to the sound of tapping at her window.

Her mind still clouded with heavy sleep, she was disoriented for a few seconds before she remembered why there was a solid warmth beneath her, why her limbs were wrapped around another human.

The front of her vision was just a blur of skin, and she rolled her head back to see more - it was Draco's neck, and in the morning light the details of his skin were revealed: tiny freckles and moles that moved with every breath he took.

She lifted her head off his chest and looked up at his face; he was still sleeping, his features utterly relaxed, his body open. She realized with a flush that they were still very naked, her leg in between his, her breast resting on his smooth chest.

She was assaulted by a slew of conflicting emotions and thoughts before the tapping sounded again.
Hermione wiped the makeup she knew was ledged under her eyes and extracted herself from him slowly, allowing him to sleepily adjust and roll over. She moved and sat at the edge of her bed, her head in her hands.

Merlin, last night had been a blur; she fought through the haze in her mind and tried to process the implications of what had happened as she rolled her ankles, letting the sleep clear from her vision.

Glancing around, she saw why their bodies were barely protected from the light; they had somehow kicked her duvet off the bed, as it was splayed beyond the edge in a crumpled pile, her cover sheet twisted and half-off as well.

She stood slowly, her stomach quivering with nausea already, her head heavy, her body somewhat sore from using muscles in her abdomen and legs that she hadn't in a long time.

"Accio water," she whispered to herself dryly.

Hermione slowly padded into her living room; the light was fuzzy and warm, the air still in the early morning as she maneuvered through the space. She had a brief moment of naughty delight as she realized that she was naked in her living room, something that never happened despite her living alone.

She stepped over the discarded clothing carefully, marring the floor of her otherwise pristine apartment, and located her and Draco's wands, forgotten on the floor.

When she came back into her room, her large glass of water in one hand and their wands in the other, her eyes immediately fell on the sleeping form of Draco, barely covered by the thin sheet rumpled over his hips.

She walked around the bed and stood next to him, watching him as he breathed, his chest rising and falling.

With his hair falling in his eyes and his face relaxed, he seemed so calm, so innocent, way more innocent than the man who had fucked her so very hard the previous night. In the light of the dawn she could see several thin, pink marks across his chest, as well as what looked like a gnarly hickie on his neck.

She smiled at her handiwork, smoothing a hand over her curls... oh dear, some of them were crushed and fuzzy, possibly from sleeping on them without care, but also because Draco had been grasping her hair and rubbing into the pillows as he had shoved against her.

She had been right about their intimacy; though they had started slow and careful, they had quickly devolved into needy gasps, clawing hands, and slaps. She was pretty sure that he had scratched her hard enough to draw blood, and even more sure that her bites on his neck would bruise horribly. She had nearly torn him apart.

She looked down and examined the scratches on her hip; she scarred fairly easily, so she hoped they would heal well.

There had been moments last night when he had distinctly reminded her of his Hogwarts self - his enjoyment of her body had been incredibly boyish. She briefly recalled the look in his eyes later in the evening, before they'd made love again; the darkness there, the unhindered lust, had been breathtaking.

It had been very good, but not in the way she had expected; she had expected their coupling to feel good in a bad way, where she could get distinct satisfaction from being tumbled around, rag-dolled
for his sexual pleasure... essentially, being fucked. It had been naughty and hard but still somehow careful, equal, as he had made sure that she was enjoying it at least as much as he was.

And though it was hazy now, as the alcohol had blurred her memory of the night, she vaguely remembered crying at one point... feeling a lot of emotion in response to the pain, to the pleasure, to his touch.

She hadn't had the presence of mind to consider what that must have looked like to him, but looking back - oh, what was her problem?

She cringed outwardly at the memory.

At least she had felt something, she tried to rationalize. As much as she liked to think she could just shag someone and have it mean nothing, she knew how caught up she could get. She wasn't sure if getting caught up was a safety mechanism for meaningless sex or if it was a legitimate attempt to fit another person into her world, but either way she liked being sure before she gave too much of herself.

Her previous sexual interactions had been lackluster at best and degrading at worst, and her night with the blond wizard was easily the best sex she'd ever had. That said, she wasn't usually down for casual hook-ups or one-night-stands, for they tended to leave her feeling guilty and unsatisfied, especially when the wizard or witch in question inevitably said goodbye and was never seen again.

She had a feeling that this wouldn't be like that, but regardless, she hoped that she had gotten Draco out of her system so she could be casual and unaffected once more.

Another sharp tap on the window got Hermione’s attention, and she placed Draco's wand and the water on the bedside table quietly before turning to the waiting owl.

She pushed open her stiff window and took the letter from the impatient ministry owl; the owl helped itself to one of the treats on her windowsill and took off.

She miserably opened the note and read through the work letter; once again the American Ministry was questioning the education standards they'd discussed. She sighed, considering if she should wait until Monday to contact the ambassador or just schedule a meeting now.

She shook her head and grabbed a sheet of blank parchment and an ink-quill; luckily she kept all the necessaries on the shelf next to her window, as was typical of wizard households. As she wrote, she shivered in the cold breeze flowing through the window, her skin tightening with raised hairs.

She penned a quick response, asking the ambassador to come to her office at his earliest convenience, and whistled for her owl.

Ginger flew from the disillusioned shelter Hermione had made in the tree across the street and landed softly next to her; Hermione attached the letter to her leg and gave her a treat.

"This is for Ambassador Gibbons," she murmured. "Have a safe flight."

The tawny owl blinked, swallowing her treat, and took off.

When Hermione turned back to the bed, she was startled to see Draco sitting up against her headboard, watching her.

"Good morning," he said, smiling slightly.
It was an odd sight to see him naked in her bed, her remaining bedsheets bunched around his waist; the large plant on her bedside table was brushing the top of his head with its overbearing leaves.

Hermione suddenly recalled the intense feelings they exchanged the previous night; she knew she was probably sporting wide eyes and a uncertain expression, and she took a deep breath to steady her thoughts.

"Good morning," she replied.

Draco was still smiling slightly, his eyes reflective like chrome as he gazed at her, and she realized that he was staring at her nude body, illuminated perfectly by the sunlight streaming through her window. She looked down, her stomach fluttery.

"Come here," he commanded softly.

She complied, stepping towards him; once she was within range, he lightly caressed her hip, his eyebrows furrowing at the scratches there.

"I hope I wasn't too rough," he said uncertainly. "I was pretty drunk."

Heat flared in her body at the mention of the sex. Their night of passion was a jumbled collection of sounds, pleasure, and skin in her mind, and even now she felt an itch that hadn't quite been scratched. Like he wasn't out of her system yet.

Like she wanted to do it again.

"I liked it," she said boldly, stepping closer and letting him smooth a hand up her side.

Her heart began beating uncontrollably; she could see, in his expression, that he was curious about her body and wanted to touch it still, now that it was morning and he could actually see the details of her skin.

She quivered in anticipation, waiting for him to make a move.

After another stroke of her side he pulled her arm towards him, and she crawled over him, her legs finding either side of his hips as she gently perched on his lap, arching so he had to look up to keep eye contact.

"So..." she said, grasping his hands and directing them to her bare hips. He stroked the new flesh appreciatively, bracing her on his lap.

Now what?

She knew that her nakedness was drawing him in; though she was feeling rather uncertain about all that had transpired the previous night, as the absence of alcohol in her system made it easier for her to question the whole situation, she was willing to muffle those thoughts in favor of the twinge of pleasure that she was getting from straddling him like this.

He trailed a finger over the scar marring her lower belly; Hermione cringed unconsciously, but could detect nothing but curiosity from him as he left the scar alone and explored the rest of her body.

She lost her discomfort the more he glided his hands over her sides and down her bare hips; her arousal was already winning over any reservations or insecurities she had about this situation.

His hands caressed her sides for a few moments before he seemed to realize what her being naked
gave him access to; he trailed a finger down her chest, over her breast, stomach, navel, all the way down, until it was under where she was perched. She stared into his eyes as he brought his fingers back up, softly touching between her legs. She inhaled sharply as he finally found the wetness there, and glided it back and forth.

"Fuck," he breathed, cradling her waist to him quickly as he pushed forward and bared her to the bed. She easily wrapped her legs around him as he kissed her deeply.

As he pressed his body into hers, she let out the breath she didn't know she had been holding, rolling her tongue against his and trying to process everything she was feeling - excited and scared, nervous and yet so sexy, and most of all, relieved; touching another human, being touched so intimately, was a thing that she knew she craved but rarely engaged in.

She wiggled impatiently, clawing at his bare hip; he pulled her leg up by the back of her thigh so he could drop into her.

This was not the hazy, dark and passionate sex they'd engaged in the night before; her vision was clear, abnormally so, as she studied the details of his collarbone, jaw, and then eyes. Even the pleasure was clear and sharp, building with every thrust of his hips. It was surreal to feel his skin, to move against his weight, to adjust to his angles, and to see him so clearly and vividly against the sunlight.

Hermione gripped him with her leg and turned, just enough to let him know that she wanted to flip over; Draco cradled her body against his again and rolled so she was on top of him.

As up became down and her balance shifted, for a moment she was struck with the craziness of the situation; she leaned back so she could look at him properly.

His hair was thoroughly mussed, some slightly damp strands clinging to his forehead; now that he had stopped rocking into her she could actually appreciate the rise and fall of his chest, his half lidded eyes and parted lips. Without his glasses on - oh dear, where had those ended up? - he looked more like the boy she remembered. His expression was softened with pleasure, but the angles of his face were the same, as was the intensity of his eyes.

In the morning light she noticed more details of his body: scars she hadn't seen the night before, marring his chest, arms, and abdomen; the pulsing of blood in the vein in his neck, steady and strong; his heart just visible as it beat against his chest; the definition of muscle down his abs, pale hair trailing down his navel, under where she perched.

Something on his arm suddenly caught her attention, and a cold feeling flooded her chest as she recognized a faded, grey imprint of a tattoo on his wrist - his Dark Mark.

Her vision swam, her hands shaking as she retracted the hand closest to it, as though touching it would burn her.

She had never noticed his Mark before, and she suddenly understood the lengths he went to cover it, probably needing to illusion it every day, which was a complicated charm that took time to carry out.

The spell had started to wear off, and for a moment she watched the ugly design twist lazily on his arm.

It occurred to her just what it meant for her to sleep with him, for the famous muggleborn war hero to ride the Death Eater traitor. That was the true reality of what was happening, regardless of the laughs they'd had, the kisses they'd enjoyed, the trauma they'd revealed. Because even though, as people,
she and Draco were more complex than their simple ascriptions, at their core that's who they were to the rest of the world, and both of them had internalized that to a certain degree.

She looked up and met Draco's gaze, her breathing unsteady, her hands still shaking; his eyes were even brighter than usual as they reflected the light of the morning sun. She thought she detected some fear in his expression.

After a moment he reached for her body and glided his hands up her torso again, like he was reaching for her emotionally as well, to guide her back to the feelings they had shared together, that they were sharing between their connected bodies...

... And the silence was broken when she began to move and his breath came out sharp and ragged.

For Hermione, all other thoughts melted away given the sound that he'd just made; it was indecently hot, evoking that kind of reaction, and she very much wanted more of it, more of that response.

Despite their past, there was no hiding from this reality: that he was inside her, that she was loving it, and that she wanted to make him feel as good as he was making her feel.

She reached forward and brushed Draco's hair away from his forehead as she laid her body over his; she slowly built up the rhythm he had established before, kissing his mouth, his neck, and the underside of his jaw as he tilted his head back.

The sounds he was making were somehow more erotic than they had been the night before; they unleashed a sort of frenzy within her as she suddenly wanted more from him; she pressed against him harder and reached up to capture his wrists above his head. The extra support gave her leverage to come down on him with the force she wanted, and she let gravity and momentum guide her.

He was actually moaning; she had never seen him let go of his composure like this, his eyebrows furrowed, mouth open. He managed to pull one of his hands away from hers and grappled at her hip, possibly to get her to slow down, or give him a second, but it felt so good that she had no intention of stopping until he finished, and she recaptured his wrist and held it fast against the mattress.

Soon she was gasping, desperate, as she lost herself in the feeling, holding his hands against the bed not just possessively but also out of necessity to keep her bearings, to give herself something to hold onto as she started to break apart.

Draco arched his back as he gasped her surname; the look of innocent ecstasy on his face as he came apart was so raw it was almost indecent; witnessing him like this was deeply special, private, and she would not soon forget it.

There was silence as Hermione stopped moving, falling against him as she breathed. Through the soft haze of her orgasm, she became aware of Draco stroking her back, his breath shallow against her skin.

As she caught her own breath, her chin resting on his shoulder, one thought broke through her mind:

*I've just shagged him. Again.*

...Bloody hell.

She realized that she was still shaking, but she couldn't tell if it was this realization, the orgasm, or the chill from the frigid breeze wafting from the open window. She slowly reached next to her and pulled her crumpled sheets over them, as if moving too suddenly would disturb the moment, crack the reality and force her to fully digest the situation.
As she settled under the soft cotton, she listened to the sound of his breath, filling up his lungs and leaving his lips.

"I'm not sure what to say," she began.

Draco's lips turned up in a smile and he laughed, brushing his hair back from his flushed face. Leaning on his chest so, she could hear his chuckles reverberating in his body as laughed, feel his chest contract and expand rapidly.

She turned to look at him, sliding off his body as it rocked with each chuckle.

"What?"

He contained himself after a moment, a smile still puckering his cheeks. "You don't have to have the answer for everything, Granger," he said, shaking his head mirthfully.

She sighed, turning and staring at the ceiling, a light smile unwillingly surfacing. She tried to be grateful that he diffused some of the awkwardness of the situation with his laughter, but her stomach was still in knots.

"This is just... so bizarre," she continued after a minute.

"You're telling me," he replied. "You're the last person I'd expect to wake up next to."

"Because I'm muggleborn?" she asked quietly.

He shook his head and said, "I can't lie, that is part of it. But it's mostly because you're... you."

She nodded, turning back to the ceiling.

"I take it you don't do this often."

She wanted to berate him for his assumption, but he was right; she didn't do this often, and frankly had no idea how to handle it in general, let alone with him. Nevertheless she snorted and asked, "What makes you think I don't do this often?"

"Well, for one you were... ravenous."

She cringed; she knew she had seemed sex-deprived. Oh dear. "Sorry," she said automatically.

"Don't be sorry, it was... really hot. I honestly didn't expect you to be so... wild."

As her cheeks burned with heat, Draco chuckled again, his hand coming up to stroke her hair. Hermione floundered for an appropriate response.

"I mean, I didn't expect you to be so..." What? Passionate? Responsive?

Good?

She trailed off as she saw the expectant and slightly smug look on his face, and she turned away. "I don't know what I thought," she grumbled.

"You expected me to be a selfish arsehole," he finished. "Which I am. But not when it comes to sex."
"Maybe it's a healer thing?" Hermione breathed. "Where you like giving?"

"Mmm... it's probably a control thing. You know... the thought of being the one giving that, doing something to make someone else feel good."

Yep, that sounded more like it. Hermione sighed and said, "As McGonagall used to say - the magic is strongest in the intention."

"Oh, come on Granger, I don't want to think about McGonagall right now," he laughed, and she giggled too, pulling herself closer to him as the air chilled her.

Sex had a way of making people feel closer than ever, and she felt this now as she smoothed her hand over his chest; she would have otherwise felt embarrassed about being so naked in the light of her window or feeling the sweat that slid between them, but she was enjoying the cool air on her bare skin, the heat of his body beneath her, and the sensation of his touches as he threaded his fingers in her hair.

"How did we get here?" Hermione asked softly, rubbing her hand over his chest.

He shrugged slightly; he had found a particularly tight ringlet in the mass of curls tumbling over his shoulder and was pulling it and watching it bounce back in place.

"I mean, people sometimes think I'm interesting, but apparently not enough to..."

"Fuck you?" he supplied matter-of-factly.

She blushed again as a twinge of arousal snaked up her body. She unconsciously drew her nails over his skin.

"You must know the effect you have on wizards, Granger."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

He smirked, still playing with her hair. "I guess that's part of it," he murmured.

When she didn't say anything, he followed with, "Think about it. You managed to secure the affections of Victor Krum, one of the most sought after quidditch players of our time, and if I recall, Cormac McLaggen had a thing for you as well. He had - and continues to have - wizards falling over themselves to be with him."

It was a vague, distant truth that she had ignored, blanketed with endless insecurity and concentration on her goals... she knew that she had an interesting mix of previous romantic dalliances, but she didn't really let that inform her opinion of herself.

"And I guess Dirk Winston was pretty up there as well..." she murmured.

"Winston, the inventor of the pocket portkey? Blimey, Granger," he chuckled. "Why would you ever want to sleep with me? He's got like twenty patents and looks like a demigod."

Hearing what she had done it out loud was somewhat jarring - it had an abrasive effect that made her stomach clench again - but at the same time it had a way of socializing the idea of it, and the idea that it was okay.

"I mean, I... it happens that... well, if you look at it... uh, you have quite an effect yourself," she finished lamely.
"Ah, yes," he replied bitterly; for a moment she thought he was going to just take the compliment, but then he followed with, "but I've had enough people tell me about the 'beautiful flesh that hides the foulness within'."

"Did someone actually say that to you?"

"Yeah. Astoria," he replied. "Granted, I deserved that, I just didn't know it yet."

"You dated Astoria Greengrass?" Hermione asked, cursing the uncomfortable feeling buzzing in her gut at the thought of the beautiful witch.

"Yeah," he said simply.

"Why?"

He rolled his head to look at her, studying her expression for a moment, before he replied, "She seemed like the right choice at the time. Pedigreed, upstanding, yet untarnished from the War."

"But..."

"Remember what I said about dating someone because of who you suppose them to be?" he said. "It was that, with a little bit of family pressure thrown in for good measure."

Hermione nodded, watching his chest rise and fall against the sun; the sound of the city was getting louder as more cars took to the streets and the bakeries and cafes opened their doors to early customers.

"You should hear the things people said about me," Hermione put forth.

Draco scoffed. "Try me, Goody Granger. One partner said I was like a 'ripe peach with a worm-rotten pit'."

"Surely you don't internalize everything people say about you?"

"I'd like to think that I don't," he replied, "but whether we know it at the time or not, words reveal truth; they manifest our will. Whether they be hexes or curses, lies, insults, or words of happiness and joy... the soul of what we speak wields power."

She met his eyes, and in the sadness there, the same sadness he had gazed upon her with when he had attempted to apologize to her, she saw that he was speaking not only for his naysayers, but also for himself.

She turned back to the ceiling, her thoughts slipping back to the past unwillingly, as her eyes traced the overpainted moulding lining the corners of her walls. She took a calm reassurance in gazing at the details of her private space, watching the light burn brighter as the sun rose from behind the skyline.

She could never have anticipated this situation, could never have planned for this. She was a planner, she knew this about herself, because it was calming to have a back-up plan, reassuring to feel secure that she knew what to do in any situation. Unfortunately she'd been so caught up in trying to rationalize dating him that she'd barely thought through the ramifications of sleeping with him in general. She didn't feel the way Ron had suggested she would feel, where she'd feel like she lost something, gave him more than he deserved, but she was still massively unsettled, and couldn't help but feel disoriented and unsure of where to go from here.
"What's that look?" he asked, an eyebrow raised.

She sighed. "Just wondering for the millionth time whether this was a good idea."

"I'm no Seer, but I guarantee it wasn't," he replied wryly, slipping his hand off her stomach.

"That's reassuring," she said with a smirk.

"Well, I just... I feel like I need to warn you. It's not like you didn't already know, but..." He caressed her side with the tips of his fingers. "I have a tendency to hurt people just by being myself."

"Don't worry," she waved, not disagreeing with him. "I know who you are."

He grimaced and nodded, looking away.

She reached over and touched his face; despite the fact that their bodies had been connected a short time before, this move still felt incredibly intimate to Hermione. "I said don't worry about it, Draco; I'm a mess as well."

"You're perfect," he retorted.

Her heart sped up a bit at this declaration - she couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic about her scholastic intensity or genuine about her as a person - but she shook her head anyway. "I'm not, I assure you."

Draco was silent, idly tracing her skin as he gazed at her, and Hermione couldn't help but get lost in his eyes, so close to her face, so layered with what appeared to be internal turmoil. After a second she noticed that he was squinting slightly, and she realized that she was reading too much into his look, because not wearing glasses was probably making it hard for him to focus on her face.

"Here, let's... find your glasses," she started awkwardly. "Did you see where they went?"

Draco sat up with some effort and sighed heavily. "I don't know, they disappeared somewhere," he commented, looking around the crumpled sheets. Eventually he gave up and retrieved his wand.

"Sorry," Hermione replied, standing and stretching her muscles.

"It's not your fault. Besides, sometimes I fall asleep with them on and when I wake up they've imprinted on my face."

Hermione smiled at the thought of that - Draco snoring, his glasses askew, revealing perfect pink lines of where they had been pressed into his face all night.

She left to retrieve the clothing trailing into her bedroom, plucking his ripped shirt and her own off the floor of her kitchen. She hugged the fabric to her chest, and for a moment had an incessant urge to bury her face in it and inhale; she hadn't quite gotten enough of his scent in the last few minutes and was missing it already...

She gathered the rest of their clothing in a state of baffled disbelief, going through the motions of tidying as she firmly neutralized her thoughts. Once back in her room, she unloaded their clothing on her bed and went to her wardrobe to get dressed.

Hermione selected her London Philharmonic t-shirt and pulled it over her head, not bothering with a bra. As she pulled up her jeans, she turned to see Draco with his head in his hands.

"Hangover is starting to rear," he sighed, rubbing his temple.
"Yeah, me too," Hermione put forth, her stomach quivering again.

"You wouldn't happen to have some Hydrating Tonic, would you?"

"Not on hand, but I can make it real quick."

He waved his hand. "Don't worry, I can summon some. I have a whole store in my study."

Hermione eyed him critically, and he followed quickly, "Not just for me, but for Blaise too. He needs them all the time."

Draco turned and bent to gather the rest of his clothing. "My shirt is in taters," he continued lightly, picking up the useless garment.

Hermione looked back at him, watching him weigh the pieces of his shirt, trying to figure out how it was supposed to go back together.

"I have a shirt you can borrow - "

He waved his hand, standing so he could find his pants. "Looks like I might need to just call my house elf. Do you mind?"

She couldn't help the slightly incredulous bubble of irritation that rose in her chest - she had been the one pushing legislation for wages and better treatment of house elves and other magical creatures, and to this day didn't like people ordering them around in front of her. Despite this she shook her head mutely, gesturing.

It was possible to tell a lot about a person based on how they treated those with less power, but regardless she didn't really want to watch Draco interact with a servant.

Hermione ran a hand through her hair, resolving to get her appearance under control and brush her teeth while Draco did his thing.

When she exited the washroom, her hair tamed, face washed, and teeth brushed, Draco was buttoning up a fresh pair of trousers. Hermione watched him pull on his undershirt and his button up, fascinated by his methodical nature.

Those things taken care of, Draco took up a few vials and uncorked one.

Hermione immediately recognized the dark orange glassware of a prescriptive potion - in fact, a few years ago she'd had a prescription that looked exactly like that -

"Is that... a mood stabilizing potion?"

Draco nodded, swallowing.

"Is it... is it for..." She paused, then sighed. "What is it for, if you don't mind me asking?"

He stared at the now empty vial, clearly weighing his options.

"You don't have to tell me, if you don't want to," she qualified quickly.

He looked up at her, studying her expression; Hermione fidgeted, the uncomfortable feeling she'd had a short time before rearing briefly.

Draco recorked and vanished the vial, and then said simply, "It helps."
That was only minorly sufficient for Hermione's inquisitive mind, and she studied his expression, trying to determine what he was thinking. There, just beyond the facade of calm, she saw a wild desperation, fear, and... embarrassment?

His eyes were always like a storm in a bottle, and his expression frequently made her nervous the way adding an ingredient to a potion by accident did, the moment of absolute fear in wait as she tried to discern his motivations. Many things suddenly made sense at once - his stoked-down nature, eerie calm, the subtle inkling she had of being lead like a lamb to a wolf's den, the raw ease of his happiness when he was drunk...

This wasn't his natural state, but something vaguely induced by his medication.

Hermione made a noncommittal noise of interest, playing off the odd moment, and said, "I didn't know you took a potion."

"Of course I take a potion for it. Don't you?"

"No, it made me too foggy. To... complacent."

He nodded knowingly. "Yes, sometimes I feel a little... detached. But it's worth it."

Hermione bit her lip. There really was so much she still didn't know about him, so much that she would potentially find off-putting about the way he moved through the world. She couldn't really judge anyone that took medication, as it wasn't always a choice, but her philosophy had always been to try to deal with problems herself... even taking potions for the flu was always a last resort, as she preferred trying to wait out sickness and care for it with rest, good food, and herbal teas.

"Look, I know you probably won't agree with my reasoning, but... I had to grow up sometime, Granger. I couldn't function, the way I was."

"The way you were?"

"You remember what I was like," he said seriously.

"Yes, but..." she paused. "The potion isn't making you different, is it?"

He shook his head. "No, don't worry. I was just... I was always in a bad place. This helps so much with... not being depressed all the time. Come on, you know how mood stabilizers work."

Hermione nodded slowly as he pulled on his shoes and deftly did up the laces.

"I'm trying to taper off, but if I get sent to Chengdu next week to heal the sick..." He finished with the laces and sighed heavily, staring down at his feet. "I imagine I'll need it. To keep me level."

"That makes sense," she answered quietly, rubbing the edge of her t-shirt thoughtfully.

"By the way," he said, clearly trying to change the subject, "I found my glasses." He produced two pieces of his honey frames, a smirk dotting his face.

Hermione gave him a look and raised her wand. "Oculus reparo," she said, and as the pieces fused together, the scratches on the lenses fading away, she had a startling moment of familiarity, or deja vu. Her eyes clouded over as he thanked her and put the frames on.

"I, um, also summoned this, for you. For the..." he gestured around her midsection. "You know. Just in case."
That snapped her out of her memory. "Right, of course. Thanks," she murmured, taking the tiny purple vial and thumbing over the crystal surface.

She followed him slowly into her living room as he shouldered on his robe.

Hermione crossed her arms, leaning on the wall next to the front door as he sorted himself out.

"So... what happens now?" she asked.

He met her eyes, a note of mirth in his expression as he brushed off his sleeves. "What did I say earlier?"

She sighed. "I don't need to have an answer for everything."

He nodded and raised his hand to her face, thumbing over her cheek. It looked like he was about to say something else, and she gazed at him, waiting.

Instead, he dropped his hand and murmured, "I'll see you around, Hermione."

After he exited, she closed the door softly and leaned against it, listening for his footsteps down the hall; as she waited, confusion settled over her, as she couldn't hear him moving away. Had he aparated without her knowing?

Finally a sound did meet her ears - a soft knock.

She opened the door, and there he was, his gaze already searching for hers. By the time she had opened the door fully, his lips were on hers and he was gripping her waist, his fingers bunching the thin cotton of her shirt.

She thought she was free of this, that she'd been satisfied enough to go about her day, but her libido was instantly tickled at the electrifying sensation of his hands smoothing over her breasts, the light fabric brushing over her nipples.

"Dammit, Malfoy," she murmured harshly against his lips, pulling him in and slamming her door.
Hermione moved through her week in a clouded haze, unusually detached and distant. With her manuscripts sent and the second quarter in full swing, she had more mental space to dwell on her life, something she didn't do enough of. But with all the new things happening around her, she felt like she needed to establish a baseline, or something, to organize what the hell she was doing. And not just with work, but with her personal life as well.

And currently, her "personal life" was mostly comprised of trying not to think about a certain blond healer.

It was still alarmingly odd to her, what had happened between her and Draco, and it almost felt like it wasn't real; sometimes she convinced herself that no, she had been dreaming and her oversexed mind had finally stretched too far and made her fantasies seem real.

But then she would find little clues - Draco's discarded water glass on her kitchen counter, a rogue button from his destroyed shirt, the purple vial in her recycling - and she would have to come to terms with the fact that it had happened. And it had been amazing.

She couldn't help but feel distracted and generally unsettled still, even given the satisfaction of orgasming with another person, even given the final barrier down between them. Because leading with sex wasn't a way she typically interacted with people.

In that respect, her relationship with Draco truly was foreign territory.

But despite the odd feelings she was practically bursting with the secret; their tangled bodies flashed under her eyelids whenever she blinked, and when she bit into food for a moment the flavor would resemble his skin. The secret was on the tip of her tongue at all times, when she was in tense meetings or having lunch with Padma, when she conversed with the friendly baker at the patisserie across the street from her flat, when she was queuing for fireplaces. She wanted to shout it down the block - *I've been shagged rotten by Draco Malfoy!*

Part of the pleasure was a distant fantasy, a fantasy of what she could've had when she was younger, a simple wisp of dark curiosity. Vague ideas of whether Malfoy could use his mouth for more than just spewing insults, if he would be as rough as a lover as he was as an enemy.

She knew the answer to these questions now, and when the thoughts of his hands or his lips or the sound of his moans flitted across her mind, she could smirk to herself, indulge in a twinge of arousal from the memory, and shake away the delectable thoughts.

The Ministry was alight with early morning activity when she flooed in, and she crossed the atrium, going with the flow of traffic as she made her way to her office.

Despite being distracted she was also a lot less stressed, and had more capacity to engage with her colleagues, dig into articles written by pro-muggleborn activists around the world, and hustle with feisty diplomats.

She was also delving deeper into her thought magic research, as she was starting to understand more of the physiology of the brain and how soul telepathy in particular interacted with it. The magic behind intention - how wizards willed things to happen - was all theory and opinion, nothing rooted in actual science.
Muggle science as she knew it was precise, where most things could be explained right down to the chemical processes in the body. Even wizard potions operated on a similar level - adding powdered root of asphodel introduced certain proteins into a potion that had certain properties.

But wizard science relied mostly on trial and error. Some things could be explained the muggle way - for instance, memory charms affected areas of the brain that controlled memory - but there was always something else, something extra, that was unexplainable. It was the magic itself, the wild card that made things happen with little explanation beyond, "it's magic." The core of this was intention - something about the will of a wizard made magic happen.

If she could figure out the relationship between wanting something and making it happen... the possibilities for understanding magic were endless.

Hermione indulged in a tiny spark of excitement at the thought.

It was Thursday, usually her day to actually get work done beyond attending meetings or schmoozing diplomats, but today would actually be a bit busy in the early part of the day. She had a monthly meeting with Padma, a one-off meeting with the lobbyists from Namibia, and then a several-hour manager calibration session that would be dreadfully boring. She retrieved her planner, checking this - yes, just as she thought - and moved her attention to the mail.

Among her morning stack of letters was the standard corporate drivel from Inkhearts - updating her on the sales of the schedule planner - as well as several letters from various lobbyists and diplomats likely responding to previous correspondence.

At the bottom of the stack was a curiously small envelope, one of the ones she recognized from a letter set she'd bought for Ron ages ago. She turned the tiny envelope over to discover her given name scrawled on the front.

Ron.

She tore open the letter and digested it quickly - words were said... clear the air... meet for tea at the old spot.

Hermione sighed, dropping her arm and letting the letter dangle from her fingers; of course Ron sent a letter weeks later, he rarely found it in him to properly communicate anything of real importance. But she knew this, and didn't expect anything more... she just assumed that he would have figured out how much she disliked that. They were supposed to be friends.

But meeting up with Ron meant that they would have to talk through what they'd fought about at the ball, and given that she'd just shagged Malfoy it seemed like... inopportune timing.

A soft knock sounded at her door, and Hermione turned to see Celes in her doorway.

"Your monthly with Ambassador Patil is in two minutes, ma'am."

"And I'm here," Padma added, appearing, her hand gripping the doorframe as Celes grimaced and scurried back to her desk.

"Don't make me drag you to a proper coffee spot, I'm going crazy in here and won't stomach any more of this month's brew," she said, coming around to stand next to Hermione. "What've you got there?"

"I'll need some coffee before I get into that," Hermione sighed and gestured toward the door.
Hermione followed Padma out, down the lifts and into the atrium as the dark-haired woman chattered about the Indian lobbyists making headway in the English ministry, as well as a new law in India that prohibited the live skinning of magical creatures, a giant leap in magizoology activism that would surely encourage other countries to follow suit.

Once the pair was safely in The Pot and the Kettle and Hermione had two palms over a cup of black coffee, she started to relax, getting into the rhythm of discussing her plans for the second half of the year and how they would impact diplomatic relations with India. She and Padma had been talking about collaborating more directly for some time, but having seen firsthand how progressive the Indian community was Hermione felt confident that speeding up that collaboration would be wise.

"This is amazing, Hermione," Padma put forth. "This is the first time I've actually been... I don't know, excited about something the Ministry is doing."

"Yes, it's bold, isn't it? Testing an integrated community here in London?"

"Absolutely. It's amazing how people change their tunes about muggles once they live near them. Muggles don't seem so boring or daft when they're a friendly neighbor."

"And - our people have no place in judging a community we barely interact with. And the same goes for the muggles."

"You've talked to the Prime Minister, then?"

Hermione shook her head. "His aides and advisors only. Busy man. But I'm optimistic there."

"Okay... but you know this isn't why I dragged you out of the office," Padma said, raising an eyebrow.

Hermione shrugged lightly, a response she usually never appreciated, trying to keep her expression neutral as she trained her eyes on the table.

"The letter," Padma reminded.

"Oh yes. That." Hermione took a slow sip of her coffee. Padma was turning her deep gaze upon Hermione as usual, coaxing truth without knowing it.

"Girl, what's gotten into you?" she asked.

Hermione almost choked on the hot liquid, and she coughed, setting the offensive cup down as calmly as she could.

Draco has!

"Nothing," Hermione rasped, clearing her throat.

Padma eyed her, and Hermione could already feel herself crumpling under the girl's knowing gaze.

"I, um, got a letter from Ron. Says he wants to talk," she said finally.

Padma gave her an I'm-not-falling-for-that look, but said, "I can't believe the prick waited so long."

"Yes, it took him long enough, didn't it? Almost two weeks."

"I know... did he say anything? Apologize?"
Hermione sighed. "In his way. He said that we need to meet up and 'clear the air'."

"Ah, well. He must know he made a mess of things. So that's good then." She took a sip of her tea, and not-so-subtly put forth, "What about the other one? Did you get things sorted out with Malfoy, then?"

Hermione nodded, trying her coffee and hoping that there wasn't a lingering blush on her cheeks.

"You shagged him, didn't you," Padma deadpanned.

Hermione sighed, nodding again.

Padma hid a wide smile behind her cup, her eyes sparkling.

"Don't ask," Hermione preempted, recognizing that sly look.

Padma raised her hand defensively, grinning. "I didn't say anything!"

"But you were thinking it," she retorted.

"I'm just happy someone is finally turning you out," Padma defended, still grinning.

"Well, I can't let you have all the fun."

"Shagging Malfoy is way more interesting than shagging the people I've got coming in and out."

Hermione's cheeks reddened unwillingly and she swatted at her friend, looking around. The cafe's early morning rush paid the girls no mind; people were too impatient to get their morning dose of caffeine and be on their way.

"What? No one cares, Hermione - "

"I know, I just..." she dropped her voice even more, "I don't want another Witch Weekly article."

"You know people are going to find out eventually," Padma said, eying her.

"Well, if they do, I'd prefer them to find out when it's actually a thing. And maybe not from the rags."

"You and Malfoy aren't 'a thing'?"

Hermione paused a moment then shook her head resolutely. "No, it was only one time."

"Yes but... oh, wow, Hermione, I'm so proud of you!"

"Wha - how do you mean?" Hermione asked confusedly.

Padma waved her hand excitedly. "You actually shagged someone just to shag them! You didn't try to calculate if you should get married first!"

Hermione made to nod in affirmation but stopped, a cloud passing over her expression. "No, I did that. I just decided to shag him anyway."

"Oh," Padma said, faltering a bit. "Well, still. Good for you. I'm so curious, but... okay, I won't ask, don't worry!" she finished, waving at Hermione's threatening expression. "But at least answer me this. How do you feel, now that you've... done it?"
Hermione shrugged again, looking into her cup. "I don't know, Padma, it's... it doesn't feel real. I thought that I was sort of... getting him out of my system, by doing it. And that we would figure out the boundaries afterward. But when he left... everything was still uncertain."

"Oh, I bet that's driving you mad," Padma said mirthfully, earning another sharp look and unwitting smile.

"Okay, Hermione, let me put it like this. When it comes to dating... sex, love, whatever... you can't stick to a plan. As soon as you get involved with someone else, the plan goes out the window. And what fun would it be if it didn't?"

"I know, but the uncertainty... urgh, I can't deal with this," Hermione groaned, rubbing her temple.

"That's part of the fun! Figuring things out as you go. Like when someone else is levitating you. You just have to trust your gut, know when to brace yourself for a fall."

"What if I don't want to fall?"

"Then drop dead," Padma retorted, and snickered at Hermione's exasperated expression.

Despite the cheek, Padma was right. It was just like Draco had said: she couldn't have the answer for everything. So what could she assume, given what had happened already?

She'd already had an inkling that what happened within the confines of her apartment was meant to stay there, and that the second Draco had departed for the last time, the illusion had cracked, and they were no longer in the special realm where making out was okay, touching was okay, having sex was okay.

When he'd finally left, there had been an air of finality to it, like that was going to be it. And it wasn't just because him knocking on her door for yet another shag within seconds of leaving was officially off the table - he'd already done that. Afterwards he'd kissed her, wished her a good week, and stepped out, apparating who-knows-where as soon as the door shut.

She didn't know what to expect with Draco - while the attraction and interest were mutual, she suspected that the uncertainty was as well, which made their future interactions completely unplannable. And because of this, she was fairly confident that her assessment was correct: the thing with Malfoy was likely done. They'd done the deed, and now she could move on, and just worry about how to act when they ran into each other again in public.

"Alright, enough about boys. You've got that faraway look again."

Hermione snapped out of her thoughts and smiled apologetically. "Sorry. What's new with you?"

Padma took a deep breath and said, "I'm finally going to get a haircut."

"Oh, that's great! The one we discussed?"

Padma smoothed a hand over her ebony tresses and said, "Maybe something a little safer for now. While I still hold a Confederation of Wizards seat."

"You know that doesn't matter. Your talent is what shines, not your hair."

"It's actually shining a little too much today," the woman said, touching her hair again. "And speaking of shining - you are positively radiant, love. Was it the sex?"
Hermione gave Padma a look, fighting a blush, and corrected, "I'm sure it's not that. I actually got this new 'curl activating' potion - "

"Oooo, curl activating."

Hermione nodded, smirking. "Yes, it's supposed to 'activate and invigorate' your curl."

"Hmm, yes, your curls do look rather activated."

Hermione snickered, shaking her head - marketing nonsense always made her smile. She'd definitely have to open the corporate letters from Inkhearts for a good laugh later.

"Back to the grind," Padma sighed, tapping on Hermione's watch - oh yes, she had three minutes to make it to her next meeting - and the women stood, levitating their dishes to the dishrack and shuffling their wiry chairs back into the table.

Hermione's next meeting with the Namibian lobbyists took all of her focus, as she was working with them closely as they challenged anti-muggleborn bias among their leaders. Crafting a diplomatic strategy that gained the leaders' favor in the short term so they could be challenged in the long term was incredibly tedious - but Hermione would be lying if she said that she didn't enjoy it at least a little.

After exiting the meeting room and saying final goodbyes, she rechecked her planner to determine how much time she had before she needed to be in the next meeting.

She sighed audibly as the three-hour manager calibration meeting melted away, leaving her calendar free and clear for the rest of the day. Thank goodness too - that was time she desperately needed to make headway on her article stack, as well as finish the paper she was writing on how anti-muggleborn laws shape the muggleborn experience generation after generation...

With her meeting canceled and her boss on vacation yet again, she actually had time to run some errands after lunch, work on her piece, and then perhaps catch up on articles in the evening while she listened to her favorite record.

After locking up and taking the lifts down to the atrium, she thought through possible lunch spots. There were more restaurants on Flitterby Avenue than in Diagonal Alley, so it made sense to stop by her favorite lunch place and then head to the grocers down the street to refresh her fridge.

She stepped in the fireplaces and said clearly, "Flitterby Avenue", and was whisked there in a flurry of green flames.

....

Flitterby Avenue Cafe
Soho W District
London
May 15th

Flitterby Avenue itself wasn't usually her scene; she much preferred Diagon Alley and the surrounding offshoots in Shoreditch. Flitterby was in Soho, and didn't have the quirky, welcoming vibe of Diagonal Alley, but still sported a decently-priced food scene. Any stroll down this street always had her emptying her pockets for pastries, new potion ingredients, eclectic oddities, or a
beautiful new book. The clothing boutiques were pricey but modern, and she frequently coveted pieces there until she grounded her nerves and committed the galleons.

One glance up and down the street told her that it was mostly tourists and working professionals out at this hour, using their lunchtimes to do a little shopping or take clients to the local eateries. She briefly hoped that her usual spot wouldn't have a wait.

She entered her favorite restaurant - a small, sunny sort of place with healthy options and a decent price-point. She was happy to see that her favorite perch - the table next to the panacea trees, near enough to the patio to benefit from a breeze but without the flies - was available. She made her way there and sat, depositing her satchel on the ground and taking up the menu.

Hermione already knew what she wanted, she shouldn't even bother with the thing, but she liked to entertain the idea of trying new things, as she made a concerted effort to do that in most areas of her life. This was different however - breaking the pattern of anticipation of that same taste, same flavor, was incredibly difficult, especially since at this point it was comforting to have some familiarity in her life, what with all of the unplanned and unexpected things happening to her.

When Mindy the waitress came, her smile toothy and wide as usual, Hermione ordered her favorite salad - the one with the toasted walnuts and sweet vinaigrette - and a glass of chardonnay, an added treat she rarely indulged in during lunch. The girl smiled and left, not bothering to write this down.

Decompressing over lunch was not usually something Hermione could indulge in, as she often consumed her lunch with the same kind of efficiency she wrote documentation with. She tried to mellow her thoughts now, consciously letting go of her work troubles as a hint of breeze blew through the patio doors to her right.

Her wine and food came quickly - another reason why she liked this place - and she tucked in, conscious of eating slowly and not barreling through her food like she typically would.

Getting deeper into thought magic had stirred her into action the previous day, and she had quietly retrieved applications for both the Unspeakable program and for the Jilner Institute's fall enrollment. It was unlikely that she would be accepted into the Unspeakable program without a degree in something related to her field of study, and her degree in Ethnic & Cultural Studies was not likely to get her far. If she started at Jilner in the fall, she could go part-time and be through it in two years, one year if she dialed down her job... she could manage it, she always found a way. She'd done more with less energy before, like when she was working for The Daily Prophet while she'd been helping with the muggleborn genome project. She vaguely recalled the time she'd fallen asleep at her desk and the ink had dyed her cheek, so it read "DNA sample" for a few hours before anyone had told her.

Hermione looked up absently, chewing, and was startled to see a familiar face across the cafe, a book in one hand and a fork in the other.

Draco was there, his eyes following words on the page as he read. His healer robes were draped over the chair next to him, though given his tight collar and unwrinkled shirt, it seemed like he hadn't started work yet.

Hermione bit her lip, indulging in the secret pleasure of watching him while he was reading - oh Merlin, she already knew that she typically went for intelligent types, people she could talk to, but seeing him here, calmly engrossed in his book... petals of hair between his fingers as he leaned against his hand... eyebrows lightly creasing, glasses slipping, and...

Oh god, there, right there, she could see a hint of a bruise poking out from beneath his collar,
purplish and red, as though a vampire had tried their best to make a snack out of him -

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione jumped, whipping around like she'd just been caught touching herself in class.

Standing next to her was a young blonde witch, all smiles and dimples; the witch looked familiar, and Hermione blanked for a second before she remembered who she was.

"Heather, right?" Hermione asked, her voice too high, and she cleared her throat as she extended her hand. "Great to see you. How did the interview go?"

"Oh, it was amazing, Miss Granger, I can't thank you enough! I've been inducted into the Unspeakable program for the fall!"

"That's fantastic, Heather, and please, just Hermione is fine. Which section are you going for?"

"Mysteries of the Brain, ma'am."

"Yes, that program is one of the hardest," Hermione put forth.

"I couldn't have done it without your help!" the young witch gushed. "Please owl me if you ever need anything, anything at all!"

Hermione chuckled nervously, looking around. "Okay, cheers."

As Heather squeezed her hand one final time and departed, she looked over at Draco to discover him watching her, his lips turned up in a smile.

Oh dear. It was that private smile Draco had beset her with when he'd seen her across the room at the other restaurant, but this time it had a deep twinge to it, as though he was recalling something less implied and more... specific.

Hermione watched in vague horror as he stood slowly and put on his robe, collected his plate and book, and made his way closer, and closer, sidestepping into her aisle, getting closer still, until he was standing in front of her table.

She looked up at him, at a loss for words.

"Granger," he murmured in greeting.

"Malfoy," she replied automatically, her throat dry.

When she didn't say anything else, he slid into the seat across from her with a sigh, placing his dish on the marble table lightly.

She tried not to over-analyze the situation, but quickly realized that with them sitting and eating together, he had just turned the next hour from a standard lunch into a date.

"No sense in eating by myself if you're here," he said conversationally, setting down his water and taking up his fork.

"Yes," she affirmed shakily. His scent wafted towards her, and involuntarily she melted just a little as she recalled how that scent was still on her sheets. She'd been rolling around in it like a cat for days, relishing in the memory of his skin, his clenched grip on her hips, his other hand a fistful of her hair -
"On break?" Hermione rasped, and cleared her throat again.

"Yes. Lots to plan still in the East," he replied. "I'll need to be in around two."

She took this information in, trying not to conjure how much trouble she could get into in two hours, how much sweet, amazing, world-bending trouble.

She refocused on him to discover him eating his pasta, and she dropped her gaze to her salad, taking up her fork and badgering herself for getting a dish that was impossible to eat gracefully in public.

"So... anything new? I haven't seen you since... the other day."

Hermione cringed, her body responding again; this was ridiculous, it was like they'd never had sex at all. Draco was still hopelessly distracting, and she'd clearly not gotten the prick out of her system, not calmed down her rampant sexual needs. It was like her body could tell that pleasure was no more than an arm's length away, and was desperately reaching for the tall Slytherin.

"Busy with work," she responded, stabbing her fork into a cherry tomato and watching the juice squirt out and drip over the sides.

"I've been completely swamped myself, between two twelves and all the logistics for the Chengdu team. Today is typically my day off, but I have to go in for a bit to finish some things."

_Well, isn't he a chatterbox_, Hermione thought sourly. She speared some salad and asked, "So do you know where you'll be working in the East?"

Draco nodded, taking up the water in front of him. "Yes, I'll be in Nepal. We're staying in Kathmandu, and portkeying out to the border to help figure out the best course for transfiguration therapy. I'll be helping my mentor."

Hermione thought for a second, swallowed the food in her mouth, and asked, "Can you tell me a bit about the disease? Perhaps I can help."

"Sure. We know that it is primarily spread through contaminated water. It causes the body to leak from multiple places - eyes, nose, mouth, ears... elsewhere. The person dies from dehydration in just a few days. The only thing keeping it at bay is the Hydrating Tonics we've been brewing in bulk, but it's an incredible waste of resources - "

"Yes, especially since it isn't actually curing the disease," Hermione finished. "And this was originally spread from Chengdu, correct?"

He nodded grimly. "A potion gone wrong. The man threw it in a river to dispose of it and ended up contaminating the whole area."

"Do we know what areas of the body it attacks?"

"Plasma volume and osmolarity are severely affected, but that is likely due to the fluid loss. We think it has something to do with the absorption - either the stomach is not delivering the necessary fluids to the small intestine to be distributed throughout the body, or there is some sort of infection of the small intestine."

"How is it that the fluids come out of a person's ears?" Hermione asked. "Also, it seems like the body is expelling mostly through orifices, but you'd think that sweat would be the main method."

"Yes, fluid is expelled through sweat, but not nearly as much. The water and sodium aren't actually
"Okay, it's being rejected. Water and electrolytes aren't being recognized as healthy... are people vomiting as well?"

"Yes, primarily."

Hermione thought quickly. "Well, vomiting can be triggered when the blood contains a certain level of toxins. So... have you analyzed what people are actually throwing up?"

"Yes - it's a mess of stomach acid, water, and trace amounts of other fluids you wouldn't expect, even blood."

"Okay, okay... bear with me for a second. All of these functions can be controlled by the brain, that's a given - vomiting, crying, etcetera. And you think it has something to do with the stomach or the small intestines being infected?"

"I mean, that's where the failure is happening."

"Have you considered this to be an auto-immune disease? Perhaps there's something that is telling the body to expel water, something convincing the body that it's toxic - "

"Oh, I see what you mean," he murmured, "which would explain why absorption is being halted. But even so, the body wouldn't reject something so hard, not naturally. I haven't seen it in person yet, but infected people are completely incapacitated by all the fluid excretion. Vomiting and crying uncontrollably."

"Hmm... okay. I think there's some investigation to be had at the brain level. The failed stomach and small intestine functions may be but a symptom of a larger problem."

"Okay," Draco said, conjuring a small notebook-quill set and writing this down.

"Also, there is a muggle disease called cholera that has similar symptoms, it might help to look into that as well. I'm not sure of the history behind it, but regardless it may give you some insight into what to test for."

"Cholera, I remember something about that in healing school," he murmured, still writing.

Hermione looked down and concentrated on her salad, scooting her feet under her chair to avoid touching his legs. Her own legs were bare today, as she was wearing her accordion skirt, and she was vaguely thankful that she'd actually done a decent job shaving this morning and hadn't spilled anything on herself yet today.

"It's a nasty business," Draco sighed when he finished, vanishing his notebook. "but someone has to do it."

"Sounds like fulfilling work."

"Ah, well, it's all about helping out. I just want people to be happy."

Hermione smiled, her heart all warm and squishy, before she noticed his smirky expression and her smile fell.

"You're being sarcastic," she muttered.

Draco snorted, chuckling properly. "Of course, what kind of Hufflepuff do you take me for? But
seriously, it is good to see people better. Just like fixing a broken broomstick, you know? The satisfaction of taking something broken and fixing it."

"I can't believe you just compared healing to fixing broomsticks," Hermione said, shaking her head.

He shrugged cheekily, taking a bite of his pasta.

"I know you care about people," she said softly. "You don't have to hide it."

"I'm not trying to hide anything," he retorted. "You can't do my job and not care at least a little. Besides," he sighed, taking a sip of his water, and finished, "The patients... are always so grateful. It's nice but it's... disconcerting."

"Why does their appreciation make you feel uncomfortable?"

He made a face like she'd just asked him something ridiculous and said, "How about we save the therapy for therapy?"

She was curious, but despite this decided to let him off the hook, shrugging and taking a bite from her plate. "Is being on the edge... is that better? Than being in Chengdu?"

Draco shrugged lightly, taking a sip of his water, and replied, "Probably. The disease... I can't imagine being there in person. It's chaos."

"Did you have to request that? To be on the edge?"

He shook his head. "I think Healer Camille wants me to have more of an organizational role, at least for the coming weeks. We're still smoothing out details. Adjusting." He paused, his voice dropping. "Besides... if I didn't want to go I could figure out a way. I've always known how to get what I want."

Hermione paled, her heart skipping a long beat; the conflicting sensations of arousal and fear collided oddly in her body, mixing into nausea. She looked down into her salad, trying to re-concentrate on the food and avoid Malfoy's eyes.

She already knew him to be somewhat manipulative, but she hadn't really thought about preventing him from being that way with her. She suddenly felt rather unprotected sitting here with him, thinking too much about how delicious his body had been and how much she wanted it still.

"You've got that look like you're about to hex me again," he said.

Hermione shook her head, stabbing another cherry tomato. "Not hex you, no."

Draco put a separating finger between his collar and his bruise - why hadn't he taken care of that thing? - and loosened the fabric lightly as he thought.

"Run away, then?" he suggested softly.

"Of course I want to run away, when you say things like that," she retorted.

He pushed his glasses up, leaning back. "You've got nothing to be afraid of, I'm harmless." He paused. "And if I'm being honest... you scare me too."

Hermione furrowed her brows; she didn't think of herself as being 'scary'. "How so?"

Draco took a sip of his water, set it down, then replied, "You're... intimidating."
This wasn't the first time she'd heard this from someone; it had been one of the biggest barriers between her and Ron. Hermione sighed, wincing as she took a long sip of wine.

"I know I'm a bit intense, I always have been, but... I don't know. You don't need to be 'afraid.'"

"No, I'm not afraid that you'll dismember me or something - "

Hermione cringed at the flippantly gruesome image.

"- but you're just... a lot. You know me too well."

"I feel like that's not true."

"I think you'll find that you know me better than you think you do," he replied. "But I really know nothing about you."

"What do you know about me?"

"I know that you want to know everything. And you want harmony within our world." He paused, eyes fixed on her, and a familiar nervousness rose in Hermione's chest as she recognized that look. She prayed he would keep his mouth shut, and thankfully he did, only giving her a private smirk before taking a calculated sip of his water.

Hermione resisted the urge to fan herself; if he kept this up she was going to physically assault him in public, and whether that meant actually tearing him limb from limb or snogging him, she wasn't sure.

"And you wonder why you're frightening," she grumbled.

"Okay, okay, I'll play nice," he murmured. "Up until now I was deliberately careful with you, trying not to scare you."

"Still, sometimes I feel like... I'm straying from a safe path. When I'm with you."

"It's funny you say that," he replied, "because I sometimes feel like a dementor being led toward the light."

"Toward a patronus?"

He smiled, his gaze gentle, and replied, "I think that remains to be seen."

"You're hardly a dementor."

"Hmmm... some people might disagree with you there."

"Why... why do you think...?"

"By some magic I've managed to stop from hurting you, at least recently," he put forth, "but I can say that this is probably an anomaly. I already told you... I have a tendency to hurt people."

"I don't have the best track record either," Hermione murmured, recalling the note tucked in her satchel, bearing her given name scrawled in her ex's handwriting.

The danger seemed to be equal. Despite his ostensibly comfortable demeanor, he'd acknowledged that being around her was unsettling to him. The question now was - was it something they could ever truly overcome?
"So where does that put us? If I'm still frightening to you?"

"I don't know, Malfoy."

"Answer me this, Granger," he sighed, gaze soft, and finished, "Did I scare you the other night?"

Oh shit, of course he was going to bring it up. She'd been waiting, whether she'd known it or not, for him to talk about it, and now the moment was here. She took a deep breath.

"You didn't then, trust me," she said quietly, looking into her plate as she picked through it.

He nodded, eyes resting on her. "Noted," he murmured.

"I was a little... preoccupied. Too distracted to be scared. Does that make sense?"

He shook his head, and Hermione sighed heavily. She really was going to have to be honest with him about how much she craved him, how utterly incapacitated she'd been by her longing.

She tried again. "There was just so much going on. I hadn't... been with anyone in a while, and that combined with the alcohol... and when you kissed me, and the way you... urgh. It was just... a perfect storm."

He nodded slowly, circling a finger on the rim of his glass, and said, "It wasn't just you. When you showed up at my job, and we were in the office... I was thinking, 'oh Merlin, this is too much,'... it was just... phew." He shook his head, exhaling sharply. "I... I wanted you even then."

Surely the breeze hadn't stopped, but Hermione's neck broke out in sweat as her heart descended.

"Even as I was saying I wouldn't try anything, I was picturing it. And praying that later that night, you would try something, so I wouldn't be tempted to."

She nodded slowly, her gaze faraway as she tried to process his words; her body was practically screaming for attention now, desperate for that fantasy to be true. She reached for her wine and took a small sip, trying to coat her dry throat.

"Granger... you do know that it takes two to duel, right?"

She swallowed. "Well, yes, but... I don't know. You've got an incredible poker-face," she murmured.

He quirked his head to the side, before his eyebrows rose above his grey frames as he understood the muggle reference. "Ah, that I do." He paused and put forth, "Look, I know this isn't the most comfortable thing to discuss over lunch..."

"No, it's good we talk about it..."

"Don't feel awkward, this is new for me too."

"Yeah, okay..." Hermione sighed. They ought to talk about it, she knew; it was just hard to voice thoughts that had been turning over in her head out loud. Especially to the object of those thoughts.

"We've discussed more complicated things than this," Draco murmured. "I'm sure we can manage."

"This is still complicated, Malfoy. You know that."

"It doesn't have to be."
"Well, just by virtue of who we are - who we were - this is complicated."

He pulled a strand of pasta up, watching the sauce drip down the noodle thoughtfully.

The conversation would be less unsettling if Draco wasn't talking like there was still more to experience, a future relationship between them that required some healing and understanding. Despite this it was still unclear if what had happened between them was only that once... or twice... three times, or if it was something that would happen again. He seemed determined to at least befriend her, but the physical side was still an unknown.

He hadn't contacted her at all via owl, and despite his suggestive comments it was unclear if he was just teasing her or if he was actually interested in pursuing her. She didn't like this lukewarm position somewhere in the middle, where she couldn't figure out where they stood.

"You're in your head again," Draco murmured. "What's that look?"

Hermione sighed. "I didn't think you'd... I don't know. I'm just surprised you're still talking to me."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Ah... I thought you'd be... done. After what happened."

There it was. Ultimately she could only beat around the bush for so long before she remembered their original rule: no pretending. When in doubt, be sincere. But this would be so much easier if she trusted him completely, and knew for certain that he wasn't toying with her. But she couldn't be sure, and it was driving her mental.

Draco was eyeing her as he chewed, in a way that Hermione was used to by now, but it was still such a strange sight: his head cocked to the side a bit, gaze soft and intentful, like he was reading her.

"I never intended that to be a singular occurrence," he said finally.

More twinges of arousal flared in her body at this declaration; for a moment, she considered pulling him up from the table and apparating directly to her flat. The apprehension she'd felt earlier melted away; he wouldn't just brush aside what happened and forget about it - in fact, it seemed like he wanted more.

"Oh," she mumbled, avoiding his eyes.

When Hermione looked up again, he was still watching her, in a way that always made her quake; that note of absolute confidence with a touch of wicked danger. Her breath became heavy as she was suddenly aware of the forward lean of his body towards her; it would take minimal effort for her to lean in and kiss him.

As much as she'd had reservations about having sex with him and had palmed her face more than a few times at the delectable memory, there was no denying that she wanted him still. And now he wasn't just teasing her; he was actively inviting her to try something, to push them over the edge again.

Her gaze fell to the hand resting on the tiny table; he was tracing a circle in the marble with his thumb, slow and hypnotic.

Hermione found that she desperately wanted to reach out and touch it, to feel his skin; even if it was just to place his hand on her thigh, make him touch her somewhere, anywhere. It was so close and she could feel that possible reality just out of her reach, if only she could make it happen somehow.
Against her better judgement, she inched her hand over to his and touched the top of it, tracing over the sharp hills and valleys and watching the skin draw back and depress under her fingers.

He flipped his hand over and took hers in his, rubbing his wandering thumb over her palm; Hermione exhaled heavily as her body began to process the new feeling.

"I'm not a very... touchy person," Draco murmured. "But something about you makes me want to touch you."

Hermione watched the movement of his fingers, the simple touch positively drugging as the sensation ignited her senses, activating her physical awareness beyond just his face, the bruise on his neck, and his scent, but further - remembering the way his skin looked after he orgasmed, smooth and flushed; how the slope of his torso dipped, pale hair trailing past his navel, hip bones jutting; the way his strands of hair darkened slightly when they were saturated with sweat. Everything about him felt so real, so present, and once again he was magnetic, attracting her body towards him like a flower to the day.

"You've always been untouchable," Draco continued, almost to himself. "Maybe that's it."

Hermione breathed out slowly, trying to ignore the tickling sensation dipping down her body as she grounded herself back in reality. "I wasn't, Draco. I felt all of those things you did. The good...," she swallowed, "and the bad."

He nodded, pulling his hand away and taking up his water with a sigh.

"I mean even now, I..." he trailed off as he took a sip, his eyes tracing their table, the plants beside them, the open door near them with occupied tables beyond.

"What?"

He shook his head, setting down his glass.

Hermione grounded her nerves and said, "Come on, we're not supposed to pretend. Out with it."

He looked up at her, his gaze molten, and she suddenly felt as if she’d baited a snake too much, and a cold wash flowed through her as she waited for the inevitable venomous strike, sweet and painful.

Finally his gaze dropped to their table as he casually nudged it with his foot, as if testing its durability, and said, "I could fuck you right now, right over this table."

Arousal flared up between her legs again. She glanced around, checking to see if anyone had heard the remark, but no one was close enough to hear their conversation.

She didn't know how he could maintain his thoroughbred manners and still be so suggestive...

"I wouldn't stop you," she breathed.

Hermione knew that this sounded like a challenge, and was worried that Draco would brush their dishes to the floor and spread her body over the marble to be devoured instead.

"Well, I'm finding myself in a bit of a quandary." he claimed softly, leaning back. "Because I should be getting ahold of myself but all I can think about is taking hold of you."

She met his gaze to discover more than just desire there - there was a challenge, an invitation, a call to action in his eyes. It wasn't fuzzy anymore, and Hermione had no excuses left for why she
shouldn't drag him away, to a quieter place where they could finish this.

But in the middle of the day?

Ah, but her body was begging for it... and she already had spent too long denying herself erotic pleasure when it came to him. That was probably why she was in this predicament to begin with.

"What are you doing until two o'clock?" she asked breathlessly.

A low chuckle escaped his lips, and he replied, "Something with you, I think."

"Something?" she breathed innocently.

He smirked and amended, "Many things."

Hermione calmly set down her fork, balled her napkin, and rose from her chair, swiftly slapping two galleons on the table; Draco followed suit, the image of nonchalant innocence as he neatly stacked two more galleons on top of hers.

She wasn't sure when her fingers had become entwined with his, but once out on the street she was already pulling him down the avenue, towards the tiny cuttie next to the apothecary. She could hear her heartbeat in her ears as the sun bore down upon them, unexpectedly unforgiving after the calm, bright serenity of the restaurant. But it was just space to move through, to put behind her, as her only objective now was to get her and her handsome conquest to a safe spot to apparate into her apartment.

As soon as she was cast in shadows from the warbled buildings she turned, pulling him into her body, and the pair crashed into the side of the apothecary in a flurry of gasps and roaming hands. Hermione easily kissed him back, her hand gliding up his chest and already closing around his throat. She teasingly pressed her thumb into the bruise on Draco's neck; his gasp was muffled against her lips.

Not one to be outdone, Draco slipped a hand around the curve of her hip and around her backside, which he squeezed.

Hermione gasped, automatically digging her thumb into the bruise out of surprise.

Draco choked on a laugh, and Hermione pushed him back; they were still on the street, anyone passing the alley could see them - oh, when had she become so reckless?

"You fucking prat," she muttered, capturing his arm and pulling him roughly towards the end of the alley.

Draco's eyebrows shot into his hairline. "Granger, the language," he tutted, positively loving it.

It didn't matter anymore, they were well past words already; her vision was clouded, breath shallow, and every time she blinked all she could see was his expression when he came, and she would remember how raw it was, how satisfying it felt to do that to him.

Hermione pulled him into her body and apparated, probably with half the concentration that she normally did, and it showed: she'd been aiming for the living room but it seemed that her mind had other plans, as she found herself falling from the shadows of the brick street directly onto her sunlit mattress, Draco materializing on top of her.

She had barely registered the change in scenery before her skirt was flipped up over her chest and
Draco was kissing his way over her navel, down her hip, tugging down her knickers - the lacey blue ones, thank god she'd worn those - and flinging them over his shoulder.

Her heartbeat was drumming in her ears as she grasped Draco's hair, raking her nails through it, pulling the strands between her fingers; she pulled the longer section of hair forward, and when he looked up at her from between her legs, only one eye was visible beneath it.

She was caught for a moment; they'd been sitting in a cafe only two minutes before, and this was such a sharp departure from his calmly interested gaze... he was looking up at her like he had nothing but wicked thoughts left, and she believed that absolutely, believed that he was only capable of pleasure and pain now.

Draco took hold of her hips and pushed her back further on the bed; Hermione slid over her covers until her pillows ballooned around her head.

"Oh...?"

It didn't matter, whatever she'd been about to ask, because she didn't need to know everything; all she needed now was whatever he was doing with his tongue, and her legs shook as she arched, eyes squeezed shut.

Dear Merlin, this was everything that she didn't do - skive off work, have sex in the middle of the day, wrap her legs around someone's head - and it was unreal; Draco was up close and personal with parts of her body she could never have dreamed he would see.

She opened her eyes and looked down her body at the man just beyond the rippled fabric of her skirt.

There was something so beautiful about this sight - Draco with his eyes closed, hair tousled, his grip on the hinge of her leg light but solid. And he wasn't teasing her - he'd already done enough of that. Now it was clear what he wanted, because he was consuming it, eating it up in every way possible.

She wasn't used to this kind of direct contact, as no one except Jonesy had done this to her; but the touch of Draco's tongue was nothing like Jonesy's: he was determined, energetic, and Hermione found herself building quickly just by watching him.

Twenty minutes ago she had willed this to happen but couldn't know exactly what this was going to be; she certainly didn't think Draco would have her thighs around his neck as he drew breath against her, or that she would discover new parts of herself with his tongue as a proxy. She'd been right in one feeling however: he had been eyeing her like a snake ready to strike, and strike he certainly did. But the bite was beautifully soft, and if it was his venom coursing through her she wanted more of it, wanted this feeling to fill every cavity of her being until she was saturated with pleasure, dripping with it.

He was holding her body in his hands now, hands cupping the rounds of her backside like he was drinking from a ceremonial offering, and it was too much to watch... she dropped her head back into the pillow, covering her vision with a careless arm, her body positively shaking as the tension peaked.

All she needed was more pressure, and it was an entirely new feeling, being sure of what she wanted when it came to him, but she seized the moment and pressed back against him; his muffled moan didn't escape her notice, as it was a sound she'd been replaying in her mind all day, all week, and hearing it again in person instantly jolted her system with pleasure.

That electric feeling filled her body, and for a fraction of a second she remembered something from
the week prior that had been shrouded in darkness - the sensation of happiness just visible beyond a tree line, only a leap away. That feeling simmered under her skin as she breathed in and out, her legs relaxing and falling open.

Her vision cleared slowly, and though her body felt heavy, her head still rolled to the side, she finally felt stable enough to process what was going on, what had happened in the last few minutes. Draco was leaning against her relaxed leg, his lips soft against her thigh.

"I could do this all day," Draco breathed, rubbing his cheek against the sensitive skin.

"Me too," Hermione responded, chest still heaving, and Draco chuckled, his breath coming out in short huffs.

After a spell he slowly pulled himself up to her, and Hermione undid the buttons of her rumpled blouse, parting the fabric just in time for Draco to smooth a hand over her breast.

She rolled her head to the other side; she still wasn't quite lucid enough to put any real effort in removing her clothes, and she sighed as Draco took over, fully parting her blouse and slipping her skirt down her bare hips.

She rose a hand to his shirt and lightly pulled on the fabric; she was practically naked while he was fully clothed.

"Still going?" he asked, beginning to unbutton his shirt.

Of course she was still going, she wanted more of this, always more; she didn't want it to end.

She nodded, swallowing, and a few minutes later he was nude as well, kissing the side of her neck, pulling her legs around him. Her orgasm had left her feeling lethargic, satiated, but it seemed that Draco understood, and guided her arms around his body, settling against her.

This was yet another thing she didn't typically experience - having sex after she had already orgasmed - and it was an entirely different kind of game. With her sensitive flesh being further stimulated, pushed beyond its limits, it opened a new world of feeling, drawing out the vague pleasure of recovery, spiking new pleasure within her.

At this point she wanted to concentrate on him... it was amazing, amazingly odd actually, but she was just determined to make him feel good, set on his pleasure. It wasn't a given for him; she didn't just assume that he was getting something out of this, but she found herself actively considering him and his body, what he might want.

And it wasn't backwards in the way it could be; she didn't want to prove something about herself, or make this worth his while. None of that mattered. They owed each other nothing. This wasn't expected, and certainly wasn't a given. And so she didn't think about her own performance in the same way, as a reflection of who she was. Clearly they were beyond that.

Hermione groaned, squeezing her legs around him, and Draco smoothed a hand up her body, up her ascended arm; he clasped her hand above her head, pressing his weight into it.

He was watching her so intensely as he moved, clearly wanting to see her reaction every time; she vaguely recalled that he liked this, the closed loop of feedback that what he was doing was making her moan, making her arch into him.

She was somewhat proud of herself, being willing to fuck him in the middle of the day when she had other responsibilities to attend to; for once she was putting herself first, instead of grinding long hours
until she finally was able to collapse onto her bed, her shoes still on.

Every time with him was so different; his kisses were always changing, his energy in flux. She thought that she would know him by now, as they'd already had sex several times, but Draco was always a moving target, a place that was unplottable on a map. When his kisses were soft and deep she met him there, holding onto him and consuming him slowly; but when they were fleeting she responded in kind, trailing her lips over his skin, just giving herself a small taste of his flesh.

And every time he made her come it was soothing, deep in her soul, in a way that she could never have anticipated; it should have just felt good for those few seconds, but each time it was healing, squeezing pain and hurt from her body that she didn't know was still there.

Being like this, her body tangled with his, both gasping as Draco came down, was different than before; it wasn't happenstance, or circumstance, that had led them here, but clear and acute interest. They'd made this decision without the help of alcohol or setting, and had made it simply to be together, indulge in erotic ecstasy together.

What she realized is that she could do this; the coupling that was all flames and desire. She had tried the other route - being sensible, not too much feeling, just a mild warmth and great conversation, penning dates into her diary and plotting day trips to the country. Romantic picnics in the gardens, but only until three o'clock because she had a meeting in Montreal that she couldn't miss.

And inevitably with her other partners she had found herself going through the motions. Doing the dinners, the book clubs, the shared bathroom with the toothbrushes entwined in a shared cup, but forgetting the important things - trusting them, sharing with them, even wanting them consistently. She'd simply drifted away, caught up in her own thoughts and her work.

This wouldn't be like before - she wanted Draco but not necessarily those calm, simple things. She could envision him waking up beside her but only after flooing over in the late hours for a shag. She could see the picnic, but it was the pleasure of trying to hide his hand beneath her skirt, the danger of being caught, not the romanticism.

In fact, she was perfectly fine with continuing with her usual method of compartmentalizing her life, as she had finally found someone to satisfy her physical needs, someone who she perhaps didn't need beyond that. She already had an inkling of where Draco stood: he'd already told her that love wasn't something that he understood, and "sex and friendship" was the ticket for him. And as that was exactly what Hermione was missing, he fit into her world like a final brick sliding into place.

Hermione brushed her curls away from her face, and Draco smoothed a hand over her nude flesh, across her belly and chest, cupping her face and rubbing a thumb over her bottom lip as her breath slowed.

Her eyes met his, and with his face so close, she got the same inkling that what she was seeing was intensely private, so vibrant she had to resist the urge to look away, like staring into the sun.

Draco cracked a smile, and her own lips pulled up as well, until he was chuckling and leaning away, sliding his weight off of her and resting at her side, his thumb still smoothing over her cheek.

"Now I see what you meant," he commented.

"About what?"

He stopped playing with her lip and said, "This is… bizarre."

Hermione looked down their bodies, tangled together, and took notice of the way he fit into her, the
muscles of his torso, jutting hip just visible under her thigh.

She looked back up quickly as though she'd seen something she wasn't meant to, her head falling back into the pillow. "Yep… still weird."

"I think I'm in a bit of shock still," he murmured.

"I thought it was just me."

"No, definitely not…"

"I thought I was going to tear you apart earlier, I couldn't help myself…"

He raised an eyebrow at her, and she rolled her head away in an attempt to hide her blush.

"Don't be embarrassed," Draco put forth. "I have a tendency to make people self-conscious…"

"Yeah, you do," Hermione mumbled.

"...and I don't want to do that. It just... well, I'm trying to be cognizant of when I'm teasing you too much. I definitely prefer when you're... not afraid."

"When I'm ravenous, you mean," Hermione corrected.

"No, when you aren't ticked at me."

"I'm not ticked. I just... I'm not used to being this attracted to someone."

"It's not just you," he sighed. "Very few people hold my interest. I really was interested in your thoughts, your opinions about my work, and I thought that the... other feelings... would pass. But they didn't pass; in fact, the more I saw you, the more I wanted you. I couldn't control it…"

"But what happened to us being friends? And me keeping my hands to myself?"

Draco smirked and replied, "We can grab a pensieve but if memory serves it was actually you that said 'fuck it' the other night."

Hermione sighed. "Yeah, I was pretty drunk. It was all I could think about."

"But you aren't drunk now."

She shook her head. "No."

Draco inhaled deeply, letting out a long sigh as he traced the shape of her curve, from the side of her ribcage to the dip of her waist, the uphill curve of her hip, and down the leg strewn over his body.

"Neither am I," he murmured, tracing the line back up.

Hermione's eyes met his, and suddenly this didn't feel so bizarre anymore; with the haze of being too turned on for too long finally clearing, she remembered something that she'd forgotten - that this was a memory come full circle, but it was also an unknown path without boundaries or direction. Her analytical mind always wanted to find precedence, data, logic, to back up her decisions or give her insight into what the truth was, but in this instance there was nothing to draw on. She had her past relationships - which truth be told she had been dwelling on a little too much - and her old knowledge of who Draco used to be, but neither of those things could accurately tell her what was going to happen, what the right thing to do was.
In fact, the uncertainty had a certain... shine to it.

It wasn't just the orgasms, though even now she could feel herself wanting that over and over and over again. But being here on her bed, naked with him in the middle of the afternoon, it was new, exciting. She was actually peering over the edge of the cliff now, feeling the rush and the wind, the gravity that beckoned her to lean further over the unknown.

"I don't know exactly how to put this," Hermione began, "but I like doing this. With you."

"Ah, with *me*. Thanks for clarifying," Draco quipped, and Hermione squirmed in his embrace, trying to elbow him as he chuckled.

"I'm serious," she said, "this is good. I can't believe it, but... this is really good."

"I mean, I'd hope so, we've done this a few times now."

"I... wouldn't be opposed to this again. If that's okay with you."

"... Yeah, of course."

Hermione turned, trying to look at him. "You hesitated," she said flatly.

"No, don't get me wrong, this is... unbelievable. I'm just... you know, I'm leaving in a few days for the East."

Hermione stomach dropped. "Oh, that's right."

"And... I don't know. Maybe it doesn't matter."

"No, it matters..."

"I'm just not sure when I'm coming back yet. I'm supposed to come back every few days - I still have appointments to keep at St. Mungo's, and need to be able to access uncontaminated water for personal hygiene. It's just... it's unclear right now."

"Well, maybe I'll see you before you go."

He nodded, gaze bright. "Yes, maybe you will."

Hermione sighed, willing her mind to mellow out and not pursue that nerve-wracking path - she wanted to live in the moment, soak up the intimacy and enjoy it without worrying. "You know my usual haunts, it seems. If I'm in town, you know where I'll be."

"I hardly know your 'usual haunts'. You're more unpredictable than you realize, Granger."

She turned to look at him. "How's that?"

His face was impossibly close, but before she could get lost in his eyes he replied, "I never would have thought that you'd consider studying alchemy. Or microtransfiguration, or the mysteries of the brain. Not that I don't think you'd find it interesting... it's just so different than your current work."

"Well, I don't typically go to Stockholm, or Warsaw, or even the Flamel Center. But Flourish and Blotts... I'm there every other week for book signings and events, regardless of the field of study."

"I guess I'll have to look for you there then," Draco murmured.
Hermione nodded, feeling no shame in indulging in a quick fantasy of him actually doing that - her reading a book in an isle, looking up as a slender hand places a bookmark between her pages without a word...

"When, um, will you know more about your schedule?"

"We may be sorting out my schedule today, actually. I mean, I should say 'hopefully'. Lots to do still..." he sighed heavily, looking up at the ceiling.

Hermione watched him through round eyes; it was so rare to see him let go of his composure, that it always fascinated her; she could hardly imagine him being overworked or tired. If he was ever tired he rarely let on.

"...With any luck I'll be out soon enough. And after work I need to find some new records for Blaise," Draco said. "He's playing a show this weekend and wants to prep."

Hermione scoffed. "You? Buying records?"

He turned his eyes on her, eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

"Somehow I feel like you'd have no idea what to get," she informed him.

"Oh, so you're taking a stab at my music tastes now?"

"If you're looking for something new and interesting... yes. I've seen what your lot listens to."

"You mean purebloods?"

"Yeah."

"It's not all bad. I quite like the traditional music, myself."

Hermione gave him a look like she wasn't buying it; Draco scrunched up his face in a dramatic cringe and said, "Yeah, it's pretty awful, actually; the muggle music is leagues better."

"But do you actually know what to look for?"

Draco paused, thinking, and replied, "Sort of. If the album art has a bunch of guys standing on the street, that's a good sign. Or if it's really colorful."

"That's half of the albums out there."

"No, not half -"

"Draco. You're going to pick the worst records."

"Wha - where's the confidence?"

"You have no idea what to look for or who these people are."

"Be that as it may, I'm still going to try."

Hermione sighed and said, "Has anyone ever told you that you're incredibly stubborn?"

"No, but I have a feeling that someone is about to," he retorted, eyeing her.

She smirked, her head rolling to the side. The sun had disappeared behind one of the tall buildings on
the other side of the street, a telltale sign that it was getting past midday.

"I've got to get back," she murmured, drumming her fingers on Draco's chest.

He sighed, his exhale lifting her curls, and nodded; Hermione found her balance and sat up, rolling her neck.

They slipped off her bed and began to put themselves back together. They both knew this dance by now; Hermione changed her undergarments but donned the same skirt and shirt, smoothing wrinkles from the blouse, while Draco retrieved his discarded clothing and got himself in order.

This time they stepped through her front door together, and Hermione closed and locked up as usual before offering her arm.

"Need to go back to Flitterby Avenue?"

He shook his head. "I'm off to St. Mungo's. Do my work."

She nodded, lowering her arm, but before she could close her eyes and focus her concentration on apparating safely, Draco's arm snaked around her waist and pulled her into a kiss.

He was always leaving her wanting more, leaving the last sentence unfinished, the final note silent. Once again she found herself wrapped up in the sensuality of kissing him, especially in a new, somewhat public space that left little to the imagination of passerby; it was obvious who they were to each other, what they had just done.

Hermione released him after a few seconds, her heart unsteady once more, breath shallow; she resisted the urge to retrieve her keys and usher him back into her apartment so she could have her way with him for another hour, and instead backed up so she at least couldn't smell him anymore.

"Until next time, Hermione," he murmured, his confident smirk gentle, and disapparated.

Hermione shook her head. "Prick," she muttered, taking a breath before she apparated back to Soho.

Back on Flitterby Avenue, Hermione made a beeline for the grocers quickly; she'd spent more time with Draco than she probably ought to, and needed to finish her errands so she could make a dent in the articles sitting on her nightstand.

The grocers was starting to fill, as she suspected it might. She sighed in relief at the idea of getting in and out of the place before the post-work rush hit as daytime workers grabbed food for their dinners.

Hermione discreetly conjured her list - tomato sauce, eggs, aubergine, courgette, olive oil and lemons - and made her way into the isles, grabbing her items with methodical efficiency.

As she finally made her way to the end of her list and pulled up in the produce isle, she stopped; a casually dressed Blaise Zabini was in the next isle, tapping floating dirigible plums and watching them bob around.

"Blaise!" Hermione called before she could stop herself, and he looked over, a grin lighting up his face immediately.

"Miss Granger," he returned. "Fancy seeing you here!"

Hermione sidestepped the display of cherry tomatoes and came to stand next to him. Blaise was standing by an array of peach and yellow fruit of every type - meyer lemons, dirigibal plums,
nectarines, starfruit and durian, piled high and contrasting sharply with his skin.

"I was just having lunch with Malfoy," Hermione started, "and he mentioned that you were looking for some new records."

"Oh, you were having lunch?" Blaise asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

She stared back at him, mildly horrified as an involuntary flash of desire ignited her senses, and a blush appeared across her cheeks. How did he know? Did she still smell like sex? Draco had kissed her after going down on her, and if she concentrated she could smell her taste...

Blaise chuckled lightly, capturing a dirigibal plum and inspecting it.

"Did you know that if you eat enough of these, you can float?" he asked innocently, turning the little plump fruit over in his hand.

"A - well, a levitation charm would be faster," Hermione stammered, clutching the edges of her sleeves.

He shrugged and took a bite, ignoring a nearby shopper eyeing him incredulously. A bit of juice slid down the angles of his chin.

"Don't worry, Draco didn't spill any details, if that's what you're concerned about," Blaise said finally, putting Hermione out of her misery, "but Ariana mentioned that something may have happened between you two the other night after the match."

"Ah... okay," Hermione replied, recovering.

"So did something happen?"

Hermione didn't know how to respond, so she nodded absently, trying to appear interested in the mangoes and starfruit near them.

"I was rooting for you guys," he put forth, taking another bite of his plum. "It must be terribly hot, with all that tension between you."

Hermione firmly concentrated on keeping her expression neutral, though her body was practically melting at the thought.

"It's nothing... official," she replied. "Just... you know. Taking it slow."

"Any reason why you wouldn't see him properly?"

Yeah sure, plenty, but Hermione didn't know if Blaise was the one to voice those concerns to. He was easy to talk to and seemed like a good-natured person, but his loyalty to Draco made him unpredictable and thus somewhat untrustworthy as a confidant.

"I'm still not sure if I can trust him," Hermione answered finally. "You know... he's done a lot to me in the past. I can't know that he won't make it worse somehow."

Blaise nodded thoughtfully, munching on his plum as it tried to escape his hold.

This was only partly it, she knew. There was another challenge there that she wasn't addressing, that had less to do with the past and more to do with the future. Their future.

Because how much of their interaction was still a game to him?
Draco hadn't had anything to lose, talking to her before; she hadn't meant anything to his daily life and he didn't need to interact with her if he didn't want to. Now that they were sleeping together however, she could feel him toying with her. Not in a way that was malicious, but in a way that was self-protective and guarded. She knew better than to buy that he was aloof and confident all the time, despite his calm exterior. And given what Harry had said about him, and how something about him still irritated her, she knew that he was trying to keep his distance romantically, if only to protect himself.

She knew this because she was doing the same thing - trying to appear nonchalant and unaffected, in case she showed too much and scared him away.

Also, the fact that he was taking mood stabilizers, however supportive she was of his choice to sort himself out, was still concerning. Potions notoriously had long term effects that were unknown, as ingredients interacted with the biology of the body in different ways depending on the person.

"He's different now, you know," Blaise prodded gently, drawing a finger across his chin to wipe the juice away. "He's not into all that status nonsense anymore. None of us are. Except for maybe the older lot..."

"Status nonsense?"

"You know. Blood status. Galleons. All that."

"But how much of what he says is really him? How much... how much is real?"

Blaise sighed heavily, considering a few thoughts, his free hand poised to describe something.

"There's levels to it," he said finally. "That's just him. You can never really be sure of what he's thinking. But given time, you can see his patterns and... you don't have to get him to talk, you just sort of... know."

"I mean, he shares a lot of what he's feeling, what he talks about in therapy... but there's still a guard, a wall, that I can't always penetrate," Hermione admitted.

"Yeah, well if you want to know more about what he's thinking, queue up," Blaise chuckled, eyeing the starfruit near them. He absently touched a few, sliding a finger over the thin, pliable skin.

"Blaise, tell me something."

He looked up, his attention captured again.

Hermione took a deep breath, grounded her nerves, and asked, "Is it his meds?"

Blaise opened his mouth, surprised, then scratched his temple, sighing as he turned the desecrated plum over in his hand.

"It's... no, it's not. Without them he was so... resentful. And always annoyed. So annoyed." He sighed again. "I think the meds make it easier for him to be himself. The good parts of him."

"The good parts," Hermione echoed.

"You know. When he's not barking around and generally being a prick. Now he's... funny. And less anxious."

"So you don't think it's odd? Or that the potions are changing him?"
Blaise shook his head. "No, of course not. I've seen him at his worst. And, arguably, his best. He's the same person, just... less mean."

Hermione nodded, rubbing a thoughtful finger over her bag, and put forth, "Thanks for telling me, Blaise."

The man shrugged, glancing back at the starfruit as Hermione passed behind him to get to the lemons.

"Don't worry about it. Like I said, I'm rooting for you two, so anything that helps that along I'm happy to share." He jumped slightly and continued, "Oh, before I forget - I'm soundweaving at The Chimera this Saturday."

He produced a card, no bigger than a chocolate frog card, and offered it between two fingers.

"I'll get to see you in action," Hermione said warmly, taking the card and rubbing a thumb over the embossed surface.

Blaise's face split into a wide grin, and he took a final bite out of his plum, raising an eyebrow at her. "Tell your friends. I expect to see a lot of Draco-taming lionesses there," he said.

"I will," she replied, meeting his suggestive look with a challenging one of her own.

...  

Author's note (11/19/18): Hey all, sorry about the wait, real life has been bananas. But I'm back! A big thank you to Meria again for betaing.

I'm so excited about the next chapter. It's basically the reason why I decided to write this story. Get ready for The Chimera! *sparkles*
Hermione stepped over the crosswalk, her boots clicking over wet asphalt. It was a chilly day, the sky overcast and air frigid. Despite this, it was a lively Saturday for tourism, and Hermione found herself sharing the Southwark Bridge with more than a few sightseeing muggles. As she approached the raised center, the wind whipping her hair, she couldn't help but watch the tourists surrounding her with a touch of envy. Her business here wasn't nearly as carefree as theirs, and it would be hours before she was dancing at The Chimera with Padma, Blaise, and - hopefully - Draco.

She hadn't wanted to meet for tea, and had told Ron so over owl. While she'd tried to rationalize this by convincing herself that she was too busy to meet with him, she knew that she just wanted to avoid being with him for more time than necessary. Taking tea with Ron meant that they would have to sit there, each awkwardly wishing for something different, but both under the clenched fist of propriety and courtesy. No - a conversation in a public, casual setting would hasten the meeting. They were near enough to the Underground and the Central Transportation Hub that either of them could get wherever else they needed to go. Hermione could chat with Ron quickly, then get back to her flat to prepare for the night's festivities.

The water presented a welcome distraction to her nervousness as she leaned over the railing, watching the curls of white and grey slap the beams of the bridge. She knew Ron would be able to find her here, as her hair was unmistakable, and so she took this time for herself, mentally preparing for the prospect of telling Ron about Draco.

If he probed any further than the basic pedigree info - why were you talking to him? - Hermione feared what she would need to say. Cracking open that part of her life even a peek made her blood hot and her mind muddled, for she barely knew the answers herself. What was she supposed to tell Ron - that she liked sleeping with Draco? That she was attracted to him despite everything, or that she was learning that he wasn't nearly as bad as she'd assumed? None of that was sure to go over well, no matter how she tried to spin it. She could lie - or at least selectively leave out information - but she'd always been bad at that.

The choices seemed slim. She almost felt as though by agreeing to meet up with Ron here, now, she was looking for some sort of permission to have a good time tonight. Blaise's invite to The Chimera was burning a hole in her pocket. The event started in only a few hours, and even at the office earlier - mostly empty save for other overachievers coming in on a Saturday - Hermione had been drilling into her work with the kind of determination that only the promise of a night out could invoke.

Meeting with Ron was one of the last things on her to-do list for the day, but she had no means of measuring what being 'done' with their chat meant. At the very least, she wanted to reinforce some boundaries, garner an apology, and perhaps - if she could manage it - explain a little about her and Malfoy.

"Hermione," a voice said, and she sighed, took a measured breath, and turned.

Ron was walking towards her, wrapped in his cloak despite the looks he was getting from the muggles; he always had trouble wearing muggle clothes in muggle places, and even now didn't dress appropriately for the crowd. She couldn't help but smirk in affectionate annoyance at the thought.

"Ron," she greeted as he stopped in front of her.

He paused, then reached for her; she sighed and accepted the hug, and that uncomfortable itching.
feeling of being too close to him briefly stressed her anxious mind.

"Terrible weather," he muttered, releasing her. "Couldn't see anything during quidditch practice this morning."

"So you made the team."

He nodded, and as he smiled, his eyes crinkling, some of Hermione's anxiety dissipated.

"That's fantastic, congratulations," she put forth, and she found that she really meant it; it had been one of Ron's goals for so long that she knew he must have been eager to see it through.

"Thanks, I really cracked it this year," he replied, tying his scarf a little tighter. "Although, they've benched me for keeper. Angelina wants me to chase for a season first. Something about how it's important to understand chasing to be a good keeper."

"That makes sense. In a game you need to know your opponent as well as you know yourself. So you can anticipate his moves, exploit his weaknesses."

Ron gave her a look, and she felt like he didn't need to say it: she already knew what he was thinking.

Subtly she was hoping that reconnecting with Ron and smoothing things out with him would make her feel better about seeing Draco. But Ron's painful reminder at the ball - don't let him have you - was still there, eating away at her excitement anytime she saw Draco, coloring their interactions and warping her memories of him. Ultimately he was still Malfoy, and despite any way in which he might be different, somewhere deep inside of him was the same boy who had schemed and plotted against her and Harry, had ruthlessly tormented anyone who he deemed to be less than him. It was unclear if that was still his approach to life, and it was only his opinion of Hermione that had changed.

The curly-haired witch shook these thoughts away and began questioning Ron about his new quidditch life. It was easy to slip into the meaningless banter that was Ron's safe space, where he didn't have to reveal anything about how he was feeling. It usually had to be Hermione to tease out his emotions or challenge him to talk about something beyond how Weasley Wizard Wheezes was doing.

With a sudden silence between them Hermione knew it was time, but she wasn't going to let Ron off the hook; it wasn't her responsibility to apologize to him, or to coax an apology out of him, and he ought to know that.

Finally, Ron cleared his throat, his bright blue eyes trained somewhere on the water.

"Hey, um, sorry about the other night. Knocked a few too many back."

"You mean the Ball?" Hermione asked quietly.

He nodded.

"You always forget how much alcohol is in sake," she said.

Ron sighed, as if grateful for the slight diversion in topic, and said, "It was the lychee sake that did it. It was just so sweet, it tasted like juice - I kept downing it. Yin had to peel me off the floor at one point."
She stared at him, at his drooping posture, and before she could stop herself she touched his arm, smoothing her fingers over his wrinkled cotton sleeves.

"It's okay Ron. I know you didn't mean it."

He looked at her hand in his arm, and then took her fingers in his, rubbing his thumbs over the tops of her nails.

Hermione remembered moments like this well, moments where in the silence and proximity she and Ron could communicate and understand each other way more than through words. It was an adjustment for her to learn how to communicate with him, as she appreciated blunt and forthright declarations of feelings, but she recognized that every person is different and made their way through the world in different ways.

"So... yeah," he sighed, letting go of her hand and rubbing his own hands together slowly. "Not quite sure what I said, to be honest, but I know I was a twat, so..."

Hermione exhaled through her nostrils. She hated when he used that word. "Well, I remember. You were telling me to stop fancying Malfoy."

His ears reddened, his gaze darting away. "Ah... yeah."

Hermione leaned forward over the Thames. The wind blew her hair around mercilessly.

"So... I take it you didn't listen."

She looked back at him, examining his expression to determine how she should answer.

Instead of saying something, justifying her actions to him, she shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself as the wind blew between the pair. A muggle couple walked up, taking photos of themselves by Hermione's elbow. She let Ron simmer a moment as the couple snapped a few pictures, their plastic smiles lighting up the tiny digital display of their muggle camera. As they stepped away, casting apologetic and oblivious glances at Hermione, she sighed wearily.

Ron inhaled, his eyes still fixed firmly on the water. "Well... I know that you know what you're doing... and you've probably thought about it a lot. So I guess all I can say is... don't make it easy for him."

"Who says I am?" Hermione challenged. "I haven't forgotten who he is, Ron."

"Well, to be honest, you were always... too good for me, too good to me... and I knew, even then, that I didn't deserve it. You just shouldn't... don't let him get away with anything."

"I didn't say we were dating," Hermione replied tartly. "But I'm going to do what I want. I have to."

"Yes," he agreed, staring down at the waves, "but still."

And there it was - that lopsided smile that made her feel so full and yet so empty, the smile that she missed sometimes after a business trip or even a long day. It didn't make her happy the way it used to, but it made her remember the facsimile of happiness they'd had, the spark of joy that his grin had once evoked.

"And if he hurts you... well, he can say goodbye to his bits," Ron muttered. "Of course, he'd have to have some in the first place - "
"Got it," Hermione sighed loudly, cutting him off.

They stood together, looking out over the grey water as tourists and residents alike passed behind them about their days. Distant chatter descended from the market down the street as people browsed and haggled over local goods.

Hermione was unsatisfied somehow, as she suspected there was something else going on with Ron. Why he would be so jealous of her and Malfoy unsettled her beyond just concern over what her former lover - former friend - thought. Despite this Hermione was getting antsy and uncomfortable in his presence, overwhelmed by that itchy feeling that she needed to get away from him. She would need to get back soon to finish her article if she wanted to go out that evening anyway.

Three hours later, Hermione was in her apartment finishing up work.

With all the tasks of the day behind her - both the grueling political ones and the emotionally taxing ones - she was free to build anticipation and excitement for her evening plans.

She exhaled heavily as she set down her parchment roll. Editing her article to fit within the word limit was always a challenge for her, as she knew that she tended to be long-winded. Hopefully the copy editor she liked at the Prophet would clean this up a little more and save her the headache.

She glanced at the clock perched upon her shelves. The event Blaise invited her to was about to start, though since it was only seven o'clock she didn't expect many people would be there yet. The time seemed like such an odd one - what nightclub opened so early? But she didn't question it, as there had to be an explanation that she wasn't seeing.

Hermione stood, stretched, and went into her washroom to run a bath.

She tried to spend as little time as possible getting ready for such nights. A few years ago she might have spent an hour doing complicated illusion charms to enhance her looks, but had since learned that muggle makeup, though sometimes messy, was infinitely faster and easier for her to apply. This proved itself when one night Ginny spent forever illusioning her lips and eyelashes, leaving Hermione enough time to do her makeup, finish three work letters, and read two chapters of Alchemy and the Art of Artifice.

Despite this, Hermione was well aware of the possibilities for the evening, and so she put a little extra care into each stroke of the comb, and made sure to be more thorough than she was usually. Hell, she might even do a quick face mask, indulge in some self-care to relax and truly prepare for the evening.

Once clean, with fresh makeup on and her hair adequately dried, she came back into her room nude and picked up the invitation.

It looked like she was going east tonight, as the club was located deep in Shoreditch. Such a short trip required almost no planning, but she found her keys and inspected her pocket portkey anyway, checking the magic and securing her registration note. She was positive that Draco would be at The Chimera tonight and she wanted to make sure that if the night ended as she anticipated it would... she would be prepared to portkey both of them into her flat.

A nervous apprehension crept up her body, tinged pink with ideas of what could happen tonight, what would be in store for her should fate permit. She looked down at herself, eyes tracing over the skin that Draco Malfoy had touched, still vaguely wondering what about her made him so intrigued,
and contrarily what about him had her aching for his hands, for the smell of his hair and his body. It seemed so odd that he could affect her like this, have her stressing over what she was going to wear and what he might think.

Looking into her wardrobe, there only seemed to be one answer: the tiny silk dress. The one that had captured Malfoy's attention at the ballet. Only, she wasn't required to appear somewhat polished; investigation had informed her that this venue had no dress code.

She could pretend otherwise, but the truth was that she wanted to capture his attention yet again. So she took up her wand, twirled it, and altered the dye to a bolder color.

Once she dressed, she took one last look into the mirror before hiding the bold splash of scarlet silk under her woolly robe.

\[\text{The Chimera Nightclub} \]
\[\text{Shoreditch W District, London} \]

The invitation's portkey deposited her into a tiny alley with two-story brick buildings on either side, all covered in soiled posters, graffiti, and old peeling signs gone rusty. Hermione took a breath, inhaling the change in scent - wet bricks, the faint smell of car fumes from the muggle area nearby, the slightly tinny smell like it was almost cold enough for snow. When she exhaled, her breath left in a misty cloud.

The ground was vibrating with distant bass, and if she listened she could hear people laughing around the corner; Hermione followed her ears, walking steadily between the buildings, Blaise's card firmly in hand. For an adult she really shouldn't feel so nervous about going into nightclubs, but she always felt like people could smell the nerdiness on her as soon as she walked in, if they didn't already know who she was.

As she walked up, there were indeed people standing in line, laughing, all wrapped in either giant wool robes such as hers or puffy muggle-style coats, huddling and smoking as they waited.

She looked up; the entrance was utterly unassuming save for the graffiti mural above the steel door, depicting a wild chimera roaring into the night, its snake tail twirling, wings spread as it flew back and forth across the wall.

Hermione quietly queued up, pulling her robe tighter around her; as the steel door opened to admit a laughing couple, the distant sound of heavy bass briefly intensified, booming through the air.

"You younglings with your 'soundweaving,'" an older man was saying, side-eying a bouncer almost tall enough to dwarf Hagrid.

"Invite," the bouncer snapped tiredly, his leather trench straining as he extended an expectant hand.

The older man handed over his card guiltily and continued, "Back in my day we played instruments!"

"Back in your day people used dragon intestine for birth control," a girl retorted, flipping her fringe out of her eyes. The people in the queue smiled and chuckled, dragging their pipes.
Hermione bit back a smile; it was a feisty crowd then.

Once at the front of the queue, Hermione flashed the card and her ID to the hefty bouncer and was ushered inside. The steel door opened to a narrow corridor, lined in shining black paint sporting graphic posters, drawings, and paintings of chimeras, all roaring and shaking flowing manes. She knew that this place was supposed to be massive, but from here it seemed deceptively intimate; the long hallway already housed chatty patrons, talking and laughing as they sipped their drinks or waited in line for the loo.

At the end of the corridor the London room fanned out in a ring, a tall stage against the front wall and the dance floor sparse as the majority of the party-goers crowded the rounded bar at the back. Hermione narrowed her eyes; the bar seemed to extend around the room and out of both archways, and from here Hermione could see other barkeeps around the bend, quickly pulling glittering bottles and pouring liquor for laughing patrons.

She now understood the way people talked about the different locations as 'rooms': they really were all interconnected. To her right, the archway to the next room read 'Ibiza,' and beyond the vastly different decor if she listened carefully the music was different as well, rhythmic and lightweight as the lights flashed against curving silhouettes, spinning and twirling, sweating bodies moving together.

As Hermione looked around, she snorted lightly; she could already see the oddly fantastical fashion of the young ones. Muggle fashion was all the rage in wizarding Britain nowadays, but it was so absurd it was hardly recognizable. For instance, the girl outside the door for the loo was wearing a miniskirt made out of baseball caps, the brims fanning out just below her bum. The one behind her was wearing a dress of all zippers and velcro, crisscrossed over her curves and splitting open into slits in the front.

The unusual fashion was something that had sprung up over the past year and was only getting more and more popular. As a muggleborn, it both fascinated and annoyed Hermione to see what wizards were doing with muggle clothing.

Hermione stepped into the open space of the London room, taking in the round shape, elevated stage, and wide, curved bar area. It was a full-stack bar, with bottles extending to the ceiling. Glass jugs were pouring left and right, galleons sliding across the bar and depositing themselves into the till. The bartenders were busy, running this way and that, mixing two, three, four drinks at a time. The exposed steel rafters and beams slick with black lacquer gave the room a polished yet industrial glint, as did the rotating speakers centered above the dance floor like a horned disco ball. Hermione stepped aside as a laughing couple lurched past her and into the room, twirling under the glowing bobbles that flashed light around the room.

Hermione's mind was buzzing with questions about this place; it was fascinating, connecting the world in such a way. She wanted to know everything: how the owner dealt with drinking laws, border control, time zones, security… her war-hardened sense of cautiousness perked up for a moment as she located the emergency exit, unwillingly estimating the likelihood of an attack. It was unfortunate, but her mind went there almost automatically, despite it being more than a year since the last copycat attack. The Dark Lord purists had been captured and imprisoned thanks to Harry, but some habits died hard.

Hermione took measured steps toward the center of the room, swaying to the prerecorded music streaming through the speakers overhead. Through the archway to her right, Hermione watched the crowd toss and jive to an unknown song, for unless they were listening to the music within the London room and intentionally missing the steps, there was some kind of audio partition between the
spaces. Despite this Hermione could still feel the bass vibrating from the polished concrete under her feet.

A tall man sitting among other patrons at the bar captured her attention then, and Hermione exhaled happily as she recognized the way he sprouted up like a tree, arms like thin branches.

She squeezed next to him, nudging him with her shoulder; he murmured an apology, moving his narrow torso over, before his eyes grew.

"Hermione?" he said, "Blimey, it's been a while!"

"Hey, Dean," she replied, grinning. "Need a drink?"

"No, but it looks like you do," he responded, raising his cocktail; the sleeves of his henley were bunched to his elbows.

Hermione met the eyes of a breathless barmaid and said, her voice elevated, "Two shots of Flame Atronach."

Dean laughed beside her, his shoulder brushing hers as he leaned back over. "Since when do you take shots of firewhiskey?"

Hermione looked at him seriously. "Since I'm still socially awkward and need it to relax."

He shrugged and when the shots slid across the bar, he clinked his with hers and downed it easily.

"I'll admit," she said, cringing against the alcohol, "I mostly came because I wanted to figure out the magic behind the venue."

"And the truth comes out," he chuckled. "It's pretty interesting though."

"Is this place usually crowded?"

"This is my first time here as well," Dean responded, looking around. "I came to see what all the fuss was about."

Hermione nodded; in his front pocket was an invitation identical to hers; it appeared to be glowing now, and out of curiosity Hermione retrieved her own flyer. Replacing the date and time, which had previously adorned the front of the card in shining gold leafing, was a large number twenty-two in a golden circle.

"It's open for twenty-four hours," Dean explained, his long finger tapping the circle. "Then it closes until the next date. I'm guessing it's for time-zone differences. After all, it's almost nine here, which would make it early morning or afternoon elsewhere in the world."

"Who are you here with? You've got an invite just like mine."

He looked at her sheepishly and replied, "I came alone, actually; I expected to run into at least one person I knew."

"Bet you didn't think it would be me."

He shook his head dramatically, grinning. "You were the last person I expected. As for the invitation, my coworker knows the owner. She's always trying to get us to go."

"Think you'll run into her here?"
Dean shook his head. "Nah, she's on holiday. What about you? Meeting people?"

"Hopefully," Hermione replied, glancing around. Blaise wasn't on stage yet. Though the music was bumping through the horned speakers, there wasn't anyone at the booth in the front. Since he didn't appear to be on yet, or perhaps even here yet, it was unlikely that the other members of his posse - Draco included - had arrived.

"Want to explore while we wait for people?" Hermione asked.

"Sure," Dean answered, picking up his forgotten, melting cocktail and sliding off his stool. "I hear the Seoul room is brilliant."

Hermione navigated them through the boisterous wizards surrounding them, making her way to the closest archway.

As they neared, she could better make out the label above the arch - 'Cuidad de Mexico.'

Hermione glanced at Dean, who nodded and shrugged, indicating that he was down to proceed; as she stepped into the room that opened into Mexico City, she was immediately met with a sweltering heat and the dissonant buzz of electric guitar. The crowd clustering around the stage was a mess of limbs, all bridled with chains, spikes and black makeup. The room was packed, people jumping and kicking up dust, bathed in the flashes and sparks of the musicians.

Hermione glanced at her companion again with raised eyebrows, and was pleased to see that Dean's head was already bobbing, his smirk bright and eyes piercing.

"Now this is what I'm talking about," he said, crossing his arms as he looked out over the pit.

Hermione turned and admired the chains and smoke, the studs and worn patches on flowing black robes, the tosses of sweaty hair back and forth punctuated by a flying elbow. It was a perfect outlet: energy manifesting as movement. The magic of release. Besides alcohol, music was another essential outlet for wizardkind, so it made sense to Hermione that people would combine the two. The rise of The Chimera was rather timely, especially in Europe, which had suffered the most from the dark age of the Death Eaters and You-Know-Who.

"Want to get in there?" Hermione asked.

Dean shrugged, eyes focused as he watched.

"Maybe just for a bit?"

"We can always come back," he conceded over the noise.

Hermione took one last gander at the lively metalheads and tuned to the Mexican bar. The glittering bottles were different here, and a squint told her that it was an intense mezcal bar, ranging from light amber bottles to deep vermillion.

"Are you seriously going to take another shot?" Dean asked, grinning.

Hermione shook her head. "No, I was just looking. They've got a great selection."

"You don't seem like the tequila type."

"I don't have a type, really," she put forth, leaning and hooking a heel on the barstool. "I'll drink pretty much anything. Save for a Boggart. Those are awful."
Dean snorted. "Sounds like someone had Ginny for a roommate."

Hermione grinned back, pushing his shoulder, and he chuckled, leaning away to polish off his cocktail. "I forgot you two dated!" she exclaimed. "Gosh, that was ages ago. Was she really drinking back then?"

"Well yeah, we all were," he replied. "Honestly, we didn't think you'd be into it. So... we kind of didn't tell you when we had parties - "

Hermione waved a hand at him. "Don't worry about it; I knew they were happening. Seamus is as subtle as a bludger."

"Yeah, plus those Lavabombs were legendary..." he trailed off, his eyes growing. "What?"

He was looking at her wide-eyed and grinning as if he'd never seen her before. Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"Hermione, have you ever had a Lavabomb?"

She snorted, looking back into the crowd as the song changed, people leaning and shaking out their limbs for the next onslaught of noise. "Of course not. It sounds awful."

"Oh, no no no. That's that, then," Dean said, setting down his empty glass and reaching for her hand. "Come on; we're going to get you a proper Lavabomb."

"Proper?"

"Yes. You have to try it at least once."

"Shouldn't I give Seamus' version a go first?"

Dean rolled his eyes, circling an arm around her shoulders to pull her forward. "No, no. You need to try a normal one, so you'll know the difference."

"You mean, so my expectations will be lowered."

He scoffed, steering them toward the next archway - Hermione squinted at the arch as they passed through it, just catching the sign that read 'Berlin.'

The difference was a shock, so much so that Dean dropped his arm. The lights here were stuttering, flashing every color of the rainbow in blinding strips. The music wasn't heavy metal, or traditional, or even wizard, but distinctly muggle. Flat rhythm, traveling beat... definitely drum and bass.

"Well then," Dean said, "Looks like the party is here!"

"Our drinks?" Hermione reminded.

"Oh, yeah."

They spilled into the bar area and waited for the barkeep to notice them; Dean ordered two Lavabombs while Hermione studied the crowd. The muggle fashion here was especially ludicrous, people covered in vinyl and velcro, backwards and upside-down garments of every type. Hermione subtly checked the clasp of her cloak, passing a finger under the metal and cloth. She was starting to sweat beneath the wool, the silk of her dress uncomfortably damp under her armpits.
"Okay, ready?" Dean said, holding out the drinks.

"Oh god," Hermione grumbled. The name was well-earned; in the center of the shot of firewhiskey was a glowing red orb, marbled like magma. She took this and another dark drink, cloudy and ominous. It smelled like a campfire.

"Cheers."

And she didn't have to ask, she already knew, and she dropped the shot into the black liquid and began to chug.

It was ice-cold and ashy, bitter like smoke, but then a swirl of sweetness bit through, and she knew she had only seconds before the fire took over -

As she finished the final sip, swallowing the luminous orb, she watched Dean's face; his eyes were glowing, cheeks illuminated with veins of fire that traveled down his throat and up to his forehead.

He held his breath for a moment, eyes watering and squinty, before he let out a sigh, and Hermione released the breath she was holding, her mouth brimming with spicy, sweet flavor like hot ginger.

"Whew," Dean said, exhaling a plume of smoke. "I'm getting too old for these."

"You're never too old for a little interactive drinking," Hermione replied, setting her nested glasses on the bar.

"The ones that Seamus used to make were formidable," he said. "If you tried to talk flames would shoot out of your mouth."

"So I'm guessing that's how the curtains in the common room got singed?"

Dean nodded, swallowing and shaking his head to clear the spiciness. "I'm sorry we never asked you to join... honestly, I don't remember why we wouldn't..."

"Well for starters I was a swotty nitwit, wasn't I?" Hermione answered easily. "I would have reported you all to McGonagall."

"Yeah, we figured... but still. I'm sorry we left you out."

Hermione shrugged. Sometimes she regretted who she'd been in school - narrow-mindedly academic and rule-abiding to a fault - but there was nothing she could do about it now.

She swallowed the last of the flavor lingering on her tongue. "Thanks for showing me the drink."

Dean waved his hand, though it was unclear if it was in casual dismissal or in response to the spiciness of his Lavabomb. Hermione smirked.

"I can take a little heat," she put forth. "Firewhiskey is my go-to."

"Not mine," Dean croaked, now fanning himself as beads of sweat lined his sharp cheeks. "I prefer safer things. Whew!" he waved a hand over his tongue. "I can't believe you can outdrink me!"

"Yes, well, speaking of that, we should probably slow down and not get sloshed before my friends get here."

"Oh, right. Who are you meeting again?"
Hermione opened her mouth, then stopped; she'd told Padma about this place and had gotten her an invite, but she was really meeting up with Blaise and Draco, and perhaps Ariana. But were they her 'friends'? She'd only really spent time with them on a few occasions, and that hardly constituted what she would normally refer to as 'friendship.' For her, friendships were what she had with Harry, or Ginny, or Mari and Jazzy. Padma was her friend, her best friend. Did Blaise or Draco really qualify?

"Ah, well, I mentioned it to Padma, and a friend of mine is soundweaving. Not sure what time he goes on though," Hermione said.

"Soundweaving in the London room?"

"Yes, I think so."

Dean gestured toward the archway, and they left the safety of the bar, weaving through the packed dancefloor and spilling into the Mexico City room.

As they stepped through, Hermione furrowed her brow; it wasn't really Mexico City, not unless the decor had changed, the music had changed, the bar had changed… everything was different, from the lounge area in the middle of the room to the wall hangings… but Dean was moving fast, and soon they were stepping through another archway, and Hermione craned to see the label above the door…

"And around the world we go…" Dean was saying as he led them through the new room. "Forgot about this part."

"I could have sworn we came in through Mexico," Hermione said, looking around.

"Yeah, supposedly the layout changes. This one looks like… maybe Beirut?"

"I've never been," Hermione mused, looking around as they wove through the dance floor, sidestepping groups of dancing people, dodging drinks whizzing past them. She latched onto Dean's arm as the crowd got particularly thick, closing in around them as the music boomed.

Finally they stepped through another archway and the music changed to a slack staccato rhythm. Hermione sighed as she recognized the layout of the London room, just as they'd left it, save for nearly triple the number of people. The bar was completely overrun by waiting figures, talking and laughing as glasses slid across the bartop.

Hermione let out a small cry of relief as she recognized a soft lilac dress, nearly glowing in the light of the orbs floating in the center of the room; Padma was smiling and taking a sip of a fresh drink as she held out a galleon teasingly for the pretty bartender. Her once waist-length hair was bobbed, lightly curled into slivers of ebony over her cheeks.

Padma really was the one true friend Hermione had, and she didn't know if she could last the whole night without her. Hermione hit Dean lightly on the shoulder and pointed, and his face split into a grin.

She quickly squeezed between bodies and embraced the dark-haired girl, indulging in a squeal as Padma gushed relief.

"Thank Merlin, Hermione!" she gasped. "I thought you might have flaked!"

"Of course not - and, look who I found!" Hermione gestured at Dean, though she hardly needed to; he was more than a head taller than her, and Padma's gaze had settled on him as soon as she'd released Hermione from her hug. Her eyes dancing, she embraced him as well.
"Love the hair, Padma," Hermione gushed.

"Yeah, you look beautiful," Dean put forth, releasing her.

Padma waved her hand at them, not looking as pleased as Hermione would have expected after she had wanted the cut for so long. "It's just illusioned. Turns out I don't have the bollocks to actually cut it."

Hermione smiled and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Well, that's a relief, isn't it? You can take it for a spin and see how you like it!"

A smile wriggled out from behind Padma's frown, and she leaned into her friend. "You're right. Just taking it out dancing."

"Yes! Let your hair enjoy the city life," Hermione added, and the girls laughed.

Padma's eyes brightened. "Ah, Hermione! How are your curls doing tonight?"

"Oh, so activated," Hermione quipped, and the girls laughed again.

Padma ordered them a fresh round of cocktails - a clear fizzy one for Hermione, and a deep amber one for Dean - and they detached from the bar to make room. As they stepped away from the fray, the music changed tones; it was fast, with a deconstructed beat that sounded like wood knocking against stone.

Hermione was happy to see Blaise Zabini now behind the stagebooth, head bobbing and wand in hand; surrounding him were glowing bubbles of different sizes, popping in time with each sound only to grow again and again. They drifted over the crowd, bringing with them a sudden intensity of certain tones. Blaise looked like a conductor, swishing his wand left and right; sometimes he warped and repeated a particular sound, and Hermione watched the bubbles grow and pop and splash the crowd with colorful light.

"So that's soundweaving," Hermione murmured. "It's just sound trapped in bubbles, woven together once released."

"I think it's more complicated than that," Dean said. "I tried to get into it a while back but it's pretty intense magic... wait, is that Zabini up there?"

Hermione confirmed, and Dean stared up at the stage in wonder.

"Well, that's unexpected," he commented.

Hermione watched Blaise as the music shimmered. The sounds were almost recognizable as everyday noises, sharp like glass shattering or steel dropping. The rhythm stretched and bounced back, creating a broken and staccato beat, with classical music unhinged and stretched over it. Hermione could even hear the raspiness of the record that the traditional orchestral samples had come from, layered with the different intonations and strung into melodies.

"Since when are you and him friends?"

Hermione shrugged, thumbing over the clasp of her cloak. The interior of her robe was starting to feel like a greenhouse. "We got to talking one night."

"At the ballet," Padma put forth. "Though why he thought to invite us here is beyond me."
"Aren't you friends with him?" Hermione asked.

"Once upon a time," she sighed. "We were paired in Potions class for that awful assignment, do you remember Dean?"

"Oh Merlin, it was the worst," Dean agreed. "I had to take a relaxation potion made by Parkinson."

"It was seventh year," Padma explained quietly, and Hermione nodded stiffly, sipping her cocktail. The year she had missed.

"Zabini was fine; he was quiet but goofy once you got him to talk - oh hey!"

They turned to the booth; Blaise was staring back at them, eyebrows high. He waved and pointed at Hermione, his grin blindingly mischievous, and Hermione waved back at him; there was a woman by his side, slapping his shoulder as she descended the steps from the stage.

Blaise had his wand to his throat now. "London!" he shouted.

Those in the crowd who were paying attention cheered. Glasses were raised above heads.

"Dreya's here," he said, an indulgent smile on his lips, and the crowd cheered again, louder than before. A spotlight appeared around Blaise's stage companion as she parted the crowd, and she raised a hand as more glasses went into the air.

As Andreya came towards Hermione with purpose, Hermione took her in; she had a bold shaved head with large, deep-set eyes framed in shadows. From her slightly hooked nose hung a heavy gold ring, matching the rings hanging from both ears. She was wearing what could only be a cuirass for a top, metal and shiny and cropped at the ribs, revealing a long stretch of toned torso. Between the shaved head, ancient military garb like a soldier for Cleopatra, and her chokered throat, she looked like a warrior. Hermione didn't think she had ever seen a more intense-looking human being.

"Andreya," the woman introduced. "Blaise says hi."

Blaise was still working the crowd, leaning forward and pointing his wand at the front to capture their cheers in his *sonorus* charm.

"Nice to meet you," Hermione replied, shaking Andreya's hand, and she returned the solid grip.

"You too love," Andreya purred, her voice as deep as her eyes. "He mentioned you'd be coming. Keep Draco occupied - he can be such a loner, even here."

"Oh, so he's coming tonight?"

Andreya nodded. "Of course, he is Blaise's biggest fan. He's right over there."

Hermione's stomach clenched, and she kept her expression neutral as she turned and followed Andreya's clawed finger. And then she saw him, hair shining like chrome under the splashes of light, smirk in place as he listened to his companions. His glasses were metal framed and slightly rounded tonight, the thin silver matching the oddly reflective quality of his eyes.

That damn smirk was instantly disarming, and Hermione swayed on her feet.

"Such a sourpuss at our practice today, I'm glad he's smiling," Andreya was saying. "But you know how he gets after a full day of patients. Besides, Blaise was already two drinks deep by the time he got there."
Hermione's mind was spinning. "Yeah, it must be nice to take a break."

She sipped her drink as she watched Draco; he still possessed that quiet, somewhat awkward disposition, standing there with his glass, but she could only tell because she knew him, had stood with him awkwardly before. She briefly wondered if he was drinking his first cocktail of the evening.

When she turned back, Andreya was introducing herself to Padma and Dean; both of them looked struck by her appearance, giving her a once-over when she turned back to Hermione.

Hermione smiled. "I'm excited for the show. Blaise was talking about it at the Memorial Ball a few weeks ago."

"Ugh, of course he was," Andreya said, rolling her eyes and casting an affectionate glance at Blaise. "I've been watching him soundweave for ages, back when he was just playing drums to piss off his mother. He's always had an interesting take on music. He'll weave any sound into a melody if you let him."

Hermione nodded, sipping. "Yes, I hadn't heard any of his songs before tonight, but he did mention that they aren't 'palatable.'"

"They certainly aren't," the woman laughed. "I love his music. No one is doing what he's doing, even the other soundweavers. He's using samples from the traditional pieces and cutting them with muggle rhythms, all made from scratch. He's using sounds from the apothecaries and the quidditch pitches. He can be moody or upbeat, dreary or whimsical. It's all fluid." Her eyes sparkled, her lips turning up in a smirk. "And most importantly, he knows how to party."

Right on cue, the beat dropped heavily, and all four of them bobbed in time, Andreya's earrings swinging as the bass vibrated the floor.

Hermione couldn't help but glance at Draco every few seconds; he hadn't noticed her yet. He was still watching Blaise and mildly listening to his companions.

Hermione sighed. "So you're a singer?"

"Among other things, yes," Andreya answered, chuckling. "I work with Blaise a lot, playing instruments, writing, whatever the music needs."

"I don't meet a lot of musicians, so I'm curious."

Andreya waved her hand. "It's not all glamor and flash like you read about… well," she admitted, "sometimes it is. I've been attracting some attention lately, and performing is a lot different than it used to be. We would never dream of getting booked here when they first opened, but now…" she gestured around the room.

Hermione looked around, and it occurred to her that people were dancing and talking, yes, but they seemed genuinely interested in Blaise. Most people were facing the stage, watching him manipulate his sounds. Some were even eyeing Hermione and Andreya with curious expressions.

"The fans are out tonight," Andreya said warmly. "And Blaise always brings a posse… oh, there's Ariana as well."

Ariana was indeed standing a few paces away from Draco, both arms wrapped around a slightly taller woman with flowing hair and crinkly eyes. Hermione looked up at Blaise soundweaving; he was concentrating on his orbs, his head bobbing determinedly.
Andreya sighed heavily, took a sip of her cocktail, and said, "Great to meet you, darling, I've got to warm up. Let's get a drink after the set."

Hermione said her goodbyes as Andreya left towards the stage, parting the crowd in her wake. Hermione turned and looked back at Draco and Ariana; the witch still had a tight hold of her companion as Draco sipped his drink.

Hermione became aware of the silk resting over her breasts, and as she inhaled the fabric tickled where it moved against her skin. She slowly reached up and unclasped her cloak, and it slipped down her arms, exposing her shoulders, cleavage, and waist, and she was beset with the instant relief of releasing the humid air harbored under her robe. She tried not to think on her sexy appearance too much as she bundled the cloak, shrinking it to galleon size to fit in her wristbag.

With the surrounding bodies now caressing her shoulders, light trailing over her skin, she took a breath. The sweet smell of many different hair products, aftershaves, and natural body scents filled the air; it swirled around her as she walked purposefully between the moving individuals around her, eyes fixed on her conquest.

As the crowd parted, Draco’s gaze shifted to meet hers, light glinting off his reflective frames.

And as she held his gaze, the night played out before her: them together, bodies brimming with alcohol and longing, moving together in the sea of people as though nothing but attraction mattered. He was familiar, but only because she had been expecting him. There was no history, or memory, or nightmare. He was a dream, *they* were a dream, and everything else was beautiful noise.

His attention caught, Draco moved towards her, and his gaze dipped, tracing over her silken sheath, down the hills and valleys that shined in the light, back up the center to meet her eyes.

Ariana was now squealing and hugging her, but the world was slow, muffled, and if Ariana's grip around her wasn't holding her down Hermione could have sworn she was floating.

She released Ariana, breathless as Draco leaned in and slid an arm around her waist. Harmless, if anyone saw, but it set her senses ablaze.

"I love that dress," he murmured in her ear, his grip tightening on her lower back and wrinkling the soft fabric.

Hermione shivered, her skin puckering; being close to him after all the anticipation of the day was overwhelming, but she was determined to keep clear and maintain some level of control.

Feigning comfort, she smiled, placed a hand on his arm, and leaned in.

"If you like it so much, you should take it off later," she breathed.

As she leaned away he met her gaze, his eyebrows in his hairline.

They were usually stumbling upon attraction, tripping over it like a rock in the road and tumbling down the path that inevitably lead to sex. It was almost brash to draw attention to it immediately, like observing the bump and doing nothing to steer away from it. It amplified the anticipation however, for now there was nothing to hide behind, no propriety that needed to be maintained until they were caught off-guard and unawares by sudden, blistering mutual interest. All of that was stripped, exposing the truth: she was here for a reason. Draco let out an amused chuckle, the corner of his lips lifting.

"Why wait until later?" he answered easily, breath elevating a curl off her shoulder, and the sudden
jolt of pleasure from the thought was almost painful.

She could only give him a heated look in response before Padma and Dean were at her side, and she numbly watched her companions greet each other, Dean appraising Draco warily but accepting the clink against his glass.

"Long time no see, Malfoy," Dean said, sipping.

"It's been a good few years, then?" Draco responded, smirking, and Dean matched his expression, eyebrows raised in surprise at the self-deprecation. Hermione let out a calming breath, stepping back from Draco to lean into Padma's side. Ariana's friend introduced herself, but Hermione forgot her name immediately, feeling Draco's eyes tracing over her skin.

The crowd rumbled with cheers as the song began to wind down, and Hermione looked up at the stage to see Blaise levitating what looked like a new mass of glowing bubbles, all shades of luminescent turquoise and blue.

Soon the crowd was chanting, "Dreya! Dreya!" and Hermione joined in, watching Blaise as he manipulated his sound orbs, diminishing the remaining ones from the previous song. Andreya stepped purposefully up to the stage, all swaying hips and shine as her chromed bustier caught the turquoise glow.

The music had already been transformational, filled with riddles and secrets, and that thread continued as new sounds filled the room, sounds of water rushing and a slow, traditional melody. Logically Hermione knew that the song came from the manipulated sounds, released as each bubble popped and grew in an endless cycle, but the ambient music seemed to surge from the ground up, flooding the room.

Andreya took a breath, and then her voice seeped from the stage like chocolate, soulful with a touch of raspiness.

*When you come around, you come around*

*and you know that I'm waiting for you*

*You always bring me down, you bring me down*

*and you know that I care for you*

As Andreya's voice duplicated, ghostly versions of herself slipped out of her body, drifting over the stage. Hermione had never seen someone sing melodies and harmonies at the same time and was enchanted. Translucent Andreya-shaped wisps supported the melody, kaleidascoping with the music. Blaise rotated the water sounds around the room as Andreya hummed, morphing them and smoothing them out, transforming the tones.

She sang of dashed hope, of a lover blind to her feelings, of care despite pain; it was at once somber and hopeful. Hermione snuck a quick glance at Ariana. She was swaying, eyes closed, hands pressed together as she enjoyed the music; her tall companion was beside her, raking Ariana's hair away from her neck to rest a hand there.

*Even if I let this go,*

*Maybe then I'll never know,*

*Even if I let this go,*
Hermione was so entranced by Andreya's singing, watching her lips move, the ghostly wisps of her voice drifting over the crowd, that she hadn't noticed the intensity of the music increasing, the bulbous lights nearly vibrating with growing luminance above them.

Then the bass dropped in an explosion of sound and light, and it was a shock through her system. The crowd dipped in time.

And they danced, Hermione timidly at first, her skin bristling as strangers brushed against her bare shoulders, but with the warm energy of the mob and the distracted and euphoric cries around her, she let go of her reservations little by little, relaxing as the alcohol started to do its work, loosening her limbs. She closed her eyes for a few moments, enjoying the sound of Andreya's voice.

Hermione had never heard music quite like this; it was reminiscent of the hip-hop she knew Blaise and Draco listened to, but without the bite. Blaise was something special, she could feel it. There was power in his perspective, his voice, and that power could instantly transport people to his soul, to a place where nothing but color and light existed, and each color was an emotion that felt as close as if she'd felt it years ago and was just remembering.

Then the beat changed, all the melodic tones dropping out as Blaise added new sounds in purple and scarlet, now lighting up the room overhead. The new beat was much faster, and the people around Hermione fell in sync, dancing as Andreya let loose rocking hips.

Hermione looked at Draco from the corner of her eye; he was swaying to the music, watching Blaise as he bobbed around onstage.

A bashful innocence pervaded her; on a night like this, at a proper nightclub, Hermione would usually drink until she found herself either lip-locked with someone or rubbing her body against them to the music. But she'd never done those things with Draco, no, they'd always ended up kissing simply because of their shared attraction. They didn't need a place like this, but there was something curiously naughty about pursuing him here.

They'd danced before but this was entirely different. In this loud place with the bass vibrating the floor and people rocking together, bodies touching, dancing meant something else. This wasn't a bloody waltz, which required steps and form and poise. This was the sweaty kind of dancing, the slide your hand here kind, the parted lips kind. It was already happening, so early in the night: the people around Hermione were loose, their hands in the air, hips swaying, knees bending. With any more alcohol this crowd would dissolve into one mass of breathless heat. There were a few sober ones, chatting and bobbing politely, but they were the only barrier to utter, collective bliss.

Emboldened somehow, Hermione bumped Draco with one of her swaying hips.

He glanced at her, and when he realized she was moving to the beat a calm interest stole his eyes. He turned to face her, his eyes traveling down, skimming over silk.

"Look at you," Draco murmured, just loud enough for her to hear. "Enjoying yourself?"

Hermione nodded, stepping closer to him, and as she glided her hands up his chest he grasped her
waist, bunching her thin dress between his fingers.

"Won't they see?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

She shrugged, indicating: maybe, but it doesn't matter. People might, yes, but she couldn't change her own mentality, her own experience with nightclubs. Her body was here and she couldn't turn off the urges that came with alcohol, darkness, heavy bass, and the stimulation of dozens of people touching her. She'd changed from a casual observer, a participant, to an active player. She was a predator now, on the hunt. Perhaps she had been one even before she'd left her flat, when she'd donned this tiny silk sheath. She couldn't pretend like she hadn't known what she was doing.

Despite this, Hermione cast a glance around. She knew that Padma and Dean would be able to see them but her quick proximity assessment told her that they were marginally distracted by the music, watching Andreya command the room. It was dark enough to provide some privacy. Other people would have to really look to put it together - is that Hermione Granger? Is that Draco Malfoy? And then observe what they were doing - oh, are they dancing? And then make the mental leap - oh, they're dancing together, that's unbelievable!

"Aren't you the rebel," Draco said, sliding his hands up and down her hips.

This touch was exactly what Hermione wanted; she couldn't help but sigh as she thought of him pulling the dress up, sliding the silky fabric over her skin until she was completely exposed, then dipping those strong fingers into her knickers and touching her, right in the middle of this crowd...

She inhaled sharply as the room began to blur, and tried to concentrate on something else, like the vibe of the music, the fabric of Draco's button down, his top two buttons undone as though he'd loosened his shirt in preparation for the evening. The triangle of skin between the stiff folds of fabric flashed in the lights, and Hermione was entranced by it, wanting nothing more than to press her nose to his chest and inhale him like the smoke from a hookah.

Being near him wasn't helping the rush of blood through her veins, and she dazedly detached from him, sparing a passing glance at her friends; Padma was watching her now with a raised eyebrow, but Dean's attention was fully on the stage, his chin practically resting on the top of Ariana's head as they both cheered for Blaise.

The upper deck, unnoticed before because of its vacancy, now displayed a line of individuals leaning over the room, sipping cocktails. The bubbles in the center of the room were popping on repeat, showering the crowd with tiny luminescent suds that seemed to disappear just before making contact.

The music that fell over the crowd wasn't even the heavy thumping that had shaken Hermione in the Beirut room, nor the dissonant roar of Mexico City. It was calm and cool, as hip as Blaise himself and with the same kind of mystery. It was like he was feeling the vibe of the room and reflecting it back with a touch of groove, smooth and leisurely, carrying everyone from beat to beat on a wave of feeling. The common thread was Andreya, holding it all together with a voice like the touch of velvet on bare skin. It was all intoxicatingly vibrant.

As the song transitioned the crowd cheered heartily. Andreya was done it seemed, now it was just Blaise and his sounds, his odd beats that seemed to spin around the room, at once futuristic and classical, all with a touch of languid silk. Dreya was parting the crowd, clearly trying to maintain anonymity and direct attention to Blaise but with little success.

Finally she pulled up next to Draco with a sigh, sporting a glass of clear liquid Hermione suspected was water.
"Andreya, love," Draco greeted, and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Fantastic as always."

"Yes," Hermione said warmly, "You were lovely."

"Had to get people moving after that first song," Andreya replied. "They love it but it's mad somber."

"What's it like, singing multiple melodies at once?"

"It's like..." She thought for a moment. "Like singing and playing an instrument at the same time. Your mind is concentrating on two things, and with this," she touched the choker across her throat, "you manifest your voice."

"Fascinating," Hermione said, rubbing her chin as she inspected the choker.

"Don't do that, she'll spend the rest of the evening trying to figure it all out," Draco admonished, his smirk catching the light.

Hermione wanted to retort but she didn't have any words for him, not yet, and so she began to move with the people around them, following Andreya's lead as her head lolled from side to side.

Blaise was even playing samples from tunes Hermione knew in '94, but mixed in a way she'd never heard; the nostalgia and excitement was palpable in the crowd as they jammed along, bodies moving and heads bobbing. Even Draco seemed to know the songs, subtly mouthing the words as the crowd dipped around him.

Hermione had nearly forgotten that Draco must have listened to the same music during their Hogwarts years; the Weird Sisters were playing on the radio every other song, and despite all the mad nonsense of fifth year, she distinctly remembered the fast-paced banger by Creatures of the Cauldron that had taken over the school just before the winter holiday. Students had been singing it down the corridors, stomping the beat before lectures, whispering the strange lyrics in hushed tones during classes amidst stifled giggles.

Hermione swayed, letting herself lightly brush those around her. She was flanked by beautiful people of every type and age. Andreya was stealing Ariana away from her companion now, twirling her in a manner at once playful and respectful, as though she was making her own boundaries clear. Ariana was having none of it; she latched onto the other woman, hands roving over the chrome of her top. Dean had a hand in the air, losing track of Padma as she got between the other girls in a show of feminine camaraderie.

What a lovely feeling. Hermione loved that sense of possibility, where everyone was available, everyone was a feast for the eyes, and even if they weren't available romantically they were still available for appreciating. She liked to pretend that she could walk up to and kiss anyone in the room, that all she had to do was smooth a hand up their arm, smile, and lean in, and their bodies and their breath would become hers. Perhaps it was the liquid reassurance associated with drinking, or the melting of inhibitions that usually made her no longer too shy to properly connect; either way, there was a vibrant sensuality to places like this, where words and ideas and logic didn't matter as much as feeling, or attraction. Maybe this was what she appreciated about Draco; being able to let go of her thoughts and just engage her body was a welcome break to the mental toils of her job, her life. The fact that he could keep up with and stimulate her intellectually was just a bonus.

It was on nights like these that Hermione loved being single. As a single woman the night could extend forever and in any direction, wherever she wanted to take it. Depending on what she'd been fancying recently she could stick to the dance floor, sweating out all the stress of her job, or she could be on the prowl for a partner for the evening. And in that regard, whether she was locking eyes
and lips with random women or leading men down dark corridors, she was free in a way she wasn't in her daily life.

That said, she didn't usually go home with anyone, and that was her plan tonight. If by some miracle Draco wanted company as well, they could dally in the crowd, maybe, but when the time came, fall into the same bed.

Hermione looked up; Blaise was still soundweaving, but there was a woman up there with him, her hair a wild bouquet of blonde curls; Hermione watched as he collected his sound orbs, and as each descended and vanished the music became more and more stripped back until the only thing that remained was the bass.

As Blaise left the stage, he raised his wand and tossed a glowing bubble back at the new soundweaver, who caught it and laughed, her curls shaking; when she exploded it over the crowd it was a ticking noise, and the soundweaver chuckled again, twirling her wand.

Draco was busy talking with Padma about something that sounded serious, perhaps the research project he'd volunteered for in Mumbai, and so didn't see Blaise sidle up to them.

"Hey mate, while you're telling your life story over there, mind passing the bottle?"

Draco gave Blaise a look - that annoyed yet affectionate glare - and procured a bottle, handing it to Blaise.

"That's the *fuego* from 1639," he said, "Don't go gulping it down, or you're buying a new one for Ariana."

"Yes, get a *glass*, Blaise, you're a menace - "

"Alright, alright, don't congratulate me for a successful set all at once," Blaise muttered, uncorking the firewhiskey and wiggling his fingers expectantly. Ariana pushed her empty glass into his grip, and he nodded in thanks, his grin returning as he poured himself some liquor.

Hermione looked around as they were herded slightly into the center of the dance floor - a large mass of people was exiting from the archway on the left side of the room, and an increase in German could be heard in the cacophony of chatter.

"Ah, the soundweaver finished up in Berlin as well," Blaise said, craning to look through the archway.

"What time is it over there?"

"Who cares?" Blaise replied swiftly. "The party doesn't stop just because the sun is up!"

"The party started a little *too early*, here," Andreya said to that, eyeing Blaise.

"Yeah, I had to be here at half-eight. Unbelievable! Any other show I wouldn't even go on until one o'clock, maybe two - "

Andreya waved a hand at him, smirking behind her water.

"We haven't been 'round to all the rooms yet," Padma said.

"Oh, that won't do," Blaise said, gesturing. "Please, explore! This place is *fantastic*."

"So if I exit through the Mexico City room, will I be in Mexico City?" Hermione asked.
"Yeah," Ariana put forth. "How do you think I got in? There's this great taco stand nearby, and they do tacos y quesadillas - Hermione, the quesadillas! They're nothing like the ones you get in London."

"You can exit everywhere except the U.S.," Blaise continued. "The muggle war has MACUSA in a tizzy."

"Oh, a tizzy?" Hermione echoed, raising her eyebrows at Blaise.

He shrugged, sipping his cocktail, his head bobbing.

"Don't go into la Cuidad with Blaise, though," Ariana said, shaking her head, "last time I brought him to a nice restaurant - a nice place, I'm telling you - he was eating guacamole with a spoon like it was ice cream!"

"Yes, apparently I didn't learn proper manners growing up, and you never let me forget it," Blaise countered.

"I thought you British were all manners and poise," Ariana laughed. "Boy was I wrong."

"Thank Merlin for that," Blaise said, slinking over to Ariana and snaking an arm around her middle.

Ariana laughed and batted Blaise, squirming in his grip as he planted a kiss on her jaw, and Hermione couldn't help but cringe; it was painful to watch them interact, knowing how Blaise felt and how oblivious Ariana was to it.

"She's pretty good too," Dean said, gesturing towards the new soundweaver, and the group nodded, bobbing to the music.

"I'll take that to mean it was a successful set?" Blaise asked, releasing a red-faced Ariana.

"Fish for compliments one more time and I'll really burst your bubble," Andreya cut in, batting Blaise on the head like one does a younger sibling they're both trying to reprimand and protect from embarrassing themselves. "I'll burst all your bubbles, actually."

The music gripped them once more, and they danced together, Blaise with a tight fist over the handle of firewhiskey. The night was still young, but the crowd was lively. The room was now a sea of moving heads, swaying to the new beats permeating the room. Flashes of purple and blue illuminated expressions, casting parted lips and closed eyes into focus. Hermione marveled at how drawn into the music she was here; this wasn't the mechanical hammering of music from muggle parties, music that had developed and seeped into society unnoticed by wizardkind. The muggle world had gone on changing and evolving, and coming back to it after the War and the cleanup had been a culture shock. Every time Hermione explored the muggle parts of the city, went deeper than just a coffee shop or a library or an electronics store, she realized how much the world was accelerating without her. She always felt like she was behind the times.

But here, every side of her being was addressed. The sense of comfort in not having to hide her magic, and being able to stimulate that sense of wonderment that made witnessing magic so special… it was relieving. It was like she could truly relax, and didn't have to worry about accidentally charming something. Once, in a muggle club, she'd been in such a heightened state that the glowing tiles of the dance floor had intensified around her body as she stepped. She herself had been practically glowing. If that were to happen now, it would just be more magic for the fun.

The music ebbed and flowed, and Hermione watched the new soundweaver swish her wand back and forth, eyes darting. Her style was tighter, heavier than Blaise's, but it was a natural progression of
time; the club was packed. Every exhale around her held that sweet scent of alcohol that Hermione secretly loved. In fact, she could feel her firewhiskey-soaked body starting to blend everything together, mixing sensations with colors and sounds.

London was out tonight.

Hermione could have sworn that the path to Berlin was still to her right, but as she looked through the archway she could see different decor, all red brick and flashing lights. If she squinted she could make out the name 'Brooklyn' above the arch.

She wondered if the changing layout was intentional, if the owner of the club had thought to mix the cultures coming together in this space and force them to interact. It was rather brilliant; the Department of International Magical Cooperation could benefit from ideas like this. She made a mental note to contact the owner and set up a meeting.

Hermione breathed easily, watching attractive members of the crowd as they danced and bobbed, the glowing orbs moving slowly around them, casting blue, pink, and purple light over their faces and skin.

Someone caressed her arm, and she looked beside her to see Draco standing a few paces away, just beyond the small steps to the Brooklyn room, looking at her intently.

Her heart skipped at the look in his eyes; that slightly devilish smile was playing at his lips again as he motioned for her to come silently; she looked back to see if her friends had noticed, but they'd lost track of her, dancing and laughing and drinking. Even Draco's friends were occupied, pulling Padma and Dean into their group, twirling them.

Satisfied, she stepped forward and slipped her hand into his.

Once she had descended the steps, he pulled her slowly through the young wizards and witches under the archway. The music changed tones and became a heavy, slow beat; the soundweaving in this room was uncomplicated but moody, suiting the dark brick walls and flashing white lights.

After a few more steps, Draco turned and slipped his arm around her waist, drawing her body closer; she complied easily, simply melting into him.

Draco just seemed to know how to make her feel incredibly sexy; the way he needed to constantly be touching her, or the way he pulled her against him, or even the way he said her name... it was intoxicating. She tilted her chin up and found herself kissing him slowly, deeply, the bass vibrating her whole body as he held her.

She became aware of a wall behind her, and she leaned away so she could press against it; he watched her do this, his eyes almost black in the dark.

He smirked, stepping closer and thumbing over her cheek as a flash of light caught her red dress.

"This has to be a dream," he murmured, entwining his fingers in the hair at the back of her neck and pulling the curls forward.

She tilted her chin up again, letting him delve his hand further into her hair; her hands were already gliding up his chest.

He leaned in, lightly placing a wet kiss under her jaw, before he breathed in her ear, "Is it bad that I want to fuck you, right here?"
She shook her head, her eyes lidded; she was already ready to leave, drag him back to her apartment and tumble around for the rest of the night, but something about the scene he just created had her growing so impatient she doubted she could wait.

He kissed her deeply, his hands gliding over her silky waist, down her hips, and Hermione honestly couldn't find any bad outcome here; whether he continued touching her innocently or pulled her dress up and nailed her into the wall, she was ready. Whatever he decided in the next few seconds was completely unobstructed from the uncertainty that came with interacting with him in public. Let them see, she thought brazenly.

He playfully grasped her hips one final time before he pulled away, leaving a frustrated moan her mouth, and he backed up, releasing her.

Hermione needed that contact however, endlessly more of it, and reached forward.

"Let's dance," she breathed.

She pushed him into the fold of bodies, red flashes of faces she didn't care to know slipping by, and they were swallowed by the breathing mass of the American magical community.

End Notes

Next chapter coming soon...

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