Summary

Hermione runs into Lucius Malfoy after the war, and finds herself carrying on a rather unexpected correspondence with the former Death Eater as she tries to make sense of the slow unraveling of the domestic peace she'd found herself and her friends in after the war.

Tagged explicit for later chapters to come.

Notes

I own none of the beautiful characters featured here. They all belong to JKR. This is not beta'd, so please please feel free to leave me your thoughts! Your lovely comments brighten my day and fuel my muse.
Ron had at least stopped sighing heavily, but had now begun to jiggle his long legs, which stretched past the edge of his chair and reached Hermione’s, leaving her subject to his restlessness as well.

“Ron, we can just leave.” She didn’t turn to look at him, and tried to keep her face and her voice as free of the irritation she felt as possible.

To his credit, he quickly drew his long legs back towards him and sat up straighter in his chair, his face instantly guilty. “No, ‘Mione, it’s date night and it’s your turn. I’m sorry.”

She shot him a small, grateful smile and turned back to the book she’d brought to read while they waited. She made it through a page and a half before she heard Ron shuffle his feet next to her and draw in breath.

“It’s just...”

Hermione slowly shut her book and turned to him, lips pressed tightly together, and raised one eyebrow. He looked somewhat cowed, but continued on against what should have been his better judgment.

“It’s just... The night of the Cannons game?”

Hermione thought she heard a snort of laughter from behind them, and whipped around from their spot in the front row, but only saw a handful of other early arrivers behind them, a couple of small groups apparently ensconced in their own conversations and one person with their face obscured by a book they were reading. Her attention re-focused on Ron, she took a deep steadying breath.

“Ron, the Cannons play every week, and we went to their practice last week-”

“But they don’t play a season opener against the Harpies every week-”

“-and this is Professor Twilburg’s first lecture since getting his Muggle Ph.D.-”

“-and a bunch of the blokes from work were actually going to go-”

“-and this is the only book release and signing he’ll do, he’s said he’s going back on sabbatical to work on the next one soon-”

“-and with Gin and Alicia still out recovering from World Cup play, they’re saying the Cannons really have a chance this time, and might pull it out-”

While Hermione had a great deal of self-control, she was, much to her great displeasure, not perfect. She snapped.

“Ron, the Cannons are not going to win! They have an eighteen-game losing streak and the Harpies could beat them even if I was their bloody Keeper! It is my turn to choose date night and I have chosen that we are attending this lecture and signing, so that we can enjoy learning about the intersection of magic and Muggle physics, and come away with a greater understanding of the world in which we both live, so you will sit here, learn, and enjoy!”
Hermione was a little out of breath by the end of her rant, but she heard an unmistakable snicker from behind them, and whipped her head around, ready to turn her frustrations on the interloper. Her fierce gaze dropped instantly as she recognized white-blonde hair and an aquiline nose. Her eyes widened and her heart stopped for a moment when she saw that the wizard she’d noticed with his head in a book was now chuckling and looking up at her, revealing the distinctive features of none other than Lucius Malfoy. She hoped she’d managed to rearrange her features into a coolly impassive mask before he saw the flash of fear across her face.

“Something to add, Mr. Malfoy?” she said in the most imperious tone she could muster.

“It’s nineteen.” His cryptic response was accompanied by a sly smirk that Hermione felt certain must come from some Malfoy-specific gene. Her lips tightened as she tried to keep her cool, noticing Ron’s hands next to her slowly tightening into fists, his knuckles already white.

“Nineteen what?” she said flatly, refraining from rolling her eyes.

“The Cannons’ losing streak. It’s nineteen games, not eighteen.”

Hermione suddenly felt Ron next to her beginning to launch himself over the chairs and clamped one hand on his thigh, giving him a warning look. He dropped back into his seat sullenly, arms crossed as he muttered to himself. Hermione decided that, in this instance, a response was not warranted, and only turned back to shoot Malfoy a withering glare. When she did though, she noticed that he had resumed reading his book, for the first time with his hands in a position in which she could see the cover, and Hermione gasped, quickly turning around before he could look up and catch her wide-eyed stare.

She tried to turn her attention back to her own book, but she kept darting glances surreptitiously over her shoulder, trying to make sure she’d read the title of Malfoy’s book correctly, but every glance confirmed it. Malfoy was reading the book being released after this lecture, the book she’d been waiting to get her hands on for months, the book whose release had been carefully controlled. Twilburg was something of a rock star within his narrow academic specialty, and his turn as a Ph.D student turned star lecturer in the Muggle world had done little to diminish his ego. She pursed her lips, wondering if it was perhaps another book with an enchanted cover, Malfoy’s idea of a joke just to irritate her. She pulled a compact out of her bag, opening it and applying some lipstick rather poorly as she instead looked over her shoulder at Malfoy. She paid attention to her lips long enough to quickly clean up the smudges, and then her eyes darted back to Malfoy. This time, though, he was waiting to meet her gaze with an amused smirk. Hermione jumped, the lipstick and compact she was holding falling to the floor with a clatter. She dove down beneath her seat to pick them up, and heard a drawling voice from behind her.

“Something to add, Miss Granger?”

The mocking bastard, parroting her own words back at her. She stayed down for a moment, taking deep breaths and hoping it would help the flush of shame and anger fade from her face. She couldn’t let Malfoy know how embarrassed she was to have caught her staring. She considered not deigning to respond, but, with the staring, that seemed unaccountably cowardly. She popped back up and turned to him.

“Where did you get that book? It’s not out yet.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You may be aware, since I believe you’re published yourself, but authors do usually get advance copies of their books.”

Hermione glared at him, thinking of several choice (insulting) questions, but thought better of
Ron, always one step behind on the thinking before speaking thing, gave voice to precisely one of them.

“So what author did you steal it from?”

Malfoy’s gaze, which had been til now mildly disdainful but at least amused, now turned cold.

“Charming and insightful as ever, Mr. Weasley. Has it occurred to you that perhaps I was an author?”

Hermione frowned, her brow furrowing as she turned the thought over in her head. “I hadn’t heard that Twilburg had a co-author, and Merlin knows his ego is so large I’d never expect it.” She flushed as she realized what she’d said, but a corner of Malfoy’s mouth was twitching upward.

“I consulted on certain sections and wrote the forward, Miss Granger.”

“I didn’t expect you’d be interested in this topic, given past politics.”

Malfoy met her gaze, his voice cold. “I wasn’t aware you knew me at all, Miss Granger.”

Ron’s heated voice interrupted the conversation. “We know you well enough to know you’re a prejudiced git. C’mon ‘Mione, I’m not going to sit here and get heckled by a bloody war criminal.” With that he stood up and skulked out of the lecture hall, his hands still balled in fists at his sides.

“Ron, wait!” Hermione cried, jumping up and starting after him. She cast one last despairing glance at the lecture stage, thinking for only the briefest moment (or, when she was being honest with herself, several brief moments) of staying to watch her long-awaited lecture.

Instead, she swung back towards Malfoy, leaning forward to whisper scathingly. “Now look what you’ve done. I guess after all these years you still ruin everything.”

She darted out of the lecture hall, tears pricking her eyes, as she resolved herself to placing an owl order for the first shipment that went out to Flourish and Blotts. It wouldn’t be so bad, she comforted herself, only a little delay, maybe a week. She hadn’t really needed the signature in it, of course, just the contents. And she and Ron, their relationship, their dignity, it was all more important than some stupid book.

* * *

The next day, when Hermione was facing the prospect of an empty Saturday without the book she’d expressly cleared her plans to be able to read, she was darkly reconsidering her priorities.

Ron still in bed, Hermione was drinking her coffee and scowling as she re-planned her weekend when she heard a tapping at the window. It was early for the Prophet, though not unheard of, but when she’d unlatched the window the owl that flew in wasn’t one of the usual post owls. It was a great eagle owl, which landed in the center of her kitchen table and surveyed its surroundings royally. She untied the heavy package it was carrying, unwrapping it with brow furrowed.

When it was finally unwrapped from its sturdy brown paper, Hermione could only stare at it for a few moments. It was Twilburg’s new book, the one she’d meant to order from Flourish and Blotts first thing after her coffee. Even in her confusion, Hermione couldn’t help tracing a reverent hand hungrily over its cover before flipping it open. What she saw inside made her sit down promptly, eyes wide. It was signed, right there on the front page. To Miss Hermione Granger, the brightest witch of her age. - Phineas K. Twilburg. Hermione greedily pulled the book a few inches closer to her, which had the unexpected effect of revealing a letter addressed to her underneath the book.
She opened it with shaking hands to find it full of careful, aristocratic lettering, and she leaned back, feeling herself blanche as she recognized that signature.
Absolutely Normal Chaos

Chapter Summary

Hermione figures out what to do with an unexpected package.

Chapter Notes

Again, none of the characters belong to me, all hail queen JKR. Reviews always appreciated.

Absolutely Normal Chaos

Hermione’s hands had come to rest on the table on either side of the letter, steadying her as she closed her eyes and swallowed heavily, building up the courage to read it in full.

Miss Granger,

I must apologize for my actions last evening, and I regret that they caused you to miss the lecture. I hope that the enclosed book can serve as some small atonement, and that you find its contents enlightening and enjoyable.

Yours,

Lucius A. Malfoy

Well, shit. Hermione leaned back, face screwed up in intense thought as she pondered the gift in front of her.

On the one hand, it was a perfectly nice gesture. When she forced herself to think objectively, she and Ron had made a bit of a disturbance at the event, and the blame for the ensuing escalation could be shared by all parties. Malfoy had been his usual smugly condescending, rude self, but Hermione had stared and expected the worst of him at every turn, and Ron had been, well, Ron about it all. In that sense, the book was a polite, if slightly overdone, act of contrition. On the other hand... it was Lucius Malfoy. And Hermione couldn’t stop herself from knowing all of the things she knew about him, from recalling all of his cruel words over the years, the memory of him putting Ginny’s life at risk with Tom Riddle’s diary, of being tortured by Bellatrix in his home while he did nothing. And this hand made her cautious.

She waved her wand over the book, running through the handful of scanning spells she knew to make sure that there was no dark enchantment lying in wait for her within the pages of the book. Though her spells all came up empty, Hermione still felt hesitant. She just needed to be sure. And she needed to figure out what to do before Ron woke up; he would throw the book in the fire before he kept anything from Lucius Malfoy, and though she was hardly rushing to believe the best of Malfoy, Hermione knew she didn’t want to assume the worst without confirmation either. Knowledge. She just needed more knowledge, more certainty.
After another cup of coffee swallowed grimly while staring at the book in concentration, she owled Bill. Hermione had been somewhat surprised to find that, as the years had gone on, she’d grown closer to Bill than any other Weasley but Ron or Ginny. In hindsight, of course, it was obvious. The two enjoyed a love of learning and arcane and ancient magical theory, and Bill was less uptight than Percy, giving her the encouragement to get out of her own head sometimes. He’d almost convinced her to go into cursebreaking with the allure of long-hidden ancient magic to be discovered and puzzled out, but she’d decided she could make more of a difference in the Ministry.

Bill agreed to meet her at Shell Cottage (they had both thought that his own home, with a child barely beginning to understand, much less control, her own magic, was not the place for a potentially dangerous magical artifact) and Hermione arrived five minutes early to pace up and down the beach with the book slung over her shoulder in an old canvas bag. When Bill arrived, his brow was furrowed as he approached her. She gave him the knapsack and he immediately set to work--it was better to know sooner rather than later if they were in danger.

She watched as he performed a number of spells, some she’d already tried, others entirely new to her in foreign-sounding tongues, and traced a circle of runes around the book in the sand. The runs flared bright blue for a moment and then faded back into nothingness, sand rushing up from beneath to fill in the indentations. After ten minutes of this, Bill looked up at her, a wry grin on his face.

“It looks like you are the proud owner of a very ordinary, completely safe, boring book on magical theory, entirely free of dark enchantments and curses. Care to tell me why we’re out here now?”

Hermione sighed, flopping to the ground next to the book and looking out at the dull grey early morning ocean crashing against the shore. She let the sound rush in and fill her brain for a few moments, watched from outside of herself as the tide washed away all of her jumbled, hectic conflicting thoughts, and then washed them back up again in some new configuration, everything from a new angle, in a new order, until she turned her head back up to Bill, who was waiting patiently.

“You can’t tell Ron.”

She felt a rush of hot shame and guilt as she watched Bill’s eyes widen, though he kept his mouth shut and his face otherwise impassive. She’d never once asked him to keep a secret from Ron, not even when she’d asked him to help her recreate mystery spells she’d found buried in Ministry archives or to experiment with her on new wards for their home to keep it safe. Sometimes he’d seen fit in his own judgment that Ron didn’t need to know just how dangerous Hermione’s experiments were, knowing his brother’s tendency to overreact when it came to protecting his girlfriend, but she’d never imposed on him like this.

She leaned forward and took the letter out of the back pocket of her jeans, handing it over to Bill. She watched him read it intently, examining his face for every slight hint of surprise, amusement, anger, confusion, every microemotion that flickered across his worn features. He finished reading and looked up at her expectantly, and she sighed before launching into the story. She tried to be objective, to acknowledge her own faults as well as Ron’s and Malfoy’s, as well as the justification each had. Bill, meanwhile, was looking between her and the letter in his hand like she was a particularly troubling cipher he needed to break, and it was making Hermione fidgety. She much preferred to be doing the unraveling than being unraveled, even by Bill.

“So, if it’s not cursed, then I’m going to keep it. I wouldn’t be much of a role model if I let my past prejudices regarding a man who’s already paid penance for his crimes cause me to spurn a truly genuine gesture of goodwill. And besides, I want this book.”
Bill studied her carefully for a moment before lowering himself to the sand next to her. “That’s right, you testified for his early release from Azkaban, didn’t you?”

Hermione nodded stiffly. “Yes, when Mrs. Malfoy fell ill. I only told the truth - that he had committed terrible crimes, that he’d stood by and done nothing while I was tortured, but that he had been a prisoner in his own home, wandless and at the mercy of Bellatrix Lestrange and Voldemort. That in the end, he renounced Voldemort, and after his downfall provided invaluable intelligence as to the location of various Death Eater hideouts and caches of Dark artifacts.” She tilted her chin up slightly, as if meeting an invisible challenge that only echoed inside her own head. “What the Wizengamot did with that information isn’t for me to judge.”

Bill just smiled at her silently, waiting. After a few moments, Hermione’s head dropped onto her knees and groaned.

“Ugh, and Ron has still never forgiven me. He actually wanted me to lie and tell them that Malfoy had tried to help Voldemort during the final battle, did you know? Lie under oath in front of the Wizengamot! Sometimes it’s like he’s not even a wizard.”

Bill laughed out loud at that. “So you mean to tell me you didn’t fancy having the whole Wizengamot catch you out as not only petty enough to lie to harm Lucius Malfoy, but also stupid enough to believe they wouldn’t have magic to catch you?”

“Shockingly, no, I didn’t want the entire Wizengamot to think I was a petty, vengeful idiot.”

Bill turned thoughtful again. “You didn’t have to volunteer to testify though.”

“No, I didn’t. But... I don’t know, it just seemed so sad. Draco was in St. Mungo’s at the time too, remember? It was all over the tabloids what he’d tried to do, and then for Mrs. Malfoy to fall so ill. He’d turned it all around at the end, all for his family. I still remember him running around yelling for Draco during the battle at Hogwarts. And to do all that for your family, to do everything to try to make it right in the end, and then lose all of them while you’re in prison, come home to an empty house... It seemed unfair, even for him.”

They were silent for a few moments together, Hermione staring moodily at the waves as she tried to wrestle with her surprisingly strong sympathy for Lucius Malfoy, of all people, Bill tapping his fingers against the soft sand and drumming tiny patterns in the endless grains.

“You’re a great big softie, Hermione Granger. The world doesn’t deserve someone half so smart and kind as you. I just hope you’re right about this one.” He reached over to heft the book in one hand and toss it over to her. “Ron won’t hear it from me, but I hope for your sake he never finds out you’ve been giving Lucius Malfoy more second chances.”

Hermione grinned gratefully across at the older man, who was shaking his head at her. “Thanks, Bill. It’d be awfully hypocritical of me to advocate tolerance and the capacity for change, and then not practice either when the time came. And I’m not going to let someone like Lucius Malfoy scare me away from my values... or this book.”

Bill reached out a hand to help her up, corners of his mouth beginning to turn up as he laughed. “That sounds more like Hermione Granger.”

* * *

Hermione decided to take a detour through Muggle London before she returned home, anxious to have some evidence of her morning’s activities should Ron decide to get curious. As she browsed
through a Muggle bookstore, despite her fingers itching to settle in with the book in her bag, she noticed a selection of nice stationery, including prominently displayed thank-you notes, and Hermione was suddenly struck by the thought. Of course she needed to write Malfoy a thank-you note. Much as she’d like to burn the note that had accompanied the book and put the circumstances of its arrival out of her head entirely, if she didn’t thank Malfoy he’d think her rude—confirming his worst beliefs about her uncouth upbringing. No, she couldn’t give him a moment to doubt that she was anything other than what the dedication in that book said. She was the brightest witch of her age, and inferior to a fancy pureblood schmuck like Malfoy in no way, even one so insignificant as etiquette.

She stopped by the owlery in Diagon Alley after she bought a few books at the bookstore. She kept her head down, eyes darting back and forth to scan the store for anyone who could possibly recognize her writing a note to Lucius Malfoy. Luckily, it was still fairly early for a Saturday morning, particularly after a Quidditch night, and there were only a few strangers floating around the office. She pulled some parchment and a quill out of her bag and headed over to a secluded nook to write, already anxious at the task in front of her. As much as she wanted to appear a model of etiquette, she was really rather terrible at all of the inane social niceties, like small talk and thank you notes. And that was even when she cared to be speaking to the recipient in the first place.

Mr. Malfoy,

There. That wasn’t so bad now, was it? She’d already begun. Her brow furrowed as she tried to imagine what on earth she should write next.

Many thanks for your kind gift.

A note that expressed thanks. That should have been it, but as Hermione looked at the sparse words on the expanse of parchment, she felt her hand itching to write more. What to write, she had no idea, but she felt certain that this paltry note wasn’t enough. She tried to remember her mother, lecturing her to write thank you cards to relatives after birthdays and other celebrations.

I am looking forward to reading it, particularly the chapter relating string theory to Transfiguration.

A personal note, letting the reader know that each note was thoughtful and individualized. There were many more words on the page now, and it wasn’t looking quite so terse any longer.

I apologize if you felt my actions disrupted your enjoyment of the lecture in any way.

Not a real apology, but it used the word apologize, so Hermione felt she was being rather beneficent with that one. After all, it had really been mostly his fault, together with Ron’s.

Regards,
Hermione Granger

She hastily addressed the scroll to Malfoy Manor and shoved it, together with a few knuts, into the hands of a startled owlery clerk before hustling home, eager to open the book and leave this whole Lucius Malfoy debacle behind her.

* * *

Several hours later, she was deeply immersed in the book, curled up in an armchair in the living room with miscellaneous books for reference scattered around her, as well as pages upon pages of parchment filled with thoughts and notes. It had been a pleasant way to pass the afternoon, and Ron
had mostly left her to it, sensing that new book mood she was wont to fall into.

She’d been almost proud of him when, strolling in from the kitchen, he’d caught a glimpse of the book and recognized it as the book from last night. She very smoothly fed him the lie she’d been practicing all morning, that she’d gotten the book on special order from Flourish and Blotts thanks to her status as a frequent customer, but then Ron had smiled and said he’d glad she’d gotten it, and that it turned out it hadn’t been such a special book that they’d needed to go to all the trouble of being at the signing in the first place anyway. She let him make his way to the Burrow for Sunday lunch, happy to deliver her excuses.

She’d just settled in to the next chapter when she heard an insistent tapping at the window. It was too late for the regular owl post, which meant someone had sent a private owl to her specifically. She reluctantly tore herself from the book only to open the window and find herself staring at a familiar eagle owl. She cursed under her breath as she took the heavy parchment, ignoring the owl’s imperious glare. It flew off before she could even get it an owl treat, and she huffed at its retreating back. Just like its owner.

She opened the owl with some trepidation, certain that this was the other shoe dropping that she’d been waiting for all day. Her eyes quickly scanned the note, and, instead, she found her brow furrowing in confusion.

Miss Granger,

Thank you, but there is no need for your kind apologies. I believe you will appreciate that chapter immensely. It was my favorite, though I did find Twilburg’s application of his theory to Animagi structurally unsound and unpersuasive.

Yours,
Lucius A. Malfoy

Hermione let out a puff of air she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, and began tugging at a few loose curls that had fallen loose from the pile on top of her head. Did he not understand the concept of a thank you note? One didn’t keep up an ongoing correspondence. She shook her head, frustrated at the puzzle that Lucius Malfoy was proving to be. Her mind turned the question of why he would continue to write to her over and over, poking and prodding it at it from new angles, spinning up increasingly wild and implausible theories as to his master plan, many of which, she was ashamed to admit, even to herself, made sense only if one took as a given starting point that these events must lead to a plotted end in which the elder Malfoy brought her or her loved ones harm.

Nearly to tearing her hair out in frustration at puzzling over motives and possible threats and moral dilemmas, she turned to the other question that had been niggling at the back of her mind. Chapter Nine - Twilburg’s appplication of string theory to Transfiguration. She’d read it a few hours before, and remembered no such structural deficiencies in his argument, but, though Lucius Malfoy was a great many unpleasant things, no one had ever accused him of being dim-witted. She turned back to the chapter again, rereading it closely, consulting her notes and trying to keep a close eye on the thread of the argument. At the end, she sat back again, a grim look on her face. Malfoy was right; two of Twilburg’s key points didn’t quite fit together the way he thought they did. And Malfoy had noticed it and she hadn’t, at least at first. She didn’t find it as fatal to the argument as Malfoy clearly did, though, and she looked back through the chapter and her notes, scribbling furiously on a paper to one side, trying to puzzle out her thoughts on the subject. Satisfied, she turned to her sheet only to realize with horror that the way she’d sorted out her thoughts was to pen a response to Malfoy’s letter, using his argument as inspiration and counterpoint to her own thoughts.
Shaking her head, she went back to reading her book, with a small interruption to chat with Ron once he’d returned from the Burrow. They drank a cup of tea while he reported on the events of the evening at the Burrow. Teddy had started to change his facial features, which had led to a bit of a snafu at the park where Andromeda thought she’d lost him. Percy was planning to propose to Audrey, though he’d been in the planning stages for almost a year. Chief among the events, however, was another row between Ginny and Molly, when the latter began dropping not-so-subtle hints about grandchildren yet again. Ginny had... not responded well, and the fiery mother and daughter had yet another fight to add to what was an ongoing saga.

Ron left to go to bed, but no matter how her eyelids began to droop and her yawns grew more frequent, Hermione’s mind couldn’t seem to stop racing over Malfoy’s letter. Finally, with a huff of frustration, she snatched the parchment she’d written earlier, adding a furiously scribbled “Mr. Malfoy” at the top and signing with just her initials, HJG. He’d figure out who it was from. She was tired of letting Lucius Malfoy take up so much of her brain space, was tired of twisting herself in knots trying to imagine what awful thing he was planning. She was a Gryffindor, and the brightest witch of her age to boot. She wouldn’t be intimidated or scared by him, whatever this game was, and she wouldn’t back down from a challenge. She’d play this game with him, as long as he wanted to try her.
A Woman of Independent Means

Chapter Summary

Hermione tries to put thoughts of her strange correspondence out of her mind to handle Sunday supper at the Burrow.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all of your wonderful comments! I'm so glad you guys are enjoying it. I'm going to try to update once or twice a week, likely on the more frequent side early on, while I've still got a lot written and planned out ahead of time. This chapter and next do a bit of set up, but I promise we'll get more Lucius/Hermione interaction soon!

A Woman of Independent Means

Hermione received another letter from the haughty eagle owl over lunch at her Ministry desk the next day. It was again courteous, surprisingly pleasant, thought-provoking, engaging. He grappled with her argument in full, brought up several points she hadn’t considered and conceded to a few of her own. As the day wore on, Hermione found her mind drifting frequently to the letter. In a purely academic sense, of course. Regardless of the man behind the pen, Hermione could appreciate a good mental spar, and she relished the intellectual challenge. Her work at the Ministry was meaningful and important, but rarely exciting and never intellectually challenging, and while she and Ron could talk about their friends’ lives and certain current events at length, he was hardly a fan of the arcane magical theory or complexities of wizarding law and politics she longed to apply her mind to the way she had back at school. When she got home that day, Ron had left a note that he’d gone round to the pub with some friends from work, and Hermione took the opportunity to pen another response.

The rest of the week passed in much the same fashion: Hermione would receive a letter from the now-familiar eagle owl by early afternoon at the latest, and would spend time each evening considering and penning a response. She never included any of the troublesome letter formalities, like courteous greetings or pleasantries about his day, and he steadfastly continued to include them. The one bow he made to her curt manner was to adopt her form of address, sending his letters to HJG and signing his own only LAM. She was secretly glad; she could always make up an academic pen pal with those initials should Ron get nosy, and he’d certainly never suspect it would be Lucius Malfoy. She tried not to think too hard about why she wanted to continue to hide this from Ron, and when she couldn’t stop her thoughts from turning there, she firmly told herself that she wanted to protect Ron from doing something stupid and getting himself in trouble over some stupid letters that meant nothing, nothing at all.

She hadn’t realized it until they’d begun their correspondence, but Hermione felt like she’d somehow managed to slip under some kind of blanket while she’d been otherwise busy going about the living of her life. She felt her mind grow sharper as the week wore on, watched as problems at
work fell away with only a few moments’ focused attention. She’d given up the dreadful habit she and Ron had grown into of flipping on the telly once he got home from work, letting the soothing comfort food nothingness of the Muggle programs carry their worries (along with her ideas, wonderments, and curiosities) away into the soft blur of the screen. She’d even begun to notice things in the world around her that had previously escaped her attention, like she’d been walking in a daze—the glint of the morning sun on the pond in the park on her way to work, the dance of the mated sparrows who had nested in the tree in front of their flat. She’d thought that the slowly creeping dullness of the world around her had been a result of simply growing older, but maybe she’d just let herself fall into a rut.

Sunday arrived and Hermione found herself frowning at her boyfriend, brow furrowed in consternation. “Go early?”

Ron rolled his eyes and Hermione fought, not for the first time, the urge to hex his eyes like that. “Yes, ‘Mione, that’s what I said. We go over to Mum’s early for Sunday supper all the time.”

“But I-,” Hermione began to protest, but snapped her mouth shut. She couldn’t well say that the reason she didn’t want to leave was because she was still waiting for an owl from Lucius Malfoy, which she’d hoped would contain the book on an arcane branch of Arithmancy she’d wished she could consult, and he’d promised to search his library for. She’d barely been able to suppress a shiver at reading that, her breath caught in her throat at the thought of how old, extensive, and tantalizingly alluring the books filling the Malfoy libraries must be. What a shame they were stuck belonging to Malfoys, in that dark and imposing Malfoy Manor.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione smiled at Ron. “Alright. I’d hoped to get in some reading before we left, but I can help your dad with that radio he asked you about last week.”

“Excellent,” Ron grinned. “Let me grab my broom and we can go. George is supposed to be bringing Lee and we’re going to get together a pick-up game.”

Hermione sighed, and shoved a few books into her bag while Ron grabbed his broom. She’d never been able to grow into as full an appreciation of Quidditch as Ron would’ve hoped, a defect he appeared to still be trying to remedy with his insistence on Quidditch-related date nights. She, on the other hand, had dragged him most frequently to academic lectures, book signings, classical concerts, and operas. She believed that their different tastes were what gave interest and spark to their relationship, but she did at times wish that for a moment they could share something between them that wasn’t their friends or their past, or the trauma that they’d undergone together, but something new.

Shaking her head as she heard Ron returning, and wondering what kind of mood she’d managed to get herself into, she followed her boyfriend into the hearth, and emerged, brushing ash off of her clothes, at the Burrow, into the gathering storm of Weasleys. She could hear Molly bustling around the kitchen, and, from the squealing sounds of delighted children outside, Bill and Fleur had already arrived. Arthur had barely managed to greet them before she heard a familiar laugh, and turned around to see the messy black hair and smudged glasses of her oldest friend, followed by the twinkling brown eyes of the woman who’d grown to be her best friend. She heard a bang from upstairs that indicated Fred’s presence. Harry and Ginny laughed again, at a joke she didn’t know, but Hermione felt her chest suddenly grow tight and warm. This--the swarm of smiling people, the raucous laughter, the smell of Molly’s delicious cooking, and even the sound of her fussing at her children to now help with this, now stay out of the way, now do that, all of it felt like home. She let it wrap her up in its comforting, familiar presence, and wondered why she’d ever gotten so worked up over letters from Lucius Malfoy.
Hermione sat next to Fleur during the pick-up game, bouncing baby Dominique on her knee while Fleur kept Victoire amused with little games. Hermione pretended not to notice Molly’s frequent glances at her with the baby on her lap, nor the way that Ginny had practically bolted away from Molly whenever her mother had attempted to get close to her. Hermione’s brow furrowed; it appeared that the Weasley women hadn’t yet smoothed over the latest chapter in the grandchildren saga, and Hermione hoped that Mrs. Weasley’s frequent glances her direction weren’t an indication that she would be the next target. Of course, Harry and Ginny were married, while she had pushed Ron to delay engagement until they were financially stable, but Hermione got the feeling that Mrs. Weasley was getting so impatient that she might not be much bothered by a child out of wedlock.

It was only after the game had ended and Mrs. Weasley had gone back inside that Ginny made her way over to Hermione, Victoire, and the children, flushed and triumphant, having barely broken a sweat.

“Hullo, my little victory charm!” Ginny said, gathering Victoire into her arms and spinning her around in a circle. Victoire giggled furiously, and, upon her repeated refusals to be put down, Ginny wound up sitting on the ground next to Hermione and Fleur with a lap full of wriggling four-year old.

The three women caught up, poked fun at the brothers, who were still arguing over the match and whether or not Fred’s creative Keeping techniques should have been permissible, and generally enjoyed each other’s company. Hermione, during a rather long story on Dominique’s teething habits, found herself watching Ginny. The younger redhead was listening to Fleur’s story, nodding at all the appropriate times, but she was watching Victoire shred grass with her small hands intently, stroking her fair blonde hair and curling it around her fingers. She would occasionally look up when it was clear Fleur’s story required more of her attention, but her eyes always went back to Victoire’s tiny head and tiny hands. She certainly didn’t look like a woman who was so opposed to having children she’d fight her mother over it for months. Hermione knew that Ginny likely had her reasons, but she clearly loved children; would it have hurt to feed her mother a line that they’d start trying?

With Hermione lost in this train of thought, and Ginny lost in the corkscrew of Victoire’s curl, it was Fleur who alerted the two of them to the fact that they were being called in for the meal. Victoire darted off after her mother, leaving Hermione and Ginny to amble peacefully towards the burrow itself. Hermione shot Ginny a significant glance, eyes darting between her and the child now running head, but Ginny just shook her head.

“Oh, not you too now.”

Hermione shrugged, giving Ginny an innocent glance. “All I’m saying is that your mum was doing altogether too much staring at me holding Dominique today.”

Ginny gasped, bringing a hand to her chest overdramatically. “Hermione Granger, you wouldn’t dare encourage my mother just to save yourself from her meddling.”

Hermione laughed. “Ginny, I illicitly Confunded Cormac McLaggen at the Gryffindor Quidditch tryouts to spare myself Ron’s moping and McLaggen’s gloating. A few well-placed dinner comments are well within my range.”

Ginny shot Hermione an impish grin. “Oh, really? And here I thought you did that because you loved Ron.”

Hermione huffed, tilting her chin in the air. “Who ever said a girl could only have one reason for doing things?”
The pair strolled through the door still laughing, and took their seats at the table, which had been magically expanded to fit their growing crowd and was now almost so large as to have outgrown the room. The meal then began in earnest, and Hermione had soon lost herself in the pleasant flow of conversation, the warm food, and the familiar warmth of the Burrow, the place that had started to feel like her home more than her own parents’ home had, as the war descended around them.

Hermione was well into her second helping of mashed potatoes and deep in a conversation with Percy and Bill about a proposed new law on the immigration of non-human sentient beings set to come before the Wizengamot next week when the three paused, hearing Mrs. Weasley’s voice rise over the din at the other end of the table.

“But, dear, I don’t understand why you can’t at least just start trying.”

Hermione’s gaze shot sharply over to Ginny’s face, which was growing redder by the moment as she struggled to control her temper. “I’ve told you, Mum, it’s not a good time in my career to start trying for a baby. I have a lot of momentum right now, coming off of the Cup.”

“Well, but wouldn’t this actually be the perfect time? You’d have plenty of time to have the baby and take some time with it before you’d have to get back in form for the next World Cup. Four years - you could even have two, if you timed it right!” Mrs. Weasley looked inordinately proud of herself, and Hermione watched with horror as she shot a gaze over to Ron, who nodded back at his mother imperceptibly. Hermione’s gaze turned to Ginny, who blessedly seemed to have missed the exchange, too busy staring at her plate and clenching and unclenching her fist around her fork.

“I could lose my spot on the team, Mum. They wouldn’t just hold it for me for two or three years while I was off pl-parenting.” It was a good sign that Ginny could still hold back the worst of what was on her tongue, Hermione thought, feeling rather as though she were watching a volcano for signs of eruption.

“Well,” Mrs. Weasley said, waving her hand dismissively, “You could always get a spot on another team, I’m sure.”

Ginny’s entire face was now the color of her hair, and Hermione could see the effort it was taking her to restrain herself. “I don’t want a spot on another team. I love playing for the Harpies. Besides,” she continued, her voice tight, “Harry and I have decided now is not the right time for us, together, right Harry?”

The entire table had fallen so silent that Hermione swore she could hear the gnomes outside in the garden.

“Right, Harry?”

Harry’s gaze was fixed on his mashed potatoes, face carefully blank as he continued re-mashing them, though they were already almost to a liquid texture from his incessant prodding and smushing. Ginny waited several more long, painful seconds before she finally threw herself back from the table with a short scream of frustration.

“You’re awful, the lot of you!” Ginny stomped to the back door, pausing on her way out to shoot them one last fiery glare before she disappeared into the rapidly falling evening, slamming the door behind her.

At the sound of the door shutting, it was like a spell that had fallen over Harry was broken. He jumped out of his chair and took off running after Ginny, calling out after her fruitlessly. “Gin! Ginny, wait!”
Silence reigned at the Weasley dinner table, interrupted only by a brief bout of babbling from Dominique. Hermione met Ron’s eye and the two of them rose from the table.

“We should probably-”

“Yeah, just go check on them-”

“Sure they’re fine but-”

And then the two of them had disappeared out the door into the crisp early autumn evening.
A Tale for the Time Being

Chapter Summary

Hermione catches up with Ginny, and the two witches share secrets.

Chapter Notes

I'm so, so excited and appreciative of all of the love and comments this has gotten! I have on my list to get around to replying to each and every one of you, but I've been on a bit of a writing tear lately, so instead I present to you one more chapter that's a little more expository, but where we get to see a bit more of Ginny and what's going on in her head. I'm unbearably excited to get to the next chapter, when we finally get some more Lucius/Hermione interaction in person, and I may post it a little earlier than I planned just because I'm so excited.

A Tale for the Time Being

As the door closed behind them, Hermione reached forward and grabbed her boyfriend’s arm, yanking him against the side of the house.

“Ronald, what in Merlin’s name was that at the dinner table?” As he began to open his mouth to speak, Hermione held up a hand. “Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. Since when has your mother known how long it takes someone to get in form for the World Cup? I saw that nod!”

Ron at least had the decency to hang his head and avoid her gaze. Hermione exhaled heavily, pushing loose curls up off of her forehead and glancing up at the rapidly darkening sky.

“Ron, how could you? You know how much this is all bothering Ginny...”

“I know, ‘Mione, I know. But you didn’t see them last week. The whole time was like it was there at the end, like Mum thought Ginny’s career was just a thing she was playing at for a little while before settling down,” Ron said, shaking his head. “It’s not her fault, she doesn’t understand, since Harry’s got plenty of money and is already doing so well at the DMLE, why on earth Ginny would care about keeping her job, when she doesn’t have to worry about money at all. I thought if I could give her a line or two, just to show she was thinking about Ginny’s career too and making both things work, that things might go a little better...”

He trailed off and shrugged, scuffing the ground with his feet, and Hermione felt a sudden swelling of warm affection. It was the Ron she knew and loved, who, even if he managed to bungle an emotional matter catastrophically, was always just trying to help. She reached out and pulled him to her in a hug, tucking her head against his lean chest.

After a few moments, she pulled away, smiling up at him. “C’mon, we better go find those two.
I’ll see if Ginny wants to come round for some tea until she’s calmed down, if you want to go to Grimmauld Place.” Ron nodded with a grin, and the two of them took off hand-in-hand for the sound of shouting in the distance.

* * *

Some time later, Hermione had finally managed to steer Ginny to the couch of her and Ron’s flat, where she was now sitting, stewing in anger with a cup of chamomile tea in her hand.

“I’m not a child anymore! She doesn’t get to interfere in my life and make decisions for me, especially not decisions like this! And at the dinner table!” Ginny’s grip on her teacup tightened and Hermione winced inwardly, hoping that all of her china would make it through the night intact.

“I’m sorry, Gin, I really am. She’ll move on soon, as soon as someone else gets married or Bill and Fleur decide to try again. Right now, you’re the easiest target,” Hermione said with a gentle smile, topping off Ginny’s teacup.

Ginny took a heavy sip and then sighed, leaning back against the couch as if defeated. “I know, I know...”

Sensing a shift in the conversation and an opportunity, Hermione leaned forward. “Ginny... Why don’t you just tell her that you’ll start trying? It’s not as if she’s going to check and see that you actually are.”

Ginny shot her a wry grin that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Have you ever met my mum, Hermione? Even if she miraculously manages to restrain herself from checking in unexpectedly, I’ll just spend every Sunday afternoon listening to every tip she’s ever heard or read in Witch Weekly about how to enhance fertility, and getting lectured on all the things I should be doing but am not, or should not be doing but am.”

Hermione shrugged good naturedly, unable to argue with that point, but the wry grin melted off of Ginny’s face as she took another long sip. “Besides... the problem is that Harry... does want to. To start trying.”

Hermione, brow furrowed, tried to meet Ginny’s eyes, and found that the redhead was resolutely looking at a spot on the wall directly behind her ear. “Oh, Gin. And you... don’t?”

Ginny shook her head fiercely, lips tightening. “It’s just... I’d have to take the season off, if I did, and even after that there’s the problem of who’d take care of it, it’s not like Harry can just stop being an Auror, so it’d be more like a season and a half, or even two, and no matter what Mum says now, she’d expect me to stay home with it, it’s sort of the Wizarding way, and just...” Ginny sighed, her shoulders visibly sagging.

Hermione took a sip of tea, her eyes narrowed and one hand tugging at loose strands of hair, a surefire sign she was mulling something over in her head. “Oh, Gin. And you... don’t?”

Ginny took a sip of tea, her eyes narrowed and one hand tugging at loose strands of hair, a surefire sign she was mulling something over in her head. “Well, I’m sure your Mum would be happy to look after it when you wanted to go back to work, or Fleur. And I know it’s not done in the Wizarding world, but you could send it to Muggle daycare and primary school, I’m sure Harry would be happy to...” She trailed off, noting a pained look on Ginny’s face.

“Oh god, Gin, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel pressured. I just... you know me, I’ve never met a logistical problem I didn’t want to immediately fix. And, well, if it is just a problem of logistics, you always know you have me at your service to come up with the perfect solution. But if it’s not just the logistics....” Hermione’s voice softened, “why?”
Ginny’s face softened again. “It’s okay, Hermione, I know you were just trying to help. It’s...” She trailed off again, her voice thickening, and spent several long seconds staring at the teacup in her hands. “It’s just that, if we start trying... things will have to change. And I don’t want them to. I want everything to go on, just as it is right now.”

“But maybe they’d change for the better?”

Ginny leaned forward, her eyes growing bright with determination, and Hermione had the distinct feeling that Ginny was going to say something important when she was interrupted by a sharp tapping at the window. Two sets of eyes swiveled to see an eagle owl pecking irritatedly at the glass, carrying a large package, and Hermione was too busy flushing in horror to notice the odd look that came over Ginny’s face.

Rushing over, Hermione opened the window and took the package, watching as the bird shot her an unmistakeable glare before flapping away. Hermione hurriedly tore open the letter on top of the book and tried to skim it quickly, conscious of Ginny’s curious stare.

HJG,

I hope this letter, at least, finds you well. I apologize if Daedalus’ behavior is less than exemplary-- it’s his third attempt to make this delivery today. I, perhaps erroneously, expected you would rather it not be left unattended.

The smug bastard. She could practically hear his eyebrow raising in that detestably Malfoy-ish way at that last sentence.

I found the Faintree text, at long last and as promised. I believe the reference you’re searching for begins on page 478, though you may find the sections on Chaldean methods which follow interesting as well. Please do let me know whether this aids your argument in the way you expected.

LAM

Hermione paused for a moment, forgetting Ginny’s curious eyes, her mind already whirring at the subtle challenge of his last sentence. Lost in thought, Hermione jumped as the letter was suddenly grabbed out of her hand by Ginny’s Quidditch-honed reflexes.

“Merlin, Ginny! Give a witch some warning.”

Ginny’s brow furrowed as she read the note. “Who’s this from?”

Hermione’s face heated. “Just an academic pen pal... someone I met a lecture. It’s all quite boring, really, just theory talk, stuff like that.”

Ginny listened to her prattle, but her eyes stayed on the piece of paper. “LAM... M... McGonagall, Malkin, Marshbanks...?” Hermione shook her head mutely, frantically searching her mind for an acceptable name before Ginny got around to Malfoy, but her normally sharp brain was short-circuiting, and the only L names she could think of were wildly laughable. Her brain seemed to be having a particularly difficult time getting past Lola.

“McLaggen? No, I listened to his whole bloody family tree at a Slug Club dinner once, no Ls. Macmillan’s family are Muggles...”

“No, no, no one you’d know... She’s... she’s foreign. From...” Hermione desperately tried to think of a country. “From Romania.” Belatedly she realized that she knew nothing about Romanian
naming conventions.

“Really? And she sent that owl three times from Romania and back today?” Ginny didn’t look suspicious, merely amused as she went back to listing M names.

“Surely not Malfoy, there’s only Draco and Lucius…” Hermione struggled not to blanche as Ginny’s muttering slowed, her tone growing ponderous. “Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, if I remember those old Quidditch trophies right… L... A... M.” She shot an unreadable glance up at Hermione. “What an interesting coincidence.”

Silence hung between them for a heavy moment.

Hermione leaned forward, her head coming to rest in her hands as she groaned. “Ginny, it’s not... I just...” And then the whole tale came spilling out, from the frustrating Twilburg lecture to the first apology, her efforts with Bill, and then the continuing correspondence.

“I’m sorry, Gin, I’m sorry. I just thought that if I went along with this I’d figure out what his game was eventually, or he’d get bored.”

At that Ginny looked up, her face still carefully, uncharacteristically, impassive. “Why are you apologizing to me?”

Hermione felt certain her jaw had actually fallen open, and took care to close it before casting a sidelong glance at her friend. “Well, there is a certain history between you two, especially as concerns books…”

Ginny shrugged. “And isn’t there a history for you as well? Or was it someone else’s drawing room floor you were tortured on?”

Hermione blanched, but kept her gaze steady. “That was years ago. Bellatrix is dead. I’ve... let go of that.”

Ginny tilted her head, looking at Hermione steadily. “And I can’t have let go too?”

Hermione exhaled heavily, running a hand through her hair. “Have you? I know that having Voldemort in your head is very different from the Cruciatus curse, Gin.”

Ginny nodded, her gaze turning thoughtful. “It is. Tom will always be in there, at least a little bit. But, you know, I hated the Malfoys, all the Death Eaters, every Slytherin, all of them, for so many years, and it didn’t help one bit. It didn’t make Tom go away. Actually, I never felt closer to Tom than I did when I was feeling so much hate.”

Hermione’s face was drawn, and her distress must have been plainly written because Ginny laughed shortly, waving a hand at Hermione. “That was a Luna realization, of course. She’s very perceptive like that, you know. Well,” Ginny said, mouth quirking into a grin, “sometimes a bit too perceptive, perceiving things that probably aren’t there, but. Sometimes she really hits the nail on the head.”

Hermione laughed at the apt description of their strange friend, and shot Ginny a tentative smile. “So... you aren’t angry?”

Ginny shrugged in response. “No, I’m not. It’s been a long time. Things have changed, people have changed.” Ginny leaned forward, a grin spreading across her face. “Did you know Marcus Flint made it on Puddlemere reserve?”
Hermione frowned. “That nasty older Slytherin?”

Ginny nodded, her grin spreading. “And now he and Oliver Wood are roommates! I ran into Wood and he was telling me all about it.”

Hermione’s brows skyrocketed in surprise. “Well, I guess wonders never cease.”

“No more wondrous than you and Lucius Malfoy becoming pen pals.”

Hermione felt herself flush. “We’re not really... It’s... I just want to know what his game is! Why he decided to send me that book, and why he continues to owl me. I can’t understand it.”

Ginny gave Hermione an odd, measured look. “Maybe he’s lonely,” she said, her voice light and casual.

Hermione shot the redhead a sharp look of disbelief. “Malfoy? Lonely? Did you hit your head or something?”

Ginny huffed, rearranging herself to lean back into the armchair, arms crossed. “No, just think about it. I mean, the man used to practically run Hogwarts and the Ministry. And now it’s been ages since the Malfoys have been seen in public, much less in a position of any power, and his wife is dead. I’d be bored out of my mind, and willing to talk to just about anyone.”

“Oh, gee, thanks Ginny.”

“You know what I mean!”

Hermione paused to mull over Ginny’s explanation. “I suppose that’s... possible. Simple, certainly. Easy. But—”

Her musing was interrupted by the sharp crack of apparition in the hallway, and with a start Hermione shoved the book and letter she’d received into the mess of books under the coffee table, standing up just as Ron entered the room.

“Hey Gin. ‘Mione, I’m just going to head up to bed...” he said, eyes nervously flitting between the two witches.

Hermione gave him an encouraging smile, her eyes darting over to Ginny, and he seemed to visibly relax as he moved towards the bedroom.

“I’ll be right up in a moment, Ron!” Hermione called after him, pausing for a moment until she heard his heavy gait pause and the door shut. At that, she turned back to Ginny.

“Well, I guess that’s my cue,” Ginny said with a small smile, sending her teacup into the sink with a gentle wave of her wand.

“You know you’re always welcome to stay if you’d like,” Hermione said, gathering up the other items from the table.

“Nah, I’m alright. Thanks, Hermione. For everything.”

Hermione smiled up at the redhead. “It’s no problem Ginny, really. And... everything we talked about tonight, that’s... that’s just between us.” It was meant as a statement, but Hermione hesitated at the end, her voice rising into just the hint of a question, and Ginny tilted her head and smiled.

“Of course, Hermione. Just between us.” And with that, she stepped into the Floo with a small
smile over her shoulder back at Hermione.

Hermione cleaned the teacups and put them away, and then made her way the bedroom, her mind whirring the entire time over the thoroughly unexpected turn the evening had taken.
The Pull of the Moon

Chapter Summary

Hermione is surprised to see Lucius at the bookstore.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday!! I told you guys I was SUPER excited about this chapter and very impatient, and since I've been making good progress and have the weekend coming up, I'm not too worried about getting ahead of myself by letting you guys have this one early. We finally get Lucius and Hermione interacting again in person, and the burn in slow burn is ON.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Pull of the Moon

Summer had returned for one last desperate gasp, breaking through what had till then been the steadily cooling autumn chill with an unseasonable rush of heat and humidity. Hermione lamented the fact that she'd not bothered to return home to change clothes before running her errands, instead choosing to dart through the crowds of Diagon Alley in her heavy business robes. She tucked her last package into her bag, hefting it over her shoulder and then, with a grimace, waved her wand to cast a lightening charm. After a pause, as if thinking better of it, she shrugged out of her robes and stuffed them into the bag as well, left only in the Muggle business attire she wore under her robes. She cast her gaze along the busy street, smiling at the peaceful bustle of people preparing for the beginning of the new school year, so different from the hushed and anxious crowds she had remembered, towards the end of the war, and something restless in her soul quieted and warmed. With a small smile tugging at her face, she turned toward Flourish and Blotts, deciding to give herself one last treat before she headed home.

She entered the crowded shop and pushed toward the Ancient Runes section, lost in thoughts of which rune dictionary might have the translation of the ancient, rarely used rune she and Lucius Malfoy had been debating the use of for several letters now. Over the past several weeks of steady correspondence, she'd grown to let his name in her mind expand. Malfy still brought memories of his narrow-faced son. When she was in a good mood, the memories were of him sneering and superior; in a bad mood, of him gaunt and pale, terrified. Mr. Malfoy made her feel like a child, and she was unsteady enough about her place in this strange correspondence to let herself feel that swallowing insecurity of her childhood again. She’d tried on LAM in her head for a while, but she couldn’t shove the knowledge of what those letters stood for out of her brain, as if she’d never known in the first place. So she’d settled on Lucius Malfoy - a slippery slope toward the too-intimate Lucius, she knew, but figured she’d cross that bridge when she came to it.

She frowned as she found herself still pushing through crowds of people, more than there usually were in the Ancient Runes section (not a historically popular section of the bookstore). All of the people around her seemed to be standing too casually still, eyes darting unsubtly down one
particular aisle, whispers floating all around her. Frown deepening, Hermione pushed through to
the end of the aisle where most of the attention seemed focused, the heat and the unexpected
obstacle leaving her blood running hot, full of restless energy and irritation, and she was poised to
snap at the assembled people and tell them to stop loitering, like she was Madam Pince, but as she
turned the final corner she stopped in her tracks.

Lucius Malfoy stood at the far end of the aisle on Nordic rune translation books, looking at one
he’d plucked off the shelf with bored indifference. He looked almost exactly as she remembered
seeing him in this shop for the first time, with the notable absence of that snake-headed cane that
had always inspired such fear in her - destroyed, she’d heard, after Voldemort had led to the
destruction of his wand. Even the ravages of Azkaban hadn’t done much to his stupidly aristocratic
face, simply whittled away any softness it might have once had and left it a cliff of sharp panes and
angles, which, combined with the long, white-blond hair bound at the nape of his neck, gave the
distinct impression of something otherworldly, like the ancient fae Hermione had read tales of as a
Muggle child.

She shook herself out of that particular reverie, blaming it on the late hour and the long heat of the
day. Even inside Flourish and Blotts, the Cooling Charms were struggling to combat the heat
outside, the body heat inside, and the constant circulating air as people entered and left the shop.
Pressing her lips together tightly as she heard a few more scandalized whispers from a group of
older schoolchildren near her, Hermione stepped forward into the aisle and moved toward the end
where Lucius Malfoy was standing. Her mind wandered to her conversation with Ginny that night
after the fight at the Burrow. Things had been blessedly clear on that front, Molly seeming finally
cowed by her daughter’s wrath (and, Hermione suspected, a few sharp words from her eldest son,
who’d attended the past few weekly suppers without fail and watched Molly with narrowed eyes ),
but the other events of that night had occupied Hermione’s stray thoughts for weeks afterward. She
examined the man in front of her closely, looking for clues to sway her one way or another. Was he
playing a long game, luring her in with now almost two months of steady, purely polite, sometimes
almost friendly academic discourse? Or, as Ginny said, was he... lonely? As she got closer, she
could see the tension in the forced casualness of his posture, the way his head would turn ever so
slightly towards the nearest group of whispers.

She forced her shoulders back, keeping her head
high and proud as she stopped a few feet away from him, clearing her throat.

“Mr. Malfoy.” She kept her tone stony and flat, and when he turned towards her she could have
sworn she saw a flicker of something like disappointment in his face, but it must have been a trick
of the light, because now his imperious gaze matched her own.

“Miss Granger. A pleasure.” His tone matched hers, almost perfectly, and she fought a smile at the
pair they made.

“If you’d excuse me, I’d like to see that stretch of shelf please. Now. I’m rather in a hurry you see.
Harry is waiting for me.” She couldn’t stop one corner of her lip from twitching up at the brief look
of confusion that flitted across his face, and, impishly enjoying herself, she shot him an honest-to-
Merlin wink. Now he looked well and truly confused, so she drew herself up and continued,
projecting her voice to be sure it would be heard in this area of stacks. “Oh, don’t look so confused.
Surely you’ve heard of him? Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the boy whose life you tried to
ruin, savior of the Wizarding World? Yes, he’s waiting just outside, so please.” And she made a
gentle shooing motion with her hands.

He scowled at her for a long hesitant moment before stepping back, away from the shelf, and she
watched out of the corner of her eye as the assembled crowds began to push their way back through
the main shop towards the front door, whispers of Harry Potter, really, yes, just outside somewhere
apparently rising, the crowd slowly filtering out until her beloved stacks were empty once more.
She turned around to the confused man standing behind her and leaned against the bookshelves, exhaling as she brushed a damp curl off of her face.

“Blithering bloody idiots. And I don’t believe a single one re-shelved the books they were ‘reading’ properly.”

They looked at each other in silence for a moment, and Hermione wondered if she’d overstepped, when she suddenly heard a noise so unexpected she almost jumped: Lucius Malfoy was laughing. Not at her, not a gloaty cackle, but honest, raspy, barking laughter as he leaned back against the shelf on the other side of the aisle, twin to hers. After a long moment, he looked over at her with one eyebrow raised, and made that same shooing motion with his hands as she’d made with hers. “Really?”

She shrugged. “I may have had a little too much fun with it.”

He shot her an appreciative glance. “Not the most subtle or cunning plan, but... undeniably effective.”

His praise sent the same rush of appreciation through her that she’d always gotten when she’d answered a question correctly in class or been the first to solve some complex problem, and she tried not to preen, but from the mildly amused look on his face she supposed she hadn’t been as successful as she’d hoped.

She turned to the book he’d had pulled out, which was now lying on the shelf, and thumbed through it. “Hoping to steal my thunder? With Nezenbaum?”

She heard a huff from behind her. “Nezenbaum is useless. As usual.”

She grinned down at the book, a secret thrill zipping through her at the knowledge that this strange peace they’d brokered, painstakingly, through two months of careful words and academic theory, was holding, even in this unexpected new setting. It gave her thumping heart confidence that perhaps her rash decision had been the right one, that she’d been rewarded for the bravery of holding out an olive branch, that she hadn’t made a mistake in testifying on behalf of his release, that maybe Ginny had been right all along.

She shot a glance over her shoulder back at him, and saw him examining the books on the shelf in front of her. She leaned to one side so he could have an expanded view, and raised a hand to pry some wayward curls off of the back of her neck, damp and sticky with sweat. When she cast another glance backward to see if he saw something useful on the part of the shelf she’d newly revealed to him, she found his eyes instead tracing, with careful, focused attention, the path of a bead of sweat trickling down the side of her neck until it disappeared beneath her thin blouse. She suddenly felt the heat again, the maddening press of it, as if she were back outside, and the restless energy in her blood from earlier. Her skin was absolutely crawling with it. Her widening eyes met the set of grey ones behind her, and she saw a flash of something almost predatory there, that her rational mind was screaming at her to be afraid of, predatory was bad, but something deeper in her bones was absolutely singing.

She was frozen, feeling like a doe caught in the gaze of a wolf in the woods, when suddenly his eyes snapped to the shelf directly to her left and he swore under his breath.

“It’s Celtic, of course.”

She whipped around to look at him. “What do you mean it’s Celtic? It’s in the middle of a Nordic text, speaking about Nordic magic, that was found in Denmark.”
The corners of his mouth tugged up slightly, and Hermione had the disconcerting feeling of being one step behind. She almost felt bad for Ron and Harry, for all those years she’d left them feeling like this. And, she thought, taking in his demeanor, it seemed she wasn’t the only one who liked to preen.

“Yes, but there was always some intermingling of the two peoples, even before the proper Viking raids. And Keating,” he said, gesturing towards the text immediately to her left, “argued that some of the more incoherent of the Nordic texts were so because some of the runes should properly be read as Celtic.”

She paused, turning it over in her mind, before she swore under her breath, looking up at him with a wry grin before she dashed off to the next aisle, containing the texts on Celtic runes. She heard him sigh and pace after her, unhurried but not far behind, his long legs catching up easily.

By the time he’d made it to her, she’d already pulled the proper text off the shelf and was flipping her way through the pages. He moved behind her to read over her shoulder, and she stifled a gasp at the sudden heat of it. He’d stopped with a respectful few inches between them, just close enough to lean over and see the pages spread out across her arm, but even with the distance she could feel the heat radiating off of him. She’d forgotten how tall he was, how broad and solid his presence, even after the years in Azkaban. She thought back to her memories of him from her time at Hogwarts, when he was in his prime, and shivered slightly, praying he didn’t notice. The heat was getting to her, clearly. The heat and the way that it was intensifying the cologne of the man behind her, so that it swirled up around her, wrapping her in some kind of sensual, deeply masculine scent. She fought the urge to inhale it deeply, and instead, to distract herself from the thrumming heat, identified its components slowly, as if it were a potion she were studying: first the sharp tang of bergamot, then the rich musk of patchouli, warm cardamom, deep fresh pine and cedar, dark leather. She almost didn’t notice his arm come up around her and flick to the next page, flushing deeply when she noticed him looking down at her.

“I think we’ve both ascertained the answer is not on that page.”

She nodded stiffly, and turned her attention back to the book in front of her, trying to keep her head from swimming. She reached up, tracing a finger down one column of text, before she stepped back abruptly with a sharp “Yes!”.

She froze when she stepped back into that still-solid chest she’d been fighting not to think about, senses filled with a rush of that deep scent and the feel of his silky robes brushing against the thin cotton of her blouse. To his credit, he merely stepped back to resume their previous, proper positioning, and Hermione, fighting the racing of her pulse and the stupid, stupid heat that was making her head swim and sweat drip down her neck and her curls cling to her head, whirled around to face him.

“Wildfire,” she said, eyes darting up to meet him. His gaze was inscrutable for a moment, eyes dark and almost gleaming with intent, and she rushed to fill the silence. “It makes complete sense now. The spell unleashes the power of wildfire.” She paused as his gaze became something more guarded and thoughtful, less... intense. She exhaled a bit at the change in demeanor, the change in the way this conversation was going, and snorted lightly. “That’s a terrible word to leave ambiguous in a spell though; without the proper intent, you’d never cast it quite right.”

He stepped back, brushing a few strands of that long, flaxen hair back from where they’d fallen loose, and smirked at her. “Perhaps that was the point, Miss Granger.”

She flushed again at being caught one step behind, and was about to retort sharply when she heard footsteps coming up the aisle behind them. She watched as the man in front of her, who had almost
seemed relaxed, if still ridiculously aristocratic and self-assured, straightened, schooled his features, transformed before her eyes into the picture of cold, haughty indifference she’d seen earlier today, just as a pair of older students turned down the aisle, examining a Hogwarts book list. The newcomers paused, eyes flitting with clear confusion to the scene in front of them.

Hermione drew herself up. “Thank you for your assistance, Mister Malfoy,” she said, hoping her tone matched the indifference she was trying to project.

“The pleasure was all mine, Miss Granger,” he said, sinking into a mocking bow, a smirk devoid of all amusement dancing across his features, his icy eyes meeting her gaze the entire time.

Nodding stiffly, she turned and fled down to the shop proper, so distracted she almost forgot to pay for the book she was still clapping tightly in her grip. When she finally got back to her flat, she gave Ron the briefest of descriptions of her shopping trip, her tone artificially light, completely omitting any mention of her interaction with Lucius Malfoy in the bookstore, and then excused herself. She took a long cold shower, blessing the way the steady cold press of the water beat the heat back from her veins and drove any thought from her head. Unfortunately, she realized, his cologne must have been charmed; no matter how long she stayed in the shower, she couldn’t get that heady scent out of her mind.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, Hermione, definitely a charm...
The run-in in the bookstore continues to trouble Hermione, and she makes a mistake.

I basically should've called this chapter "two very difficult scenes to write" but I hope it's alright! I've fiddled with it a lot before deciding to post. I know Ginny is being rather erratic, which a lot of you have commented and speculated on, and I promise that we will all find out why in the near-ish term. Also, I'll be traveling for work this week, so there may be a little bit of a delay in getting the next chapter out.

Also, be warned: there be smut ahead! Is it a tad trope-y? Yes. Did I still enjoy the trope-y set up immensely because I have no shame? Yes. If you'd like to avoid anything too explicit, you can skip starting with the sentence beginning "She let herself be pulled into the bedroom", and pick back up at "She slipped away". You'll probably get the gist of the narrative point without the scene.

For the next week and a half, Hermione remained in that frazzled state, even as the weather calmed back to its normal, chill autumn self, a cold and damp season settling in around them. That Sunday at the Burrow, Ginny slipped into the kitchen behind Hermione to help her wash up, shooing her mother outside with a bright smile. After a few minutes of wand-waving, when Hermione had heard everyone else go outside to a bonfire that Fred was building, Ginny whirled to face her.

"Spill, Hermione."

Hermione’s eyebrows shot skyward and she nearly slung a clean teacup to the floor, catching it at the last moment. “Spill what, Ginny?”

“Whatever has had you in a daze all day. Percy tried to tell you twice that some Wizengamot bloke whose name I’ve already forgotten wanted to put together some sort of special committee about Muggle and Wizarding cultural events, and you just passed him the mashed potatoes both times.”

Hermione’s eyes darted to the floor as she began casting furious Scourgify charms at the areas around Victoire and Dominique’s seats. “It’s just something that’s come up at work.”

Ginny raised a brow. “Your work? That place you once described as ‘a lovely way to occupy a third of my brain while the other two-thirds do more interesting things’?”

Hermione flushed deep scarlet. “I said that in confidence!”

Ginny laughed at that. “Hermione, you yelled it so loudly I think everyone at the pub heard you.
Wine appears to just turn your volume up.” Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Ginny interrupted her. “And besides, we’re alone. Your secret’s still safe with me.”

Ostensibly Ginny was referring to the bit about her work, but from the mischievous twinkle in her eye Hermione had a sinking feeling that Ginny was thinking about another secret entirely.

“Is it?” she said hesitantly, eyes darting around the room.

For a moment, Ginny just looked at Hermione, arms crossed, and then with a huff she grabbed her wand and cast a quick silencing charm around the two of them. “Have you had anyone come and confront you about it, then?” At Hermione’s glare, Ginny’s lips narrowed. “I didn’t think so.”

The two witches met each other’s heated gaze for another few long moments before Ginny sighed, her entire body collapsing back in on itself as she leaned against the table behind her. “I wouldn’t do that, Hermione. I told you it was just between us,” she said, her voice smaller than before.

“Not even Harry?”

At her husband’s name, the fire seemed to spark back to life within the redhead, her lips twisting angrily as she looked back up at Hermione. “No, not even Harry. What, do you imagine I tell him everything?”

Hermione frowned, eyes examining her friend’s suddenly defensive posture. “Ginny, are you alright? You seem... tense. Erratic. I’m not trying to pick a fight.”

Hermione watched as Ginny’s lithe frame squared into a battle stance momentarily, feet planted and eyes blazing, and then sank back against the table once again, shoulders caving in as the redhead looked down at her hands twisting the hem of her sweater.

“I’m sorry, Hermione. I know you’re not. You have every right to ask me that. I just... It’s not an excuse but...” She sighed, running a hand through her tangled mess of red hair. “Harry and I fought again.”

Hermione’s frown deepened; she had noticed that the Potters had seemed to always be floating just outside of each other’s conversational orbit tonight, but had chalked it up to coincidence, not marital strife. “About the baby thing?”

Ginny shook her head. “No, not this time.” Hermione wondered suddenly how many fights Harry and Ginny had been having recently - they always seemed to be such a united, positive front, the perfect couple. How could they not be? Harry, the Auror, the savior of the Wizarding World, and Ginny, the fighter, childhood sweetheart who’d become a Quidditch superstar. Apparently appearances could be deceiving.

Ginny took a deep breath. “You know that story I told you, about Marcus Flint?” At Hermione’s nod, Ginny continued. “I told Harry. He wasn’t pleased, just frowned and said he’d check in on Oliver, make sure everything was alright.” Ginny, however, had begun pacing, gesturing furiously as she spoke at an increasingly rapid pace. “I told him he was missing the point, and besides, for all Flint was an idiotic brute, he was never a Death Eater, but he just thought I was being too kind, too optimistic, naive even. He couldn’t even begin to imagine that he might be wrong, that Flint might have changed.”

Hermione let the redhead run herself out of steam, listening intently the whole while. “And why did that bother you so much?” While she agreed with the redhead’s general view of things, she didn’t understand all this anger over Marcus Flint, of all people, and had begun to suspect that there
was some underlying thread, some unknown fact or hidden concern, and was about to try to tease it out and tug when they heard someone approaching the back door.

“Hermione? Gin dear? Almost done with the washing up?” Arthur’s voice floated through the wall of the Burrow, and with a quick wave of her wand Ginny’s silencing charm was gone.

“Yes, Dad! We’ll be right out!”

Ginny darted toward the door, mouthing a quick ‘sorry’ back at Hermione. The brunette simply shrugged and followed Ginny out the door, watching intently as her friend shook off her earlier, frantic demeanor and strode over to George, laughing easily. Shaking her head, Hermione wandered over to Percy and began discussing the cultural committee he’d apparently tried to bring to her attention earlier.

* * *

For a time, it seemed that her strange conversation with Ginny had managed to do the impossible, and settle the restless tension that had been building inside of her since her chance run-in at Flourish and Blotts. Even Ron had noticed Ginny’s odd behavior, and had insisted on joining Hermione that evening after they returned from the Burrow, pressing her to discuss Ginny’s distance from Harry at supper, asking her what she and Ginny had been saying while they washed up, why they had taken so long, whether Ginny had said anything when she’d come over for tea after the big fight those weeks back, and a variety of other questions that left Hermione feeling distracted and distressed. She didn’t like to keep things from Ron, and now it seemed like she did nothing but keep the things that were plaguing her thoughts (good or bad) from her boyfriend, but she wouldn’t break her friend’s confidence, and Ron’s reaction to her correspondence was still almost certain to be unreasonably bad. At long last Ron had headed for bed, and Hermione had scribbled a hastily-written, barely thought-out response to Lucius Malfoy’s latest letter, a reaction to a book on ancient forms of magic he’d lent her.

The next afternoon found her home early, after a mishap in the Beasts division had led their entire floor to be closed for the afternoon while the employees tried desperately to locate and catch a family of Demiguises. She’d settled in to the couch comfortably, pulling out the response she’d received earlier in the day. She had been glad to even receive one, given how hurried and decidedly un-Hermione-like her last letter had been, given the Ron and Ginny of it all. She tried to ignore the pleasant lightness that had filled her veins when her fears had proved unfounded, chalking it up to the good weather and good fortune in getting out of the office early.

As she scanned the letter, though, her brows knit together in confusion.

HJG,

I’m pleased you enjoyed the text, as it’s one of my favorites. I must admit, though, that your interest in the line of thought beginning on page 431 was... unexpected. If it’s an avenue of theory you’d like to explore further, I believe the family library has several texts on the subject. I don’t expect you’d have come upon them yourself, as they can be difficult to find in the common places. As ever, I’d be delighted to share their knowledge with you.

LAM

Unexpected? The section she’d been referring to in the ancient tome had dealt with the manipulation of space in relation to time, a hearkening back to some of the topics Twilburg had covered and that they’d first discussed, simply in a new (or rather, old) context. She’d thought it was quite clever, though of course she hadn’t expressed these thoughts, hoping that they’d grown
to understand each other enough, at least on matters of magical theory, for him to follow. Maybe Hermione was overestimating their connection in her head, she thought with a sinking feeling, and pulled the borrowed text back to her to look at the section once again.

She’d opened to page 431 and began reading only to turn first a vivid shade of scarlet and then deathly pale. She leaned her head against the back of the armchair, looking up at the heavens and praying to whatever gods or monsters there may be to take her away from this horrid, awful misunderstanding, or release her from whatever nightmare dimension she’d fallen into, because there was no way that she had told Lucius Malfoy she particularly enjoyed the section of the text on ancient sex magic.

After several more minutes of staring at the page, and flipping between pages 431 and 341, she was forced to accept it with a grim determination. Page 341 contained a lovely description of ancient ways of manipulating time and space and ancient magical theories about their relation. Page 431, the page she had cited, contained a lengthy exposition on the ways that ancient witches and wizards had used sexual activities to heighten their magic and perform complex, powerful spells, complete with illustrations that made her blush down to her chest.

Despairing, Hermione turned back to the letter, rereading it with something almost like relief at how very un-Malfoy-like it ultimately was, given how much he could have teased her or lorded her interest over her. On her first read, it had seemed terse, almost cold compared to their recent correspondence, but now - her face began to heat as she considered some of the lines in a new light. His knowledge of the other texts on the subject in the family library made her consider just how familiar with their content he might be. And - delighted to share their knowledge? Nothing in the phrase itself was untoward, carefully polite and neutral, and yet with the undertone of what he’d been referencing, she felt a shiver zip down her spine and her toes curl slightly against her house slippers.

She found herself leaning back in her chair, worrying at one lip as she tried not to think about what kind of knowledge Lucius Malfoy would delight in sharing with her, twisting anxiously as she felt the beginnings of warmth stirring deep within her. She reached forward to shut the text in front of her emphatically, but she’d never been less grateful for her nearly eidetic memory; the illustrations, and the text calmly describing the sensations that one could expect from each ritual, the intimate intermingling of magic, were stubbornly imprinted in her mind.

At that moment, Ron arrived home, and Hermione couldn’t decide how she felt about his arrival - happy to see him, his distraction welcome, or full of roiling guilt because even as she leaned up to meet his quick peck of greeting, she found herself pressing her lips more fully against his, sinking into the kiss, fueled by the dark warmth that lay coiled in the pit of her stomach as the words delighted to share their knowledge with you spiraled through her mind. Ron pulled back with a look of happy surprise, and Hermione felt another flash of guilt. She couldn’t quietly excuse herself until this moment of... whatever it was had passed, not now that he’d noticed the push of her lips and the fire in her eyes.

“What have you been up to, ‘Mione?” he said with a grin.

“Just... reading,” she said breathlessly, trying to avoid looking at the book in front of her and thinking about the letter shut within its pages.

Ron’s grin widened as reached down to pull her up to him. “Well, you should definitely read more of that book,” he said, tracing a hand down the curve of her body down to her hip.

Hermione felt a cold rush of guilt, but then Ron was tilting her head up and kissing her deeply, one hand grasping at her hip, and the heat that had begun inside of her earlier flared again as the felt
Ron’s familiar lips smiling against hers but heard Lucius Malfoy’s voice whispering in the back of her mind.

She let herself be pulled into their bedroom, nearly stumbling as Ron pulled her onto the bed, his hands ghosting over her breasts before he pulled her top off, humming with pleasure to find her nipples already taut, visible through her thin brassiere. He muttered her name against her chest as he pulled her against him. She squirmed against the hardness she felt between his thighs, and he groaned her name. “What’s gotten into you tonight?”

She flushed, afraid of the answer that was lurking inside of her brain, but then Ron was taking his top off and undoing her bra so he could set his mouth on her breasts, licking and sucking, and she was saved from the need to think too hard about the answer. She knew his question was valid though - she and Ron had what she had long ago decided to accept as a perfectly adequate sex life, but nothing to wax poetic over, and she’d acknowledged that she herself was the source of at least some of their issues. Ron was an eager and gentle lover, if sometimes too quick to move on from foreplay, but Hermione was often too caught up in her own mind, unable to just relax into the sensations of her body, something else always thrumming through her thoughts in the background, and so she often felt dissociated from the sex she had, full of love and appreciation for Ron but not often completely satisfied.

Now, though, as Ron undressed them, long fingers splaying across her stomach and down between her legs, looking up with an awed grin as he found her wet and waiting, her body was occupied with Ron, but thrumming through her mind in the background was Lucius Malfoy. As Ron slipped a clumsy finger around her clit, Hermione closed her eyes and gasped as her thoughts, drifting back to the book in the living room, went to the man on the other side of that correspondence. Ron increased his pace, but Hermione arched her back, eyes closed as she gave in to insistent imaginings - had he been plagued this way too? Had she poisoned his mind the way he seemed to have infected hers, with her inadvertent innuendo? Had he, too, found his thoughts drifting to how she might look if she were in the illustrations in the book, with her back arched, her legs spread - him in between them - how it might feel to have his magic wrap around hers the way the book described?

She whined, low in her throat, as Ron flipped them over and pressed against her entrance. She felt outside of her own body, felt like she was watching some other witch press her hips up insistently, but this time the once-familiar dissociation was different, because Lucius was in her mind’s eye with her, and she felt herself clench around Ron buried within her as she imagined Lucius watching her. She trembled against the bed, her eyes shut tightly; she was watching and watched, and Lucius was the link between those two roles, that predatory gaze from the bookstore in her mind’s eye as she snapped her hips, straining upward.

She felt the rhythm of Ron’s hips against her grow erratic, increasing his pace, and she whimpered in frustration as she felt him finish, sagging against her with her release so close but not quite there. Emboldened by the steel grey eyes boring into her very soul, the remembered scent of leather and pine, she snaked a hand between her body and Ron’s, still panting above, and circled a finger against her clit. As the heat within her sparked back to life, she wondered if he, too, had touched himself with thoughts of her, and at that desperate image she gasped her climax into the pillow beside her.

She slipped away from Ron’s dozing figure to take a long shower, as if she could scrub the guilt off. But it was her mind that was traitorous, not her body, and a few hours later, after they’d had a quiet dinner during which Hermione had been glad to let Ron ramble about some upcoming Quidditch event, providing only an occasional sympathetic nod. After dinner, she’d scribbled one of the briefest notes she’d ever written to Lucius, feeling like the quill was burning her the whole
time she wrote.

LAM,

Apologies for the inadvertent puzzle my last letter must have presented. While my mind is usually infallible, I regret to admit I am capable of mistake - I meant to refer to the text on page 341, regarding space and time.

HJG

She fell asleep that night and dreamed of wildfire.
Screwtape Letters

Chapter Summary

Hermione deals with her guilt, and throws herself into a date night with Ron and some distracting new work.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay between releases (work travel sucks!) but I think I’ve made up for it for you guys with a longer-than-normal chapter! And at first I thought that this and the next chapter would just be one chapter (ha ha ha...).

As always, thank you guys so much for all of your feedback and comments! I love reading them and they help give me so much excitement and motivation to know that you’re enjoying reading this as much as I’m enjoying writing it! Keep ’em coming!

Screwtape Letters

Hermione woke up drenched in sweat, trembling, and enormously full of guilt. She rolled onto her side, facing the side table stacked full of books and the wall she’d insisted they repaint a soft grey, watched the dawn light spread through the bedroom, and tried to listen to the sound of Ron’s gentle snoring without screaming. She had made a mistake, crossed a line last night, even if it was just in her head. She wasn’t a saint, she’d thought of men other than Ron before, sometimes even in the bedroom, but... those men had always been different - distant, unattainable, Muggle celebrities and star Quidditch players, like the darkly beautiful Spanish Keeper Ginny had introduced her to at a World Cup afterparty. Never anyone she’d really known, was in a position to act on, and her imaginings had certainly never been so... intimate. She shivered in bed at the thought of that predatory gaze and the way she’d felt imagining it on her, had performed her sexuality for his hidden gaze, for the thought of that sharp mind examining her like it did the intellectual puzzles they unknotted in their letters. No, her imaginings of last night had been something altogether different than the usual daydreams, and she couldn’t let herself repeat it.

Laying in bed, Hermione did what she did best - she planned. She scheduled and arranged and analyzed, and came up with a plan to redouble her efforts on her relationship and the work she cared about. She briefly considered ending her correspondence with Lucius, but cast the idea aside quickly without too much thought on her reasoning. To feel the need to end their correspondence might acknowledge that whatever she’d let their odd acquaintance build to was more dangerous than she cared to admit - if not to her physically, than to her mentally, her relationship, and the life she’d tried to build after the war.

By the time the sun had risen fully, Hermione was sitting at the coffee table, penning a letter to Elphias Doge, expressing her interest in becoming involved with the cultural committee he had spoken to Percy about. While her passion remained in the rights of magical creatures (she would resuscitate SPEW when the time was right), she welcomed the opportunity to help the magical
community understand Muggle culture (and the Muggleborns who were immersed in it) and hopefully prevent misunderstandings and hatred that would fuel another war. She added a note, suggesting Andromeda’s involvement if Doge hadn’t yet thought of her, confident that the witch would bring invaluable experience to the idea of bridging the cap between the old purebloods and Muggle culture, and then turned to enjoying her coffee.

Hermione had just finished her second cup of coffee and the crossword in the Daily Prophet when Ron emerged from the bedroom, eyes sleepy and hair a ruffled mess, beaming at her blearily. She felt her heart sink with crushing guilt once more, looking at at this man she knew loved her dearly and sweetly, but whose presence had been so utterly secondary in her mind last night.

“Morning, ‘Mione,” Ron mumbled, his voice still rough with sleep, and Hermione quashed her guilt to smile brightly up at him.

“Good morning, Ron,” she said, gesturing towards a cup of coffee sitting on the counter with a warming charm on it. He gulped it down eagerly and shot her a grateful smile, while Hermione set to work on the next step in her fastidious early morning plans. “You know, it’s been a while since we’ve been on a date night. We’ve let it lapse a bit. We should do something this week.” She looked up to see his brow furrowed slightly, and hurriedly added, “Your choice.”

He smiled at her, though his eyebrows were still knitted together in the slightest hint of confusion. “Sure, ‘Mione. That’s a good idea. I’ll come up with something that’ll knock your socks off by Friday. But now I need to run into the office or Robards’ll skin me alive.”

Satisfied with how things were coming along well according to plan, Hermione changed and ran into the office herself, trying to throw herself headlong into the research report she was writing on werewolf unemployment and poverty. Her satisfaction wavered only slightly when a familiar eagle owl appeared around midday and her stomach began to tie itself in knots, and she found herself full of a tingling, nervous excitement and anticipation. It was only the same way she always felt when Lucius’ letters arrived, she told herself, simply excitement at continuing what had been a fruitful academic correspondence.

Unable to concentrate on her report with the letter watching her reproachfully from the side of her desk, Hermione set her work aside and opened it with trembling hands.

HJG,

No need to worry. I will somehow refrain from holding your fallibility against you.

She exhaled a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, sagging back into her uncomfortable wooden desk chair, letting go of the desperate, irrational fear that he’d be angry or disappointed in her implied rejection, though she wasn’t even certain that the offer she’d appeared to reject had been one he’d made at all, rather than one she’d read into his letter in some sort of shameful flight of fancy.

Are you feeling nostalgic? The text on page 341 is undeniably reminiscent of Twilburg’s work on the subject. One wonders whether ancient practitioners were tapping into an underlying structure to the magic of which they understood little, whether Twilburg and ancient magic users are both approaching the same thing, understood in different but complementary ways, or whether Twilburg’s application of string theory is just a clumsy attempt to impose structure on something the ancients long ago understood to be more organic, sensual, wild (I’d cite page 431 for their views on the subject, but I don’t believe you’ll need the cite). I find myself of two minds, and find myself somewhat unexpectedly eager to hear your views on the subject and let them inform my own.
LAM

Hermione flushed at the reference to page 431, but she could almost see within her mind’s eye his arched brow and the gently teasing tone of his drawl, and allowed herself instead a small smile at her desk. She felt unexpectedly warm and light - he’d caught her callback to Twilburg, remembering their earlier correspondence, had essentially promised not to hold her unflattering mistake above her (though he was not, apparently, above a bit of light ribbing, which she supposed she’d walked into), and he was eager to hear her views on a subject before he made up his mind. Her head was spinning a bit at that, as she contemplated the turn of events - Lucius Malfoy, avowed pureblood supremacist, of an ancient magical line, wanted the thoughts of Hermione Granger, daughter of dentists, on matters relating to the inherent nature of magic. Her boss returned from his lunch break and shot her an odd look, finding her blushing moonily over a letter, and Hermione shoved the parchment hurriedly into her bag and went back to work on her report, but she found herself returning throughout the day to the question of what a strange world she’d found herself in.

* * *

The week carried on much as the few preceding it had, even subject to Hermione’s new determination to adhere to her plan. She dropped by Grimmauld Place unexpectedly a few evenings, worried about Ginny, but since their conversation last Sunday something seemed to have changed for the redheaded woman. She was warm and relaxed, and while Hermione still felt there was some sort of distance between Ginny and Harry that hadn’t been present before, she couldn’t put her finger on it, and hadn’t been able to corner Ginny alone for any long period of time to talk about it. Maybe, she mused, after her last visit of the week, she was reading too much into things; surely married couples went through rough patches, drifted apart and then came together in their love, just as she had found herself doing with Ron before she’d redoubled her efforts on their relationship, and Hermione resolved to leave well enough alone.

Friday came, and with it the first of the renewed date nights. They had broken down sometime in the weeks immediately following the Twilburg debacle, after Ron had proposed yet again watching a Quidditch match at the pub with his friends from work. Hermione had been nervous about proposing their reinstatement; she wasn’t honestly certain what she would have done if Ron had proposed more Quidditch. Instead, though, he had thoughtfully suggested a newly opened restaurant in Hogsmeade, which left Hermione rifling through her wardrobe looking for something suitably nice but casual for the evening when a familiar owl tapped at her bedroom window. She hastily opened it and took the letter, shooing the eagle owl away before leaning her head against the wardrobe, the parchment she held in her hands burning her fingers.

This was all, of course, her own fault. The evening before, she’d found herself unable to resist the inexplicable urge to add, at the bottom of another salvo in their ongoing discourse about the nature of magic, a postscript.

PS. In case you are as fond of schedule and routine as I am, I warn you that I may be guilty of the sin of tardiness in our next correspondence. I find myself with a date tomorrow evening, and would hate to shortchange you with rushed or less than fully developed thoughts.

In her response the next morning, she’d received a postscript in return.

PS. While I flatter myself to think that I can deal with a slight interruption to our routine, I appreciate your warning. I do prefer to have you and your thoughts at their very best. Forgive a man his rude but insatiable curiosity, but I do hope your date is not to the Cannons match.

She’d giggled, actually giggled, at her desk, and, after a long and frustrating day in which her
supervisor had deemed her report on werewolves factually correct and compelling, but ultimately not worth troubling the Wizengamot or any other branch of the Ministry with, had found herself rashly scribbling a hasty response to the postscript itself while she was still at work, leaving aside the larger, academic questions he had posed for the morning. No, instead she’d written him a few lines reassuring him that she’d strive to provide him with nothing but her best, that she’d hate to disappoint him, and that her date was not to the Cannons match, but to the new restaurant in Hogsmeade. And then, upon realizing what she’d done after she’d sent it along, she’d promptly buried herself in paperwork and hoped that he would let her be to wallow and then forget about her mistakes. Instead, she found herself opening the letter clutched in her hand, trembling.

* * *

Much preferable to a Cannons match, and with significantly less orange, I can happily report. Try the cassoulet, together with a Languedoc red. I believe it won’t disappoint, and you can make the disruption to our regular correspondence up to me by acknowledging my superior, discerning palate.

Hermione groaned, leaning her head back against the wall, just as she heard Ron apparate into the living room. She swore softly and shoved the offending note into a book on her nightstand, slipping her shoes on just as Ron popped his head around the corner of the doorframe.

“Almost ready?”

She nodded, and he took her arm in his as he apparated the two of them to the restaurant. 

* * *

Of course, she got the cassoulet, with a Languedoc red. Ron had looked at her oddly, but had been too puzzled by the menu himself for him to mull much over her quick and decisive choice. She told him to get a simple steak, and concentrated much of her considerable mental effort on not comparing the two men - Lucius with his confident, refined palate, though still clearly an appreciation for the simple and comforting, and Ron... well, who was still the same Ron who’d been utterly puzzled by the bouillabaisse served at the feast in their fourth year.

She hated that it was utterly delicious, not at all what she would have ordered for herself but perfectly to her taste, deceptively complex flavors hiding within a simple, hearty dish. She hated that she couldn’t take a bite without thinking of Lucius Malfoy. She hated most of all that she had no one to blame but herself.

Ron had been relating a lengthy story about one of his coworker’s girlfriends, one that Hermione had admittedly not been following, instead stewing in her own thoughts. As he lapsed into silence once again, Hermione cleared her throat.

“You know, Ron, I read something very interesting the other day. It was about how ancient witches and wizards viewed the relationship between space and time, and it was very similar to Twilburg’s theories.” Ron was looking at her as if she had suddenly sprouted a second head, so she pushed forward gently. “Twillburg is the author whose lecture we almost went to, in the fall, remember? The one who’d gotten his Muggle Ph.D?”

Ron nodded slightly. “Right, that bloke. Wasn’t that the lecture where we saw Lucius bloody Malfoy? I can’t believe they let that monster out in public, after all he did. If he had any decency he’d just leave us all well alone and die in peace... quickly.”

Hermione felt her hands clenching under the table, her fingernails digging into the soft flesh of her palms as she tried to master the flush of anger that roared through her veins with a ferocity that took her by surprise.
“Ron, I didn’t want to talk about Lucius Malfoy at dinner. I wanted to talk about what I read. What do you make of the fact that the wizards and the Muggles eventually came to the same, or I suppose a fundamentally similar, understanding of the world?”

Ron shrugged, shoveling a bite of food into his mouth. “I mean, it makes sense that the Muggles would’ve caught up eventually, I suppose. I’m impressed they managed to at all, but I guess I don’t find it as surprising as you do that wizards knew something long ago that Muggles just now figured out.”

Hermione pressed her lips tightly together. “Well, it’s not quite the same thing. Wizards figured out a theory of relationships between time and space related to magic that Muggles independently figured out and applied to the nonmagical part of the world.”

Ron listened, but seemed nonplussed by her explanation. “I think you’re reading too much into it, ‘Mione.”

Hermione bit her lip, looking down at her plate. She wondered if she should be chiding herself for setting Ron up for failure; he hadn’t read the texts, didn’t understand the nuance. And yet, another part of her wondered that Ron would suggest what Lucius Malfoy, blood supremacist of old, had not once brought up: that the obvious and simple answer was that Muggles were just 900 years slower than wizards in understanding some fundamental truth. Once again, she wondered what kind of a world she’d found herself in.

The rest of dinner passed without incident, though Hermione gave up on the magical theory discussion, and the night ended with Ron and Hermione in bed. Hermione had steadfastly refused to allow her mind to drift again to blonde hair and grey eyes and a razor-sharp mind contemplating her, leaving her agitated from the effort and unsatisfied. Ron, however, seemed blissfully unaware in his postcoital haze, and leaned over to press a kiss to her temple.

“I love you, ‘Mione.”

She gave him a smile and a kiss and returned the sentiment. She nestled against his chest and listened to his steadily slowing, deepening breathing.

“I can’t wait for our future together, ‘Mione,” he mumbled sleepily, and Hermione froze, pressed up against him. “Can’t wait to see our kids, watch you raise them and teach ‘em everything you know. I just imagine myself coming home from a long day of work and seeing you and the kids and dinner, everything in place at home, so warm and comforting.”

Hermione’s blood felt like ice; she’d always known, deep inside, that the picture Ron had painted was what he wanted, something that looked like a variation on his childhood rather than a radical departure from it, but she couldn’t help the dizzy dread that had overcome her as he’d been speaking. She closed her eyes and, as Ron’s breathing transitioned into snores, told herself that she was overreacting, likely the wine. She’d always known this about Ron, and she’d come to terms with it. She rolled onto her side and tried not to dream of cassoulet and smirks and long intellectual discussions in front of a library fire.

* * *

Saturday morning dawned, and Hermione pulled herself together, yawning all the while. Before she could turn to replying to Lucius’ letter, she would have to run to the first, informal meeting of the committee that Elphias Doge was putting together. She stepped into the Floo still holding a Muggle thermos of coffee, yawning all the way to the Ministry conference room that the elderly man had reserved for this first meeting. She slipped inside and found herself meeting the gazes of a
room full of people she mostly knew (including Justin Finch-Fletchley and a handful of older halfbloods and Muggleborns she recognized from Hogwarts), and noticed with delight that these faces included Andromeda Tonks’. She met the older woman’s gaze with a smile and dropped into a seat next to her, taking a greedy gulp of coffee under Andromeda’s amused, watchful eye.

“I believe we’re almost ready to begin,” Elphias Doge began from the head of the table, “just waiting on one more...”

And at that moment Hermione heard the swoosh of robes as someone entered the room, and turned her head to find herself looking at a familiar figure. Her eyes widened and her face grew hot, and had she not been so distracted by her own reactions she might have noticed the grey eyes that went straight to her, brows raising quickly before dropping back down into a carefully schooled impression.

“Ah yes, here he is, the last member of our esteemed ranks. Thank you for joining us, Lucius.”
Chapter Summary

Hermione makes it through her first committee meeting, and then gets coffee.

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys once again for all of your wonderful comments! They seriously make my day, and remind me how worth it it is to dig into writing some more even after a long day. As always, let me know your thoughts!

This isn't the most exciting chapter, but I think necessary set up for what's to come ahead (which should make you very excited!). I'm super excited for the next chapter, which I hope to have up by the weekend, if not sooner. Things start to... escalate from here (insert evil laughter).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Facts

The meeting was nearly unbearable. Lucius had taken a seat on the other side of Doge, looking supremely at ease in the small Ministry conference room, despite the intense scrutiny he was receiving from its other occupants. Doge rambled on about introductory matters, but no one in the room other than Lucius and Andromeda seemed particularly interested. The other occupants watched Lucius intently, with expressions that ranged from slight fear to intense rage. Hermione watched Justin Finch-Fletchley and a girl she vaguely recognized as a Hufflepuff who had been a few years ahead of her at Hogwarts exchanged furiously scribbled notes, their eyes flicking towards Lucius frequently.

Hermione, for her part, watched the blonde man with nearly as much intensity. She wondered how he could be so self-possessed, so calm and unperturbed even as he was the subject of so many stares. She was nearly trembling from the tension in the room, and none of it was even directed at her. Upon a particularly egregious episode of note-passing, with Justin staring so hard at Lucius he was practically announcing to the room the subject of his correspondence, Hermione noticed those grey eyes flicker towards the Hufflepuff pair for the briefest of moments, nostrils flaring, before his gaze returned to Doge, with that cold disinterest Hermione had watched descend upon him in Flourish and Blotts. She’d always surmised that the Malfoy control must be something they were born and bred to, but watching Lucius now, Hermione wondered how much effort it cost him to maintain that supercilious attitude.

Before she knew it, Doge had stopped talking and was clearing his throat as he packed his things, and, after a brief moment in which the drifting attention of the room recentered, everyone else began the process of packing up as well. Hermione stiffened as she noticed, out of the corner of her eye, Lucius Malfoy approaching her side of the table, and she felt her heart begin to flutter with what was certainly at least ninety percent nervousness over figuring out how much of their
relationship to reveal to the assembled parties, and definitely, definitely not at all excitement at being in his solid, enchanting presence again. She noted, with some emotion that she chose not to examine closely, that he was wearing the same cologne he’d been wearing at Flourish and Blotts.

Just as he was about to step close enough that Hermione felt she had to open her mouth and set the tone for their meeting, Andromeda leapt up with her bag and placed a kiss on each of his cheeks. Hermione paused, eyes darting over to the two with curiosity, and her eyebrows shot higher than she’d known they could go when the older witch exclaimed, “Lucy!”

Hermione stifled a chuckle at the look of utter discomfort on Lucius’ face at the nickname, but he returned her embrace warmly. “Andy. I thought we’d agreed to leave that nickname behind in third year, where it belongs.”

Andromeda smiled impishly. “Ah, it must have slipped my mind, Lucius. But you know how forgetful I can be.”

“Yes, quite,” Lucius drawled blandly, and Andromeda burst into laughter. A few moments later, Lucius’ impassive stare melted into a smirk. Hermione continued to pretend to pack her things up - even though she was certain she’d packed and unpacked the same scroll three times. She couldn’t tear herself away from the scene beside her.

“I should send you a Howler. I haven’t been able to get Teddy off of that stupid toy broom that you sent him, and if he’s even half as clumsy as his mother was he’ll break his neck.” Hermione’s eyes widened and she put the scroll back into her bag for a fourth time. Lucius sent Teddy Lupin toys?

“Oh, that was an aberration. Your father was the best Chaser Slytherin had this century, it’s just a matter of time before the talent reappears. Let the boy enjoy himself.”

Hermione realized, with a sudden jolt and a curse for her own ignorance, that Teddy was technically Lucius’ great-nephew, through Narcissa. She stood frozen, staring at her packed bag for a few moments, as she felt simultaneously a tingling warmth at the knowledge that Lucius appeared to have reconciled with his sister-in-law, and to have a warm relationship with little Teddy, and a flush of shame at her own stupidity for forgetting something as simple as the fact of Lucius’ dead wife. Even as she’d tried to avoid it, she’d found herself spinning a tale in which Lucius Malfoy respected her opinion and enjoyed her company and even found her attractive (quite attractive, if she let herself count her thoughts on that one fateful night), and let herself get caught up in what she knew to be a bit of a (so-far innocent, though ill-advised) flirtation, but - how could she be so stupid? How could she compare to someone like Narcissa, who had been a cunning witch and devoted mother, tricking Voldemort himself for the sake of her family, and, on top of all of that, beautiful and elegant? How could she think that someone who had been married to that would find her, Hermione Granger, Muggle-born witch who frequently wore the same outfit three days in a row, with her bushy hair and ink stains on her hands and face, attractive? And those owls, mentioning her date last night? She’d been making a proper fool of herself.

She was startled out of her downward spiral by the sound of someone gently clearing their throat. She flushed as she realized that, sometime as she had been staring at her own packed bag, Andromeda had gone, leaving her and Lucius alone in the conference room. She knew without a doubt it was him, without even looking, from his scent, and the warm presence she could feel near her - as always, just far enough away to respect propriety, but close enough that she could feel her skin tingling where the two of them drew near.

“In need of some assistance, Miss Granger?”

If possible, she turned an even deeper shade of red and grabbed her bag, throwing it over her
shoulder. “Ah, no, just... packing up.”

She looked up at him finally, to see him watching her closely, a strange look in his eyes as he watched her struggle with her bag. She was suddenly acutely aware of the shabby Muggle clothes she’d worn to this meeting, loose jeans and an old jumper that was getting a little threadbare, and her eyes darted away, her breath catching in her throat.

“How was the cassoulet?” he asked, leaning against the table, and Hermione watched the muscles in his forearm flex as he shifted position, watched his large hands palm at the table, and exhaled heavily. She looked back up at him, meeting his gaze earnestly.

“It was... perfect.” She felt a smile ghost across her lips at the memory, and Lucius’ strange gaze intensified.

They fell silent for a few moments, just looking at each other, and Hermione felt her chest begin to constrict, felt the sudden urge to run, because she wasn’t sure she was ready to begin to confront the way that Lucius was looking at her or that she had the self-control to avoid doing so. Just as she was about to say that she had to run, her mouth just beginning to open -

“Would you like to have coffee, Miss Granger?” For a moment, Lucius seemed as surprised that he was asking the question as he was, but he smoothly recovered. “If we’re to work together, it seems prudent to get to know each other better.”

The chance had passed; Hermione knew she couldn’t bear to run, and so she found herself nodding, a small smile finding its way onto her face. She could have sworn that for just a moment Lucius’ smirk turned into a real, honest smile, corners of his eyes wrinkling, but then he was back to smirking and they were walking out of the Ministry together.

* * *

An hour later, Hermione found herself in one of the strangest situations she’d ever been in - even considering the wide variety of wacky adventures she and Harry and Ron had found themselves in while at Hogwarts. She was sitting across from Lucius Malfoy in a coffee shop in Muggle London, having a polite (even friendly) discussion. If she hadn’t been living it, she would have doubted that it was even possible.

Instead, when they’d left the Ministry, and Lucius had asked if she had a particular preference when it came to her coffee, she had unthinkingly nodded, waxing rhapsodic about her favorite coffee shop. After a few minutes on the subject she’d paused and looked up at him with a careful expression on her face. “It’s, ah, in Muggle London. Will that... be a problem?”

“It will be dreadful, but I think I’ll manage the unbearable agony.” At the soft noise she’d made, he’d shot her an amused smirk, and the twinkle in his eye had given her comfort to relax. After that, he simply paused at the corner of the street, shrugging off his robes and giving them a careful eye before transfiguring them into an oversized coat in a style that had maybe been popular approximately eighty years ago. “Will it do?” he asked.

Hermione refrained from laughing. It was, admittedly, much better than most wizards did with Muggle clothing. “It’s a little... vintage, but it’ll do.”

After a quick walk through Muggle London, filled with pleasant small talk when their surroundings warranted it and companionable silence the rest of the time, they’d finally made it to Hermione’s favorite coffee shop. It was minimalist but cozy, simple and welcoming all at once, and soon they were ensconced at a small table in the corner, next to a large window looking out at
the crowds bustling through the city.

After a few minutes in which they’d each just enjoyed their coffee, Hermione put her cup down emphatically and looked up at Lucius, no longer able to withhold her curiosity.

“Why did you join Doge’s committee?”

One corner of Lucius’ mouth twitched. “I’m sorry, was it unexpected?” The look that she shot him had him laughing aloud. “Well,” he mused, “Andromeda is a convincing witch. She suggested me to Doge, and told me that I would get out of the Manor, begin to rehabilitate the Malfoy name, and lend credibility in certain pureblood circles to the project.”

Hermione raised a brow. “And why would you care if you lent credibility to the project?”

Lucius leaned forward over the table. “Because I happen to think it’s worthwhile.” Hermione’s face must have communicated her disbelief, because he carried on. “Truly. Both purebloods and Muggleborns can have an opportunity and make an effort to understand each other’s cultures.”

“Ah.” Hermione nodded, brows furrowing. “That makes sense. So you’re participating as an advocate for pureblood culture.”

She was startled at the flash of anger that crossed Lucius’ face before he schooled his features back into their usual mask of impassiveness, and she shrank back slightly. “On the contrary, I’m participating as an advocate for exactly what I articulated: a true crosscultural exchange,” he said coldly. After a moment, he seemed to notice her wide-eyed stare and changed demeanor, and sighed heavily, a bit of the ice of his stare fading into simply... weariness.

Softly, he continued. “A man can do a lot of thinking about his life choices over the course of nearly four years in Azkaban.”

She shivered slightly at the thought of it, before meeting his gaze. The question hesitated on the tip of her tongue, and Hermione wondered if she would be pushing too far, but decided, as she set her jaw sternly, that she simply had to know the answer.

“Why did you join him in the first place?”

Across from her, Lucius suddenly grew still, and the two of them sat, just meeting each other’s gaze, for a long beat. Finally, Lucius seemed to acknowledge that he wouldn’t outwait the Gryffindor, and sighed.

“When he first rose, I was actually put under the Imperius.” Brows furrowed, Hermione leaned forward, only for him to hold up a hand to stop her. “Don’t get your adorably naive Gryffindor hopes up. I only didn’t join of my own volition because I was a coward, not because I had a hidden conscience. My father had made his loyalties well-known, but the bastard had the audacity to die early, leaving me to figure out whether the best way to enhance the Malfoy name was to keep some distance while letting our opinions be known, or to become what everyone already expected me to be. I was... honestly relieved to have the choice taken from me. But he and I both knew that the Imperius was just a convenient excuse, that I could have fought against it, could have broken it, could have done anything other than give in.”

Hermione stared, eyes wide, in disbelief as Lucius continued talking, his eyes distant and focused on a spot outside the window just over her right shoulder. He spoke quietly but firmly, and it all just tumbled out of him. She wondered if he’d ever told the whole story to anyone - it didn’t seem to be the case, and Hermione felt suddenly as if her presence were secondary, and this was simply
a therapeutic exercise, an exercise in absolution. Nevertheless, she leaned forward and kept her
gaze steadily on him, giving him encouraging nods at appropriate intervals, in case she were called
upon to absolve or even just to bear witness.

“The second time around... He’d returned from the dead. After 13 years, he was alive again, and... that power was intoxicating. Terrifying to behold, of course, but intoxicating. He promised us power, and status, and why shouldn’t we believe him? He had triumphed over death itself.”

“And... now?” Hermione prodded gently, hands still clutching her mug of now-cool coffee.

“Four years in Azkaban, a dead wife, and a-” Here, he faltered for the first time, but Hermione
merely took a sip and averted her gaze as he composed himself, the mask slipping back. “-a nearly
dead son would make anyone consider the limits of their ambition. Contrary to popular belief, mine
is not unlimited.”

They sat silently, but the moment was interrupted by their waitress, who came by to clean up. After
each ordering another cup of coffee, Hermione took the opportunity to study the man across from
her, who still seemed to be preoccupied by the crowds of Muggles rushing by in their blustery
winter gear. Perhaps inexplicably, she believed him. If it was a lie, it wasn’t a particularly
flattering lie, and his discomfort with her pointed questions seemed too severe to be disingenuous.
She felt something tight in her chest she hadn’t even realized was there dissipate and relax as she
watched his stormy grey eyes gazing outside, his aristocratic profile composed, and felt herself
warm to the occasion. Satisfied, when the waitress had left the area, she gave him a small smile.

“Well, I’m glad to have you on the committee.” He gave her a small nod of appreciation, and she
decided, once again, to try this new technique of leaving well enough alone. “So... you got Teddy
Lupin a broomstick?”

He seemed to relax somewhat into the conversation now that it had turned to safer ground. “Of
course, the new model. He’s a Black, he should have the best of everything.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I’m somehow beginning to understand Draco a great deal more.”

Lucius raised a brow. “So you’re an advocate of denying children things that bring them pleasure
and that are no burden on the adult to give?”

Hermione frowned. “You’re manipulating the wording to your advantage. Adults know that there’s
such thing as too much of a good thing, and children don’t.”

Lucius grinned. “But however will they learn for themselves if we don’t let them have too much?”

Hermione frowned; she’d walked into that one. “Did you spend much time with Draco when he
was a child?” The smug look Lucius gave her let her know that he’d noticed the topic change, but
he humored her anyway.

“Yes, I mostly raised him.”

Hermione’s brows shot up. “You? Not... Mrs. Malfoy?” Infuriatingly, Lucius merely nodded, as if
her question was insufferably simple. “I was under the impression that it was customary in most
Wizarding homes for the wife to raise the children until they could go to Hogwarts.”

Lucius nodded, giving her a penetrating look that made her think her faux disinterested tone was
not working, and that he had picked up on the slightly personal alarm in her question. “Yes, that is
typical. It’s unfortunate that Hogwarts doesn’t begin earlier, since it’s nearly impossible to send
children who have grown up in the Wizarding world into the Muggle world and expect them to
uphold the Statute of Secrecy. However, some of the old houses still believe that the only way to
guarantee a proper heir is to have him educated and trained by the man of the house - yes, I’m sure
you were waiting for some sort of surprise bastion of progressiveness, I hate to spoil your fun. But
the point stands - I raised Draco. Besides, I quite like children.”

Hermione quirked a brow at his last statement, but her brain was too caught up in the rest of the
information he’d spoken of to formulate a proper response. She’d always told herself she could just
send her children to Muggle school and talk Ron out of his silly, outdated notions of her staying at
home, but the point Lucius raised about the Statute of Secrecy was a good one, and she was
kicking herself for not realizing earlier that discretion and children didn’t often go hand in hand.

“Worried, Miss Granger?” Lucius interrupted her thoughts, with a wry smirk that made her flush
for more than one reason.

“Of course not,” she snapped too quickly, but he simply gave her a knowing look and didn’t press
further.

The rest of the morning passed swiftly, the pair discussing a wide range of subjects, from plans for
the cultural committee, to her report on werewolves to the current state discourse in the Arithmancy
community. By the time the lunch rush began to trickle in, Hermione, who had been leaning far
over the table and gesturing wildly as she complained about a certain French academic’s proclivity
for overgeneralization, happened to glance at her watch and jumped.

“Oh no, it’s past noon! Ron’ll think I’ve been kidnapped or something, I’ve been gone so much
longer than I planned. He must be worried sick.”

Lucius chuckled, the rough, husky sound sparking a warmth that had been simmering quietly
beneath the surface since they’d arrived at the coffee shop. “I’d be more worried about the poor
bastard to attempted to kidnap you, and whatever hex you’d inevitably laid on him.”

Hermione gave him a thankful grin, hoping he mistook her sudden flush as caused by her sudden
hurry, as she headed towards the door. “I’ll write you later today.”

He nodded, and she watched him through the window as she strode off the down the street, sipping
coffee in that ridiculous coat, looking oddly thoughtful.

Chapter End Notes

So, I’ve gotten a fair number of comments, and expect to get a few more after this
chapter, to the effect that Lucius is a little OOC in this fic, a point which I'm happy to
take (it is just fanfic). But! In my own defense, and to confirm some things that so far
I've just alluded to, let's remember that the Lucius we saw in the sixth and seventh
books was already a fair fall from where he'd been earlier in the series, and that in this
timeline he's lost his wife and (tw) his son has attempted suicide (which I've alluded to
in a couple of places and I promise we'll get to unpack more later). In my mind, those
are all pretty transformative events! So, sorry if you're not seeing it, but I hope that this
little explanation of Lucius helps you guys understand more of where I'm seeing some
of the drivers of this little redemption arc.

I promise less angst and more smut to come!
Chapter Summary

Hermione goes on a date with Ron that has an unexpected ending.

Chapter Notes

Happy Sunday, happy Father's Day if applicable, here's a monster of a chapter! It just kept growing and growing, and I thought about splitting it into parts, but Hermione has to experience all this action in one crazy night, so so do you, dear readers. Barring any more rampantly expanding chapters, I think we have 3-4 chapters before a big reveal occurs, which I'm very excited about! The week after next is going to be a staycation for me, so I'm hoping to have up to the big reveal written and out by the middle of that week.

As always, thank you thank you thank you for your reviews and kudos! It means so much to me and I appreciate seeing your thoughts and reactions to the story.

The Sorrows of Young Werther

The next day Andromeda showed up for supper at the Burrow, and Hermione made it her mission for the afternoon to catch the witch alone - a task easier said than done at the full-to-bursting Burrow. Finally, when most of the Weasleys were distracted by a demonstration of some of George’s new prototypes and Molly had Teddy well in hand, Hermione managed to catch Andromeda’s eye and, with a few careful head motions, direct the two of them to the garden without catching the attention of any of the others.

After they’d made their way outside, they each stood side-by-side, looking out at the winter moon appearing early in the sky for a few long moments before Andromeda broke the silence.

“Am I right in assuming I know what this is about?”

Hermione shrugged, uncertain of how much of her own connection to Lucius Andromeda knew, and how much she cared to reveal herself. “I think you do. Lucy?”

The older witch turned to Hermione with a weary sigh. “Lucius Malfoy is, whatever else he may be, some of the only family Teddy and I have left, and, however improbable, he’s my friend. I was the one who convinced Doge to invite him to the join the committee.”

Hermione kept her face and her tone carefully neutral. “I see. So when did... things change?”

Andromeda gave a small smile. “Which time?” At Hermione’s confused look, she chuckled. “Lucius and I were the same year at Hogwarts, in Slytherin together. We were friendly as children. Of course, things became strained when You Know Who’s power began to grow, and Abraxas began to vocally support him, while I started dating Ted, and once we were married I was totally
estranged from basically everyone I’d known, Lucius included. But he was never the worst. I was glad Narcissa wound up married to him - better Lucius than Rosier, or Flint, or worse, Rabastan... But I suspect that’s not the turning point you were asking about.”

Hermione shook her head, giving Andromeda a sharp look, in response to which she merely sighed, looking even more tired than usual. “We... reconciled at Narcissa’s funeral.” Her voice grew thin and she blinked quickly, even as she drew herself up taller and straighter.

Hermione reached out and tentatively laid a hand on the other woman’s shoulder. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Andromeda shot Hermione a grateful smile. “We both attended full of regrets. He for the role he’d played in my tragedies and me... well.” Her face grew pained. “Narcissa had reached out to me, to apologize and try to have a relationship again. And I was still upset about Ted, about Dora, all of it, so... I ignored her. And then she died.”

Hermione bit back tears, but Andromeda seemed to have an almost otherworldly emotional control. Hermione wondered if it came with the territory of being raised in those old pureblood families. “I know it must seem hard for you to understand, but... Ted is gone. Dora is gone. Remus is gone. Sirius and Reg are gone. Even Bella and Cissy are gone now, really gone. Lucius and Draco are family, real family, our only real family, and as grateful as I am to the Weasleys for welcoming us into theirs, it’s not the same.”

“No, I do - I do understand,” Hermione interjected, biting her lower lip. “I still, uh, well, I still haven’t been able to find my parents in Australia.” At the distressed look on Andromeda’s face, Hermione waved a hand. “I don’t think it was foul play, I just think they moved, and they’re proving hard to track down. I did my work too well.” Her tone turned wistful for a moment before she brought herself back around. “But the point is, I love the Weasleys, but it’s still not the same as my family. People who have the same old stories, the same traditions, the same crazy uncle.”

Andromeda gave her a droll smile. “Every uncle in the Black family tree is crazy.”

Hermione laughed brightly, thinking that yes, she perfectly understood how Andromeda and Lucius got along. They had an astonishingly similar sense of humor. “Point taken.” There was a long pause, and Hermione inhaled deeply. “Well, I for one am glad you invited him. I’ll... try to talk to the others.”

Andromeda shot her a grateful smile, and then Ron poked his head out of the door of the Burrow.

“Oi, there you are! ‘Mione, you almost ready to go?”

“Coming, Ron!” she yelled back, and turned to Andromeda. “Thank you, for sharing that tonight. I really appreciate it.” Impulsively, she reached up and hugged her. Andromeda was stiff for a moment, before she slowly relaxed into the hug, giving Hermione a tight squeeze.

At home, Ron gave her an odd look. “What were you talking about with Andromeda outside? You missed George’s new trick quills that snitch all the secrets of anyone who tries to steal one from you.”

Hermione gave a frown. “Sounds dangerous.” Ron rolled his eyes at her response, but she carried on. “We were just talking about the cultural committee Elphias Doge put together.” At his blank stare, she elaborated. “I told you about it over dinner a few nights ago? Where I was yesterday morning? Committee on cultural exchange between Muggle and pureblood cultures?”
“Oh, right! I’m glad you have Andromeda on it with you. Sounds right bloody boring to me, but I’m sure you’ll somehow change the world with it.” He gave a bright smile that soon faded into a yawn. “Mind if I turn in?”

“Not at all.” She watched Ron’s retreating back and then made herself a cup of tea. She was tired, but her mind wouldn’t stop racing - between yesterday’s coffee and tonight’s conversation with Andromeda, she had a lot to think through before her brain would let her body settle into sleep.

* * *

The next few weeks passed in a feverish haze for Hermione, even as winter finally settled down around London. Her days were a flurry of activity, between her job, continued weekly date nights, work for the cultural committee (which planned to announce its first big initiative at the Ministry’s Yule Ball), and, of course, her correspondence with Lucius.

After their conversation over coffee, something had seemed to relax even further between the pair, as if one of last of the old barriers between them had melted away. Their letters grew longer, even as they grew more frequent, and Hermione realized that the distinction she’d fought so hard to maintain between the academic and personal had long since blurred into nothingness. She couldn’t seem to bring herself to feel quite as strongly about that anymore, though, not now that the pair’s correspondence had stretched into its sixth month, not now that she felt her early fears had been assuaged, not since he’d let her see behind his mask of cool indifference that morning. She frequently wrote him about her work projects, and he in return gave her invaluable (if insufferably Slytherin) advice on how best to frame and present it to be most well-received (down to recommending flowers to send on birthdays - she had rejected that particular suggestion). In return he shared snippets of stories about Teddy and Andromeda, and occasionally Draco. Hermione found that, even though Harry, Ginny, and some of her other friends made occasional appearances in their correspondence, she rarely mentioned Ron, nor did Lucius bring him up.

The two saw each other weekly at committee meetings as well, where they dominated the meetings - either arguing vociferously when they disagreed, heated words matching heated gazes (Hermione took it as a personal challenge to attempt to fluster him, and she surmised that he enjoyed seeing her flushed and speechless when she’d been bested), or teaming up to ensure success and quell dissent when they were in agreement. After one particularly hard-fought triumph for the pair over the objections of Justin Finch-Fletchley’s friend, Justin had approached her in the hall afterward.

“Seriously, Hermione? How could you take his side?” Justin was frowning, arms crossed, but still with that bloody irritating Eton-esque tilt of superiority to his posture.

Hermione gave him a once over and then raised a brow, shooting him a stern frown that would’ve made McGonagall proud. “I argue for proposals in which I find merit, regardless of who proposed them. I hadn’t realized you were the kind of person to allow prejudice to impede your independent judgment.”

At the dumfounded look on his face, she turned and flounced away, allowing herself a small grin. Lucius, coming out of the room behind them, shot her the slightest hint of a smile, just a tiny quirk of his lips that a less observant witch, who knew him less well, might not have caught, and she allowed her grin to spread, a bit more bounce to her step as she basked in the sudden warmth and glow of his implicit appreciation and praise.

Lucius’ frequent physical presence in her life, however, had made her plan regarding her relationship with Ron more difficult. She followed each step diligently - weekly date nights, dinners together at least three nights a week, trying to honestly learn and ask about the things she knew Ron liked and would appreciate - and in some ways, things were easier. The pair fought less,
spent more time together, and Hermione was reminded of all of the qualities that had drawn her to Ron in the first place: his sense of humor, his steadfast loyalty, his sometimes clumsy way of always trying to do the right thing, his love and consideration for his family, the enthusiasm with which he threw himself into things he knew she cared about when she asked. But at the same time, she often found herself sitting through conversations at dinner, wishing she were talking to Lucius Malfoy, hearing his thoughts on a subject, asking about his day.

And at night, Hermione was having an ever harder time banishing thoughts of Lucius from her mind - flashes of his large hands, the sharp panes of his face when he gave her one of those smirks, the heated gaze with which he sometimes watched her when he thought she wasn’t looking. And hearing his voice weekly meant that she was utterly familiar with its tones and rasps, enough that her mind could sometimes, unbidden, conjure a facsimile of it saying the filthiest things while she was in the bedroom, describing what he wanted to do to her, what she looked like, praising her body and her mind, telling her what a good girl she was. That last thought had burned through her with a flash of lightning, leaving her clenching and shaking around Ron with a sudden, unexpected orgasm. After that night, Hermione decided it might be better to avoid evening activities altogether rather than attempt to shore up her clearly crumbling resolve or learn any more unexpected secrets about herself.

* * *

Late in December, almost Christmas, date night approached again - this time, Ron had managed to get them tickets to a Weird Sisters concert. Hermione should have been excited - the group had taken a long break from touring, the tickets were difficult to get, Ron was so excited, he’d been trying so hard to make compromises and do things they would both enjoy instead of just Quidditch. But instead she was standing before the mirror in her bedroom, a mountain of clothes arising from the floor where she’d torn them out of the wardrobe in frustration. The venue would be heated, they’d be in the press of bodies on the floor, warm and pressed together as people danced and sang, everyone else would be dressed fashionably, young, excitingly. But all Hermione wanted to wear was a warm woolen jumper and loose jeans. She scratched absentmindedly at her forearm, at the scarred letters she knew she’d find underneath the sleeve of her jumper, that she could picture in her mind’s eye with absolutely no effort, and then she flooed Ginny.

Harry had answered, but when she’d explained that she was having wardrobe problems, he’d rather enthusiastically gone to grab Ginny, who had approached the problem with her usual mixture of excitement and determination. Not an hour later, Hermione was back at home, ready to leave with Ron, tugging self-consciously at the hem of the top that Ginny had leant her - long-sleeved, modest neckline, but it clung tightly to her torso and exposed just the slightest hint of her bare torso. When he’d seen her, Ron had given her one of his usual grins, and tugged at her hand with nothing more than a “You look great, ‘Mione. C’mon, don’t want to be late - Seamus and some of his mates are meeting us there.” She told herself not to be disappointed; after all, Ron had never exactly been particularly demonstrative or observant when it came to her appearance. She’d even appreciated it (well, after she’d mostly gotten over the sting of the whole debacle that was the Yule Ball their fourth year) because it meant he appreciated her first for her personality, her virtues, her mind, before her body. So why was she suddenly bothered by it?

They met Seamus at the apparition point for the venue, and were soon joined by a group of friends he’d brought along. Most of them Hermione only vaguely recognized, with the exception of Parvati and Padma Patil, who greeted her warmly and Ron somewhat less warmly.

“Excited, ‘Mione?” Ron said, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet as they pushed their way over to a bar area, Ron ordering himself a beer and Hermione a glass of wine. Well, Hermione
thought as she examined the plastic cup of sickly sweet-smelling liquid in front of her, she supposed it was technically a glass and technically wine. She tried not to think about the casual authority with which Lucius had recommended a wine pairing to her cassoulet, nor to wonder whether he liked the Weird Sisters. She had a sudden flash of irrational fear that he would be here, would see her drinking cheap wine in her revealing top and think less of her, and then she shook her head, clearing the thought from her brain – Lucius Malfoy wouldn’t think less of her for enjoying a concert, if he did he was in the wrong, and, more importantly, there was no way Lucius Malfoy would ever be caught dead in the large basement of this Wizarding bar, pressed up against the sweating masses, listening to the Weird Sisters.

Happy that Ron seemed to be content with her nods and smiles for now, until the wine could lull her into enjoying herself more, Hermione let herself be dragged over to a spot near the center of the floor, where Seamus and the others were waiting. After a long while of the group talking loudly, during which Hermione contented herself with drinking cup after cup of the terrible wine until it became not-so-terrible and making small talk with Parvati and Padma about her work and the cultural committee and each of their jobs (Padma at the International Wizarding Confederation, Parvati at Sleekez’s potions division), the Weird Sisters finally began to play. After a few songs, and a few more cups of wine, Hermione had even let herself relax into enjoying herself, bouncing to the beat and singing along, twirling around in ridiculous, Luna-esque dances with Parvati and Padma.

The band had just transitioned into one of their newer selections, with a thick, heavy pulsing bass line that Hermione felt shudder down her spine with a curl of slow fire, when she heard Ron make a strangled choking noise and then cough on his beer. She turned sharply to see him looking at a pair on the other side of their group: a tall, dark-skinned man, lithe but muscled, with his arms wrapped around a pale blonde witch, who was pressed back against him to dance to the beat, the sensuous way they were dancing giving Hermione a moment of pause. Then she realized, as he turned to shoot a wink at her, that she recognized the wizard: it was Blaise Zabini. She hurriedly straightened and looked away, and she felt Ron wrap an arm around her protectively.

“I see Zabini’s got a new one,” Seamus said to Ron and Hermione, sounding more amused than anything, but Ron just huffed.

“Do they have to dance like that?” Hermione asked, eyes still on the dancing couple, half-appalled and half-intrigued by the brazen display of sexuality; she felt certain that neither Zabini nor the blonde witch he was with felt insecure and awkward and dissociated during sex, didn’t need to police their thoughts to keep them from straying.

Padma shot her a wicked grin. “I mean, wouldn’t you if someone like that asked you to?”

She raised her eyebrows suggestively and let her eyes trail obviously down the long lines of Zabini’s muscled limbs. Hermione swallowed thickly, trying not to look instead at the long blonde hair of the witch in Zabini’s arms and trying harder not to think of whether she’d dance with Lucius Malfoy if he asked her, pressed her back against his broad chest, the heavy warmth of his cologne enveloping her, long fingers wrapped around her hips to guide her - she shook her head, finding it hard to clear her mind through her alcoholic haze, only to find Zabini giving her an amused grin and a predatory once-over.

Hermione felt, rather than heard, Ron growl behind her and pull her against his body. She shifted uncomfortably as the pulsing beat of the song continued and Ron wrapped his hands around her hips, attempting to begin the same undulating rhythm that Zabini and his date had established. But their rhythm was stilted, Ron’s hands pulling her roughly too close to his body, manipulating her hips with sharp, jerky movements, and he seemed to be misinterpreting Hermione’s squirming as
an attempt to dance. She could feel Ron’s breath on her neck, smell the slightly sour aroma of stale beer, and suddenly the music was much too loud, the air much too hot, Ron’s skin clammy on hers, and Hermione felt her world beginning to narrow, the edges of her vision growing dark as her pulse quickened. She felt one of Ron’s hands creep upwards, skimming over the top of her jeans to paw at the bit of exposed midriff, and then slip his hand under her top. Hermione felt her blood run cold, and she finally focused enough through the haze of the wine (how much had she drunk?) to lean away.

“Ron, no, I don’t want to dance like this,” she said quietly, trying not to cause a scene in front of their friends.

“C’mon, ‘Mione, it’s just a little bit of fun.” He pulled her back against him, his palm pressed against her stomach, and Hermione’s skin crawled. She felt a rush of guilt for that fact - whose skin crawled when their boyfriend touched them? - but she couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable.

“Zabini isn’t the only one who can have any,” he chuckled, and Hermione felt a flash of cold rage.

She stiffened in his arms, turning her face to him with her lips drawn in a tight line. “Ronald, I am not interested in being a part of this testosterone-fueled stand-off. Stop this nonsense and let’s go back to having fun with everyone, like we were before.”

Their eyes met, and for a second she seemed to have gotten through to him, his eyes regaining their focus on her, but then Blaise Zabini had to ruin everything.

“I don’t think your girlfriend wants to dance with you, Weasley,” he called over to them with an amused tone, and then Ron was tearing himself out of her sudden grip and, as if in slow motion, she watched him forego his wand and simply raise an arm to punch Zabini in the face.

Horrified, Hermione could only stand back and watch as the drama unfolded in front of her, like she was not so much a player as an audience member watching events unfold separate from her, on a stage from afar: the two men brawling, a chaotic mess of pale freckled skin and smooth mahogany, Seamus and some of their other friends attempting to pull the two apart before they caught the attention of security, the blonde girl yelling at Ron from the side, a dim awareness of her own voice repeatedly pleading with Ron to just stop, the appearance of security guards, a shameful walk through the venue with hundreds of eyes on them, Ron still arguing with the guards, Padma and Parvati’s eyes full of pity as they watched her go, until finally she was smacked back into focus by the slap of cold air that hit them as they made their way into the street.

With a sudden burst of clarity and cold rage, she whirled on Ron. “You idiot! Ronald Weasley, you utter prat! Why did you have to do that? Zabini played you like a fool and you ruined our night over some sort of idiotic caveman masculine competition!”

Ron, his temper already running high and alcohol still clouding his judgment, met her anger with his own. “Me? I ruined things? Why couldn’t you have just danced with me when I wanted to, instead of acting like my touch made you sick?”

Somewhere within her, Hermione felt a rush of guilt that Ron had seen through her to understand the shameful truth of her body’s responses to his touch, but anger and frustration and embarrassment were still pulsing at the top of her mind. “Are you out of your bloody mind? I didn’t want to look like... like... like rutting animals in the middle of a concert with our friends! We were in public!”

“Oh, really? It was just because we were in public? Maybe I wouldn’t be such a bloody animal if you let me touch you in private! It’s been weeks, ‘Mione. I thought we were getting somewhere, thought you were relaxing, but you’re still just as much of a frigid bitch as ever.”
Hermione felt her face grow hot, the sharp prick of tears beginning to form, but she gave Ron as cold a look as she could muster, trying to remember how she’d seen Lucius shrug his armor back on (how could he do that, she felt like she was a cup trying to contain a typhoon of emotions, they were going to spill out and drown her). Swallowing thickly, her hand gripping her wand, she whispered “Avis”, watching with grim satisfaction as Ron’s eyes grew wide at the flock of birds suddenly barreling towards him, before she spun on herself and apparated away, eyes clenched tightly shut against the tears.

* * *

Emotional, and still drunk, and more than a little afraid of splinching herself, Hermione didn’t apparate far, just to the other end of Hogsmeade, where she leaned against the wall of a closed dress shop and bit her lip to fight back the tears that were still threatening to spill out. She leaned her head back against the cold stone, shivering against the icy bite of the winter wind whipping through the village. She was still not in any fit state to apparate home, not that she wanted to risk finding Ron there, and even if she’d been able to apparate to Grimmauld Place just then, she wasn’t sure she was ready to face Harry and Ginny yet. Things had been going so well, for weeks, and yet they’d still managed to end in such a spectacular disaster. And yet, hadn’t she known, deep down, that they would? That for all things had been going well, she couldn’t wrangle her body and her emotions into compliance with what her rational mind was telling her she should be feeling?

Wiping her face with the backs of her hands, she squared her shoulders – she at least needed to get out of the cold before she moped herself into hypothermia. She couldn’t bring herself to go to the Three Broomsticks, where she might see students or professors she recognized. She briefly considered the Hog’s Head, but it was a long walk, and she couldn’t take the chance that Aberforth would have a moment of conscience and send a note to one of her friends to retrieve her. From across the way and a few doors down, she saw lights still twinkling in the window of the French restaurant she and Ron had gone to on their first renewed date night, what felt like ages ago. She might be seen, but it was late for dinner, and it seemed the safer bet than any of the other establishments she could think of.

Several minutes later, ensconced at the bar area with a glass of red wine (decidedly not in a plastic cup), Hermione was feeling much more confident about her decision. The wine and the soft music, the kind of decades-old French pop that her parents had listened to when they were in a dreamy mood, were perfect for slipping into a soft, hazy melancholy, the kind of melancholy that made one feel like a deep, tragic heroine instead of just sad. The whole situation was spilled out before her with a kind of fatalistic matter-of-factness, and she’d come to accept that she would always have shied away from Ron’s groping touch, Blaise Zabini would always have taunted him, Ron would always, always be pathologically incapable of not taking the bait Zabini so temptingly dangled before him, and she’d always wind up here, drinking sadly at a bar in a half-empty restaurant an hour before it closed. She had closed her eyes and was humming softly to a familiar song, letting a few stray tears escape, when she heard someone approach behind her.

“Miss Granger, what a pleasant surprise.” She instantly froze, hoping that she had simply had much too much to drink and was deep into a hallucination, but then her fears were confirmed as Lucius Malfoy, in the flesh and blood, slid into the stool next to her, the slight smile that had been beginning to bloom on his face rapidly disappearing into a flare of concern as he took in her streaked makeup and puffy red eyes, and her attempts to wipe the last few remaining tears from her face.

“Are you alright?” he asked suddenly, leaning over to her with brows furrowed, looking so honestly concerned that her heart hurt with it, but some dark, wild part of her was so angry with
him, for being so bloody intelligent and attractive, for sending her that book in the first place, for somehow making her incapable of being content with the way her life had been before he had stepped into it, for being somehow not at all and entirely the cause of tonight.

She snapped at him. “I’d think it was quite obvious that the answer was no.” She took another long sip of her red wine, feeling some of it spill from her lips and swiping at it with the back of her hand, though her posture was still stiff and her gaze imperious.

He gave her a long, sidelong look. “Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Can I get you anything?”

“Yes,” she said, as she picked up her wine glass and finished it off, licking the last drops from her lips and watching his eyes follow the motion closely. “Another glass of wine.”

Lucius’ brow furrowed further as he leaned forward, motioning for the bartender with one exquisitely, stupidly aristocratic hand. “Sir, maybe a glass of water for the lady...”

“No.” Hermione’s head snapped to look at the two of them, the fierceness of her expression pinning both the bartender and the blonde wizard to their spots as if frozen. “I said wine, not water. Another of the same.” The bartender hastened away, undoubtedly more than a little afraid of the drunken war hero who was swaying on her stool slightly. “And you, Lucius Malfoy - don’t you dare presume to make decisions for me. You’re not my bloody father.”

He winced, slightly, and Hermione felt any satisfaction she’d taken earlier in her anger drain away as he turned slightly away from her, his usual mask slipping down.

“I apologize, Miss Granger. You’re an adult, fully capable of making your own decisions.” His voice was carefully steady and measured, but when she glanced up at him the remorse in his eyes seemed to be genuine, and she sighed heavily, suddenly feeling worse than ever, hoping desperately that the bartender would be back with her wine so she could work on drowning this new burst of sadness.

“Is the wine truly that bad?” he said with just a touch too much concern in his voice for his faux-joking tone to succeed, and, looking up again, she found him waiting to meet her eyes with a steady, earnest gaze that lingered on the streaks of brown makeup from the corners of her eyes and she felt all the sadness she’d been burying beneath the wine erupt suddenly.

“He called me a... a frigid bitch,” she choked out, feeling the words thick and slimy in her throat, and then she pressed a hand to her mouth to try to stifle the sob she knew was coming, looking up at Lucius in horrified panic, because she could not, could not be breaking down, drunk, in public next to Lucius Malfoy.

She recognized a flash of shocked anger behind his normally cold stare, so intense she was almost frightened as she suddenly remembered that Lucius Malfoy had very much been a powerful and accomplished Dark wizard, but then it was gone as he sprang into action. As she drew in breath after shaky breath, interspersed with choked cries, with a few quick flicks of his wand he’d cast a silencing charm around them, slung her drink over to a dark corner table, and was escorting her over to said table, one hand pressed just below the exposed bit of her skin, fingers carefully respecting propriety, and, suddenly, everything taken care of, Hermione sank into a chair and let herself sob freely, head buried in her hands. He stayed standing and reached out with one tentative hand for her shoulder, and when Hermione leaned into its comforting warmth he began gently
rubbing her back. After a few moments, Hermione realized he was softly murmuring reassurances to her, that she was alright, she could let go, she would be okay, and with a fresh sob she stood and turned to bury her face in the broad planes of his chest, feeling his familiar warmth and cologne settle around her. He continued rubbing her back, and she murmured the story of the evening at his chest, stilted, frequently interrupted by the need to draw breath or to let loose a fresh cry.

“And,” she said, pausing to take in a deep, steadying breath, “I know I’m not... I’m kind of... well, I kind of am a frigid bitch, he’s right, but that doesn’t mean I want to hear it.” She felt Lucius stiffen underneath her and looked up to find that terrified rage in his cold eyes again, and he was looking down at her with an intense seriousness.

“You are not... that, Miss Granger, and you should not let anyone convince you so.”

“Well, but... you don’t really... know that,” she said, stumbling over her words, cowed by the force of his anger and confused by the fierceness with which he was looking at her.

The look in his eyes suddenly shifted as his gaze dropped down her body, back up to her lips, then to her eyes, and Hermione suddenly wondered that she’d ever found his eyes cold when they could look like molten silver. “No, I suppose I don’t know for certain.” His hand, still resting on her back, suddenly felt like fire, sparks exploding through her whenever his fingers shifted even slightly, and she swayed in his grasp. “But I do know you, Miss Granger, at least a bit at this point, and you are... curious, brilliant, deeply passionate about a wide range of subjects, throwing yourself headlong into whatever you touch. All of which seem to point far from... frigidity.” She shivered, looking up at him in wonderment at the way he’d described her, not just the words but the restrained vehemence in his tone, the urgency in his gaze, and she licked her lips in hesitation, felt his gaze drop to watch the motion of her tongue, felt herself grow dizzy again -

When the bartender reappeared, clearing his throat. “Sir, madam, unfortunately we will be closing in five minutes. If you could -” he paused, appearing to prefer if they filled in the blanks themselves, and Hermione stepped back from Lucius with a flush, wiping at her eyes fiercely.

“Certainly,” Lucius said, stepping forward and pulling a coin purse out of his pocket. Hermione started to protest, but he’d dropped a large number of clinking coins into the hand of the bartender, far more than Hermione knew was needed to cover even the several glasses of wine she’d ordered, and was shaking the bartender’s hand, telling him “Your discretion is much appreciated,” and Hermione wisely kept her mouth shut and let herself be lead outside.

“Do you have... somewhere to go?” he asked, delicately, and Hermione nodded as she wrapped her arms around herself to shield herself from the cold.

“I’ll go to Harry and Ginny’s, they’re at Twelve Grimmauld Place. Oh, thank you,” she muttered, as he deftly unwrapped his cloak and handed it to her. Without his customary cloak to impede her view, she noticed the way that the soft woolen sweater he was wearing clung tightly to his broad frame, which was starting to look more like the solidly built man she recalled from all those years ago than the leaner shell she’d seen in Flourish and Blotts.

“There’s a public Floo outside of the post office, which should still be open. May I escort you?” he said, wrapping one long arm around her waist as she stumbled over a loose cobblestone.

“Yes, thank you... I’m sorry, I... I don’t normally drink this much,” she said, face flushing. He gave her an odd look as the two of them continued their way down the deserted streets of Hogsmeade.

“You had a deeply distressing experience, and you dealt with it in a not uncommon way. There’s nothing to apologize for or be ashamed of, Miss Granger.”
“Hermione,” she blurted out suddenly, feeling his grip tighten on her waist. “Call me Hermione, please.”

He smiled at her, that small smile that stretched all the way across his face and made his eyes crinkle and the left side of his mouth tug up just slightly more than the right, and she stumbled again as her breath caught in her throat. He pulled her slightly closer to him, and Hermione smiled to herself as he nodded. “Very well then, Hermione.”

They reached the post office, and Hermione handed back the cloak, trying to tamp down the ache she felt at the loss of the warmth and scent that reminded her so much of the cloak’s owner.

“Well,” he said, sounding awkward for the first time in their very odd evening. “... If you ever need anything, in the future, a place to go... Malfoy Manor will be open to you. I’ll set the wards to let you in.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, reaching up on tiptoe to wrap her arms around his neck, burying her face in his soft jumper just to feel his solid presence again, head swimming a bit at the idea that he would open his home to her whenever she were in need, that she might need it in the future if she and Ron were to have another fight like this, that (strangely) she wouldn’t hesitate to run to Malfoy Manor, because she’d be running away from Ron not to the place Malfoy Manor, but to the man who was its lord. He hesitantly wrapped his arms around her, one hand brushing ever so lightly, almost certainly accidentally, against her exposed midriff, but Hermione felt all of her awareness sharpen to that one stretch of rib, to the feel of his fingers against her skin, certain she was so suddenly focused on that touch that she could recreate his fingerprint.

“And... don’t forget what I told you earlier. Please. You are... so much more than that,” he said, so softly she almost didn’t hear it, but she did, and she squeezed him tightly, thinking of what he had told her, of how he saw her - passionate, headstrong, curious, so much more than she saw in herself - and the fierce look in his eyes when he’d said it.

She raised her gaze to meet his and found him staring at her with that odd expression again, eyes not cold iron but soft grey, like her favorite jumper, and without thinking, because if she’d been thinking she’d have run far, far away from that look, she leaned up and pressed her lips against his, her eyes drifting closed. After a moment she pulled away, hesitantly, eyes finding his to see that soft grey had sharpened into swirling molten silver again, and he took in a deep breath, his hand brushing against her rib cage again, sparks shooting down her spine, and she pushed forward again, this time leaving no moment for hesitation, pressing her whole body against him, one hand reaching around to cup the back of his neck, and for the longest space between two heartbeats, when she didn’t feel him respond, she almost despaired, but then he was pressing back, his mouth opening so that the kiss turned sloppy and hot, his hand gently stroking the bare skin of her ribs cage, and he tasted like whiskey and coffee and caramel and the darkest chocolate, sweet and bitter in equal measure, and Hermione was desperate for it, her arms pulling him closer to her, spearing through his hair and relishing in the soft groan he gave as she ran her nails over his scalp. Then she pressed against him again, and she felt him against her stomach, long and hard and hot, and she whimpered against his mouth, her body suddenly on fire, the ache between her legs unmistakeable and unbearable, because it was so much better than she’d allowed herself to imagine, and he thought she was passionate and brilliant and amazing, and his hand was just brushing the curve of her breast and his hair was wrapped around her hand and his scent was all around her and she was suddenly pressing up against the heat of him, pressing her hips forward to grind desperately against him, but with a soft, broken groan he pushed her away.

She stopped, breathing heavily, taking in the sight of him, a sight she knew would be indelibly seared into her mind and would’ve been, eidetic memory or no - impeccable blonde hair tousled,
lips red and swollen, eyes glazed and burning hot, chest heaving, arousal evident through his trousers. He was astounding. But then he was speaking.

“...I’m sorry, Hermione, I’m so sorry. You’re drunk.”

And, swearing under his breath, he grabbed a handful of Floo powder and, pushing her in as he threw it at her feet, said “Twelve Grimmauld Place”, turning away from her shocked expression to rub a hand heavily across his face as she spun into oblivion.
Hermione stumbled forward out of the Potters’ fireplace with a cough, her mind a blur, still struggling to comprehend the events of the past few minutes. Out of the corner of her vision she saw Harry and Ginny, who had been sitting in separate armchairs, each leap to their feet and rush forward to catch her stumble.

“Hermione! Thank Merlin, we’ve been worried sick,” Harry said, rushing forward to clasp her to him in a tight hug. “Ron stopped by earlier -”

“Oh, did he?” Hermione interrupted sharply.

Harry took a steadying breath and took a step back from her before continuing. “- and mentioned you’d had a fight, so we were expecting you, but that was ages ago, and he said you’d apparated and we were afraid you’d splinched yourself somewhere.”

He paused to draw breath and Hermione took in his tousled hair and sleepy emerald eyes, waiting for the familiarity of this, of Harry and Ginny and Grimmauld Place, to calm her down, but she was still drunk, angry at the thought of Ron coming here, no doubt telling Harry and Ginny a story in which she was the villain, and she desperately just wanted to be somewhere quiet and alone so that she could sort out her jumbled mess of thoughts and emotions about Lucius Malfoy.

“I went to get a drink,” she said curtly, ignoring Harry’s slightly hurt look at her tone, but then Ginny was laughing brightly, looking at her with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

“Oh, I can smell. Either that or you rolled around in some wine.” Hermione shot Ginny a glare, but
the younger witch just laughed again.

“How did you... I’m glad you made it here alright,” Harry said hesitantly, unsure what to make of this strange, drunk, angry Hermione. She decided to answer his unspoken question.

“Lucius Malfoy helped me.”

She took no small pleasure in the way Harry’s face blanched and he began coughing, but noticed Ginny giving her a look she’d have described as warning if she’d been sober. It seemed like Ginny had been true to her word - Harry was shocked at her mention of Lucius.

“I’m sorry, Hermione, it’s late and I must’ve misheard you, but I thought you said that Lucius Malfoy helped you.”

Hermione nodded, keeping her face and tone carefully neutral and bored. “Yes, Lucius Malfoy. He’s on Elphias Doge’s cultural committee with Andromeda and I.”

Harry’s brow was furrowing and he looked like he was going to continue this line of interrogation when Ginny interrupted. “C’mon, Hermione, you’ve had a long night and I’m sure you must be exhausted. Let’s get you up to a spare bedroom and we can discuss your knight in dark armor in the morning.”

Hermione made as if to protest, but then Ginny had her by the hand and was dragging her up the stairs to one of the many guest bedrooms in the old house. Once they were safely inside, with the door shut, Ginny whirled on Hermione with a fierce glare.

“You reek of wine and you look like you’ve been snogged senseless.” Hermione blanched and fell back onto the bed, head falling forward into her waiting palms. “Don’t worry, Harry’s only the least observant bloke alive when it comes to that stuff, but you were pushing it with mentioning Lucius Malfoy.”

Hermione lifted her head, but Ginny put up a hand to silence her. “Tell me what happened with Ron. He wouldn’t tell us, which means he must’ve might a right royal mess of it.”

Hermione shifted uncomfortably on the bed, her lips drawing thin. “Well, we were both drunk, and we just... we got kicked out of the concert, and then got into an argument and yelled at each other...” She hesitated, looking up at Ginny, all of the anger she’d been feeling earlier drained out of her and replaced with a burning sense of shame. Ginny was Ron’s sister, and, more importantly, annoyingly perceptive lately; she didn’t want to admit to Ginny what had really happened only for Ginny to see the truth of it - that Ron’s touch made her blood run cold, that she was the one keeping them from having a healthy sexual relationship, that Ron was right about her.

Ginny frowned at her. “Got kicked out of the concert? And yelled at each other about what? Tell me everything, Hermione, or I swear to Merlin I will sit here asking you all night and then I’ll send Gwenog after you when I’m shit at practice in the morning because I’ve had no sleep.” The redhead’s face was set determinedly, and Hermione sighed, too tired and too drunk to argue with her friend, so she spilled the whole story - getting drunk at the concert, Zabini’s antics, Ron taking the bait, their yelling match, and then what he’d said about her. By the end, Ginny’s hands were clenched into fists.

“The prat. I’ve got to tell Harry, he’ll go talk some sense into him.”

“Ginny, no, please, don’t tell Harry,” Hermione pleaded, suddenly afraid that now Harry, too, would know that there was something wrong with her. “Please, let it be another of our secrets.”
Ginny shot her a sidelong look, lips pursed. “I’m sorry, Hermione. I can’t promise that, not about this - it’s not okay, and Harry should know this about Ron.”

Hermione bit her lip, looking up at Ginny nervously, who just shook her head. “Not budging on this one, ‘Mione. But I won’t do it until the morning. You look a wreck, you should get to bed.”

Hermione sighed in agreement, and, finally taking in her surroundings, suddenly glanced around the room, noticing the piles of books on the nightstand and scattered dirty clothes on the floor. “Um, Gin, are we... in the right bedroom?”

Ginny flushed slightly, noticing Hermione’s look. “Sorry, this is the nicest bedroom, we haven’t quite gotten all the portraits down from the others, which is obviously a problem because you’re Muggleborn and the Black portraits are the literal worst, but, uh... sometimes when Harry gets home late from assignment and I have early practice he just sleeps here so he doesn’t wake me.” The explanation rolled off of her tongue easily, casually, but Hermione noticed that the glass of water on the bedside table didn’t look old, there was a very recent Quidditch magazine on the end table, and the pile of dirty clothes was large. She frowned as she wondered how often the Potters slept separately, but resolved that she’d caused enough trouble for one night. Tomorrow would be a better day to talk to Ginny about her marital problems.

“Thanks, Gin,” she said as the redhead moved to the door.

Ginny shot her a warm smile back. “Anytime. You’re always welcome here, Hermione.”

Quickly changing into the pajamas Ginny had pulled out to lend her, Hermione climbed into bed with a heavy sigh, and though she’d worried that she wouldn’t be able to sleep at all, just lay awake plagued with worries, the thought itself had barely drifted through her head before she was spiraling into a heavy sleep.

* * *

Hermione woke up the next morning with a pounding headache and a prickly, dry mouth. The leftover smell of wine she’d spilled on her jeans, which were lying crumpled in the corner of the room, made her cover her mouth as she gagged. She rolled over, groaning, to see a bottle of Pepperup Potion sitting on the nightstand, together with a sealed letter and a hastily scribbled note on top. Silently blessing the Potters, Hermione pulled the potion over to her and gulped it greedily, sighing in relief as the pounding dissipated and the world came into clearer focus. Her mind once again able to concentrate on things other than not vomiting, Hermione pulled the notes over and sat up to examine them.

The one on top was in Ginny’s handwriting and familiar brief, expressive way of speaking.

Hey Hermione, had to run to early practice. Gwenog’s a bitch. Left you a Pepperup Potion (you’re welcome). Daedalus dropped a letter off for you this morning from your Romanian pen pal. Harry was still in bed. Let me know if you need anything. Harry should be around. You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like.

Brow furrowed, Hermione hastily shoved Ginny’s note to the side and frantically opened the other letter. Why had he owled her at Harry and Ginny’s? He knew she would be here of course, but he didn’t know that Ginny knew - what if Harry had seen? She had the niggling suspicion that there was something there, something she had the clues for, she wasn’t seeing quite yet, and then it was overcome and forgotten as she realized, with a rush of cold guilt, that maybe he assumed she’d told her dearest friends about him. Not, of course, the inappropriate feelings she was harboring for the tall blonde wizard, but their correspondence, their friendship (she felt comfortable calling it that, at
this point). Maybe he’d assumed she wasn’t hiding him like a dirty secret, which, of course, she was.

She groaned, feeling nauseous again as another wave of guilt overtook her, and opened the letter.

_H,

*Apologies for the early owl, but I wanted to ensure you’d arrived safely.*

There were several scratched out attempts at the start of the next sentence before the letter continued.

*I won’t have my skills as a rescuer called into question. I find I must apologize for my behavior last night. You were upset and not in your right mind, and I would not wish to have ever made you feel uncomfortable or jeopardized our correspondence and, I believe, friendship. Please forgive my transgressions.*

_Yours, L_

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek, feeling tears beginning to prickle at the corners of her eyes and her vision start to swim. It made no sense, no sense - she was the one who had committed the transgressions, she was the one who had kissed him, and here he was apologizing? She grabbed a pillow off the bed and screamed into it. Everything felt like it was coming off the rails, she felt like she had all the pieces to a puzzle but didn’t know the answer, like her world was tilting off its axis, and Lucius, who had always been so brilliant and logical and sometimes surprising but always in that clever way of his, was making no sense.

Unless, she realized, sitting up with a start, her breath beginning to come faster as the thought seeped into her chest with a cold hollow ache. Unless he was giving her an out. She had committed the transgressions, but his letter gave her the opportunity to “forgive” him and forget about it all. She wouldn’t have to say a thing about her reasons, have to have any conversation at all, and - on the one hand, it was a blessing, Hermione’s head had been spinning all night over what she might possibly say to Lucius in the morning, how she could possibly resume their correspondence, whether he would let her simply pretend it hadn’t happened, an endless carousel of what-ifs and maybes. But on the other hand, it meant... it meant he didn’t want to talk about it, then, and in this upside down letter was he actually forgiving her? For... for being out of her right mind, for being upset and kissing him and making him feel uncomfortable? The knot in the pit of her stomach grew tighter, as she realized that maybe she had made him feel uncomfortable, had pushed their relationship to a place that existed only in her head - she’d been reading too much into his words, the brush of his touch, the slightest shifts in his eyes. And he’d responded to her kiss, of course, but he was a healthy man, in his prime for Wizarding age, and she’d flung herself at him. And he... he didn’t want to jeopardize their friendship, which, of course, she had done with her silly, silly crush. She felt a sob choking her again, and she crumpled the parchment in her fist as she stared up at the ceiling, trying to blink back tears.

She heard a knock at the door and, sniffling, called “Come in!” Harry stuck his head gingerly through the cracked door, shooting her a lopsided smile, though his eyes were still hesitant.

“Hey, ’Mione... How are you?” he said softly, opening the door the rest of the way now that he’d confirmed she was dressed and wasn’t ready to hex him.

She shrugged slightly, shoving the parchment into the loose pocket of Ginny’s pajama pants with a subtle movement. “The Pepperup Potion Gin left helped,” she said with a wobbly smile, and Harry humored her with a small chuckle. “Did... Did Ginny tell you what happened?” she asked
hesitantly.

Harry nodded, his brow furrowing. “She woke me up before she left for practice. I... We... I’m sorry, ‘Mione. Ron’s my best friend, but... so are you, and that... wasn’t okay.”

Hermione nodded softly, vaguely aware that she had begun to cry again, which only made her want to cry harder in frustration at the fact that she couldn’t seem to contain her emotions. Harry perched beside her on the bed, wrapping his arms around her in a hug.

“How you still want to work things out with him?” Harry asked gently.

Hermione paused, thinking through his question. Six months ago, there would have been no hesitation - she and Ron, for all their faults, were it. They were soulmates. They’d been through so much together, how could they not be? And, as she thought about it, that hadn’t changed. So she’d had a crush on Lucius Malfoy. So what? He clearly saw what she had not, at first, that it was impulsive and irrational and not going anywhere, just a flight of fancy. She needed to stop dreaming about grey eyes that did not and would not ever belong to her and focus on her relationship with Ron. Ron, who’d always been there for her, even when he sometimes slipped up and treated her poorly. Like when he’d ignored her for months third year over Crookshanks and Scabbers (well, Peter Pettigrew, but no one had known that at the time), but then had done all of the research for Buckbeak’s appeal so that she could rest. It was Ron. He was safe, familiar, comfortable, home, loving, Ron. She found herself nodding slowly, turning to look at Harry.

He looked hesitant. “Alright, Hermione. You know Gin and I will support you no matter what.” He gave her another hug and then stood up. “Now, can I get you some tea and we can talk about whatever you were talking about last night? Lucius Malfoy helped you here?” His tone expressed his clear disbelief, and Hermione shifted uncomfortably. The last thing she wanted to do was talk about her ill-advised drunken comments last night with Harry, especially without Ginny to distract him and divert the conversation.

“I... I don’t know. I should probably go home and talk to Ron.”

Harry frowned slightly, his green eyes reflecting worry and confusion. “Are you sure, Hermione? You don’t want to stay any longer?”

Hermione shook her head, lips pressed tightly together. It was a lie, of course - she would have loved nothing more than to hide in Harry and Ginny’s guest bedroom for the rest of her life, never having to confront the choices she’d made, but she wasn’t a Gryffindor for nothing. “Thanks Harry, but no, I... Ron and I should really talk.”

Harry nodded slowly before he moved towards the door. “Okay, if you say so, ‘Mione. Let me know if you need anything, okay? I’ll be down in the study working on some paperwork. You can use the Floo whenever you’re ready to leave.”

As the door shut behind him, Hermione sighed and pulled the crumpled piece of parchment from Lucius out of her pocket. She frowned at it, worrying at her bottom lip furiously, before she finally reached over for her wand and incinerated it. With a weary look on her face, she stood up and began packing up her things to head home to Ron.

* * *

When she stepped out of the fireplace in her living room, the first thing she noticed was Ron pacing back and forth down the hall, head in hands, muttering to himself. The second thing she saw was that the living room and kitchen were absolutely covered in flowers and books, large bouquets
covering every surface of the room, which left the floor for the stacks and stacks of books that
were scattered throughout the room, titles she recognized from her wish list at Flourish and Blotts,
and she must’ve made some sort of startled gasp, because Ron whirled toward her, his face
stricken and pale.

“‘Mione, ‘Mione, oh thank Merlin. I’m so glad to see you, I’m so so sorry.” He made as if to reach
toward her, but then seemed to think better of it, and simply ran a hand through his hair, drawing in
a shuddering breath. “I didn’t know how to make it up to you, so first I got flowers, but then I
realized that was stupid, because you’re not just any girl, you’re Hermione, so I went to Flourish
and Blotts and got you all the books you’ve been wanting, but then that didn’t seem like enough so
I wrote to everyone, all the Weasleys and all my mates from the pub and everyone in the Auror
office and told them to go to the Ministry Yule Ball so that they can hear about the big initiative
your cultural committee is planning, and then I’ll tell them to go to that too, and...” Ron continued
talking, his voice anxious and fast-paced, but Hermione couldn’t hear him because she suddenly
burst into tears, burying her head in her hands.

Ron trailed off, stepping forward and hesitantly placing a hand on her shoulder, and the moment
brought back a memory of Lucius doing the same last night, which only served to redouble her
tears, because he’d been so kind and she’d of course had to kiss him and he’d of course not wanted
her, and now Ron was being sweet, trying so hard, and it was all so overwhelming and all she
could do was cry. When she didn’t recoil from him, Ron stepped closer and pulled her to him,
letting her cry against him, murmuring apologies into her hair all the while. She let him lead her to
the couch and laid down against him as he turned a program on the television, a science
documentary, but she just closed her eyes and let herself forget about everything that had happened,
let the BBC narrator’s soothing tones lull her into a deep, dreamless sleep.

She woke up to Ron shaking her gently, the faint red-tinged light streaming in from the window
letting her know she’d slept until early evening. “‘Mione, I have to run in to the office for a bit.
Will you be alright here without me?”

She looked up at his familiar face, so creased with concern, and she managed to put her features
together into a reassuring smile. “Of course. I’m sorry I fell asleep, I’m just tired. Maybe I’ll start
on one of the books you got me.” She could see the relief on his face as he leaned down and placed
a kiss on her forehead before he disappeared from the room. Her eyes fluttered closed, but she
couldn’t manage to fall back asleep again, nor to will herself to get off of the couch and begin
reading one of the books that Ron had brought her.

She thought she might have dozed off briefly, because she was woken from her stupor by a
familiar tapping at the window. She jumped up and ran to the window, her heart thudding
erratically in her chest as she grabbed the letter from the familiar eagle owl. Instead of its usual
chuffed look, it paused, tilting its head at her curiously, hooted softly once, and then flew away.
Hermione sighed heavily, unable to be much bothered by the owl’s odd behavior when she didn’t
know what was awaiting her in the the letter. She tore it open, eyes scanning it for she didn’t even
know what.

H,

If you make me admit I’m worried about you, my image will be ruined. Do me the favor of simply
letting me know I’m being ridiculous and my reputation as a cold bastard will remain only slightly
tarnished.

L

She sighed, and crumpled the note before throwing it into the fire. She didn’t know what she could
say to him. She knew what she should say to him, which was to apologize for her actions and take advantage of the gracious opening he’d given her to let them move on, apologies given and friendship intact and act as if nothing untoward had happened at all. But it would feel so final, and, deep down, she knew she was waiting for something else to happen, something to shake her out of the set of choices she had laying before her. But nothing was forthcoming, and she found herself falling back onto the couch again, her eyes drifting closed as she blissfully forgot her dilemmas in sleep.

* * *

The next day found her in a similar fugue-like state all morning, though she managed to eat toast and coffee while she read one of the books Ron had bought her - a novel, not anything academic, which just made her think of what Lucius would think of the text, and then her heart would ache and she would feel foolish and guilty and mad at herself, and tears would prick at her eyes, and - so she had settled on a mystery novel.

It occupied her until she and Ron left for the Burrow, where she plastered a smile on her face and managed to let the normal Weasley chatter cover her still-fragile mood, doing her best to avoid Harry and Ginny, who had twin worried looks on their faces every time they glanced her direction. After dinner, though, Andromeda asked her if they could speak outside, about something to do with the cultural committee, and Ron, who had floated by her side all night, gave her a shrug and a gentle smile.

Once outside, though, Andromeda rounded on her.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at, but it needs to stop.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open, her brain still too foggy to keep up with the conversation. “I’m sorry, Andromeda, but I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Andromeda rolled her eyes, her lips tight, and the glare she shot Hermione reminded her for a flash of her sister. “I know about your correspondence with Lucius.”

Hermione blanched, heart pounding as she wondered just how much Andromeda knew about her correspondence with Lucius. “What did he tell you?”

Andromeda must have taken in Hermione’s panicked face and the dark circles under her eyes, because she sighed, the fire in her dark eyes dying out. “He came over to see Teddy and I and started skirting around questions about you, about how you’d been, if I’d seen you in the past few days. It was the least subtle he’s been in decades.”

At that image, and Andromeda’s exasperated tone, Hermione unconsciously grinned slightly, and Andromeda’s face softened further before she continued.

“Of course I confronted him, and he admitted you struck up a bit of correspondence, and that he found you drunk and upset, helped you to Harry and Ginny’s, and hadn’t heard from you since.” Hermione flushed slightly, glad that Andromeda either didn’t know or wasn’t bringing up the kiss. “He’s worried about you, Hermione,” Andromeda continued gently.

Hermione sighed heavily, bringing a hand up to rub against her temples. “I know, I know. It’s just been a bit of an overwhelming couple of days, and I’ve been feeling under the weather. I’m sorry you had to be dragged into all of this.”

The older woman gave Hermione a small smile. “It’s no trouble at all, though my preference would
be not to play owl post between you two ever again.” Hermione laughed at that, and Andromeda’s smile grew. “No offense meant, but, Hermione, you look terrible. Maybe you should go home and get some sleep?”

Hermione looked at the motherly concern in the other woman’s eyes and nodded, feeling herself yawn at just the thought of climbing into bed. “Maybe you’re right. I’ll go make my goodbyes.”

After she’d drifted into the Burrow and begged an early departure, saying she was tired and had to get into the office early the next morning, Hermione made her way home, eyes already feeling tired, as if the mere acknowledgement that she could sleep soon had given her body permission to make its need known. She was stopped from going directly into the bedroom, however, by the sound of an angry hoot from the window, where Lucius’ owl sat, glaring at her. She walked over and opened it, taking the letter, but instead of flying off the owl merely settled onto the outer sill, fluffing its feathers and fixing her with a sharp look. She supposed he was supposed to be waiting for her return letter, and she flushed, remembering Andromeda’s words.

She tore open the letter and wasn’t sure if she wanted to laugh or cry. She did a little of both.

H,

If you don’t reply, I’ll be forced to take drastic measures to make sure you’re not seriously ill or being held captive by the ginger Neanderthal.

L

She waved a hand at Daedalus, who was pecking at something on the windowsill (or maybe was just trying to annoy her), and muttered hold on, hold on as she rummaged around for a quill. With it finally in hand, she smoothed out the parchment Lucius had written on and scribbled a reply on the bottom.

L,

Apologies for the delay, though now I’m sad I’ll never get to see what your drastic measures were. I’m fine, simply tired and a bit under the weather. The not-a-Neanderthal doesn’t have me captive.

She paused, the quill shaking in her trembling hand as she considered what to write next. A few drops of ink spilled onto the parchment and she shook her head, clearing her thoughts as she pressed quill to parchment once again.

As for your letter of Saturday morning, I’m afraid the apologies should all be mine, as were the transgressions. You’d make me inestimably happy if you could, in forgiveness, read tomorrow what will be I’m sure a much inferior to usual letter with my thoughts on the Touchstone astronomy text you leant me and pretend that I haven’t kept it far too long to be polite.

Yours always, H

She didn’t know what had possessed her to sign it yours always, but it rang true and in any event scribbling it out now would look even worse. She sighed and pressed it into the outstretched claw of the eagle owl, who gave her an imperious hoot before taking off into the night. Suddenly overwhelmed with fatigue, Hermione made her way down the hall and crawled into bed, surrendering quickly to sleep.

Chapter End Notes
SO this was a bit of a 'yelling NO HERMIONE NO at the computer screen' kind of chapter, I think, but, guys, the course of true love never did run smooth! We need some downs to get to our ups.
So Long a Letter

Chapter Summary

Ron has a surprise for Hermione.

Chapter Notes

As promised, a reasonable-length chapter! And a quick update! Assuming vacation stays on track, I'm on track to have another couple of quick updates for you, so we'll get through a couple of longer chapters with a lot of plot movement (and more Hermione/Lucius and Hermione/Ginny interaction!) by the end of next week.

So Long a Letter

The weeks of December passed quickly. Hermione had settled back into her usual routine of work, date nights, cultural committee, and Lucius, but the feverish energy that had filled her not so long ago hadn’t returned. Instead, she felt like she was still a little in the fog that had passed over her after the events of that fateful weekend, unable to fully shake it off. Ron, if he noticed, didn’t say anything, though he continued to be a somewhat kinder, gentler version of the Ron she was familiar with, and she caught a flash of guilt in his eyes when he thought she wasn’t looking. Lucius - she hated that, even after all that happened, she couldn’t help but compare the two in her head - noticed, skirted around the issue in every letter, pushed his arguments past the point of sense to try to get a rise of out her, argued vigorously against proposals he knew she supported, even when it meant he ultimately reversed his position to support good ideas, anything to try to shake her out of her fog. The fact that he was so kind, such a good friend to her, only made her feel more guilty about the way she’d flung herself at him, so willing to assuage her own ego by assuming he was interested in her. His wife had only been dead a little over a year, and Hermione paled in comparison to that ghost, and yet she’d had the audacity to think that because he’d taken care of her when she was in need that he - what? Had a crush on her too?

She avoided his eyes in committee meetings, even as she felt the weight of Andromeda’s disapproving stare, hurrying home to where Ron waited with a warm, friendly smile and attempts at stimulating conversation, though ones that blissfully didn’t require her entire focus. She pasted a smile on her face. She told herself she was happy. This was what she had wanted since she was fifteen and had begun to notice Ron’s easy smile and the way his laugh made her heart skip a beat. How could she not be happy?

A week before Christmas, the night before the Ministry’s Yule Ball, Ron told her that she should take off work, because he had a surprise for her. She accepted, though she could only muster a modicum of curiosity as to the nature of the surprise. Normally, she hated surprises, spent all of her mental energy figuring them out - Ron wasn’t exactly a tightly shut book - but she was too busy trying to wrangle her emotions into a more manageable state than the chaotic mess they had exploded into after the night of the Weird Sisters concert. She wished there were a potion for emotions, something like a Sleakeazy’s, that she could use to smooth the frizzy and fraying ends of
her thoughts into sleek, tame strands, the way she did her hair.

Her heart thumping oddly in her chest, the day before Ron’s surprise she looked down at her return letter to Lucius, a neat and tidy paragraph on Muggle theories about Stonehenge (they’d gotten themselves into a real rabbithole on ancient magic, which she had surmised was one of Lucius’ particular areas of interest), and, face flushing, scribbled a postscript at the bottom. That may have gotten her into this mess in the first place, but the idea of him sending letters that were returned undelivered all day, him worrying about her again, made a dull ache suffuse the general area of her chest.

*PS. I may be delayed or unable to answer your owl tomorrow. Ron has a surprise for me, one of which I am for once entirely ignorant. I hope my note above provides sufficient thoughts to make up for a day of absence.*

She sent the letter off and lay back on the couch, picking up one of the books Ron had gotten her from Flourish and Blotts. With a flush of shame, she realized it was on ancient communities of witches and wizards and their cultures and practices. It was a topic she’d always been interested in, but she couldn’t lie to herself and say that her choice of reading material had nothing to do with the blonde who’d been most recently on her mind. Her thoughts distracted and her mind aflutter, she’d only made it through a handful of pages when her owl returned, though carrying a return letter. Hermione frowned and tore it open, wondering at his instantaneous reply.

*H,*

*Never fear. Each and every one of your letters is alone more than sufficient to keep my thoughts occupied for as long as I could wish, though I of course regret not to hear more sooner. I do think I will never manage to hear all the thoughts in that inexhaustible brain of yours, much as I might try. I hope your surprise is a pleasant one, though forgive me some pessimism when it comes to the brute. Remember my offer - you will always have a place to go should you need it.*

*Yours always, L*

She turned away from the window, flushing deeply. A deep secret part of her was thrilling his praise, imagining that odd, intense look on his face as he said he would try to hear all the thoughts in her *inexhaustible brain,* but the rational Hermione tried very hard to tamp those down. She couldn’t let her mind run away like that, not again. He was trying to make her feel better after her apologies about missing their regular correspondence, and he was worried on her behalf after the last of her interactions he’d heard with Ron. He was being a good friend. Nothing more. Nevertheless, instead of burning the letter like she usually did, she folded it carefully and tucked it into the pages of the Twilburg book. Ashamed of her sudden sentimentality, she ran a hand through her hair and rushed to bed.

* * *

The next day dawned, and for once Ron was up early, looking like a kid on Christmas morning. He’d made coffee and breakfast, and Hermione smiled faintly, though a suspicious unsettled stirring had started in her chest at Ron’s out of character actions. After breakfast, he announced the surprise - they were going to Hogwarts, to watch the last Quidditch match of the term, Gryffindor vs Slytherin, together with Harry, Ginny, Neville, Luna, all of their friends. Hermione smiled, a genuine one for the first time in a while, as she thought of Hogwarts, that familiar castle that had been her home, and all of her friends all together once again. Her world had felt so off-balance, so out of tune, that maybe being back in a familiar place would help.

They dressed quickly after breakfast, Hermione draping an old Gryffindor scarf around her neck,
before they made their way to Hogsmeade and from there up to the castle. Hermione could’ve cried and the sight of all of them, together, hugged Neville and Luna so tightly that Neville chuckled uncomfortably and Luna asked her if she had a Wrackspurt infestation. Hermione stayed in high spirits throughout the game, enjoyed listening to Ginny analyze each and every play with an expert eye and Harry and Ron’s amiable chatter about old acquaintances, laughed at the way that Luna cheered every time either team scored a goal, discussed eagerly with Neville his apprenticeship with Professor Sprout. For a few hours, she could almost imagine herself back at Hogwarts, that she was the girl she had been, who had wanted nothing more than to belong, to have these brave friends of hers to support her and love her, and when everything had been straightforward and enough.

Cheeks rosy with the cold and sore from smiling after cheering Gryffindor to a close win, she let Ron lead her away from the stadium on a walk around the grounds. They approached the lake and Hermione sighed happily, turning to gaze out at the picturesque scene of the Hogwarts castle blanketed in snow, finally rebuilt and whole, as peaceful and welcoming as she remembered it being as a child. She heard a soft cough from behind her, and turned around to see that Ron was on one knee, his hand fumbling in his pocket.

Her heart stopped.

“Hermione,” Ron began, his eyes shining up at her as he pulled something from his pocket.

She wanted to stop him, wanted to run, but her throat seemed closed and her limbs seemed leaden. She’d thought they were waiting. She’d thought she had time, time, always more time before this moment had to come and things had to change. Random images floated to the top of her brain. The glitter of the golden Time Turner she’d had in her third year. Ginny’s voice months ago. Things will have to change... I want everything to go on, just as it is right now. The tense moment right before she’d tipped the Time Turner quite all the way.

“Hermione, you’ve been my best friend. You’ve fought beside me, taught me basically everything I know, inspired me to see and care about injustice, even wear a badge that says SPEW, and saved my arse more times than I can count. I know I’m a right bloody idiot half the time, but every morning I wake up amazed that a girl as brave and beautiful as you could ever want to be with me. I love you so much.”

It was beautiful. It was perfectly Ron. Her hands had begun to shake and she could feel her face heating.

“Hermione Granger, would you make me the happiest man alive and be my wife?” He finally presented her with the ring, which was simple, straightforward, with a delicate ruby set against a gold band. His eyes were shining up at her earnestly.

Hermione burst into tears, suddenly overwhelmed. The maelstrom of emotions that she’d carefully managed to contain within the tiny cup of her self seemed to have run over again, turbulent and churning as she replayed Ron’s speech in her head and found herself traitorously wishing that he’d said he wanted to hear every thought in her inexhaustible brain.

She heard a nervous chuckle from her side, and a familiar voice call out, “You know, ‘Mione, you do actually have to say yes for it to count.”

She turned and looked through wide eyes to see a small crowd of people gathered on Hogwarts lawn, watching from a short distance, having just crested the hill before the lake. She recognized Harry, Ginny, Neville, Luna, a sea of Weasleys, including Molly and Arthur’s beaming faces, a smattering of professors, McGonagall even cracking a smile.
A fresh wave of tears threatened to burst and Hermione laughed suddenly, not so much at the comment but at the ridiculousness of it all. She looked down at Ron, still watching her earnestly, and she felt her as if her chest would shatter from the force of her conflicting emotions. It didn’t feel right, the image in her head of her saying yes, hugging all of them, marrying Ron and carrying on as she’d always envisioned things would, figuring out her career and kids and all of that when they came to it. But... but nothing had felt right, not for months, really, not since she’d seen Lucius Malfoy smile at her with that broad, crooked smile, not since she’d realized that she couldn’t bear not to speak to him for more than two days in a row, not since she’d realized that his sharp wit and elegant intellect were the most delicious puzzle. Her world had seemed knocked off its axis, wobbling about as it turned, ready to fall over at the slightest disturbance.

But maybe things could feel right, she thought, looking out at the assembled assortment of friends and family. Hogwarts was her home, these people were her home, this was where she was supposed to be, what she was supposed to be doing. Hogwarts had reminded her of how easy her path had once seemed. Why couldn’t that path still be hers? She cast her gaze across the group and met Ginny’s gaze, noticed that her friend’s brown eyes were wide, expression grave and unsmiling, and she seemed to be subtly shaking her head, but Hermione took in a deep, steadying breath, and turned to Ron.

“No,” she said, simply, afraid if she said more the cold lump in her throat that had formed the moment she’d spoken the word would turn into words better left unsaid and spill out of her, unbidden. She was saved from the possibility as Ron leapt to his feet and crushed her against him in a hug, slipping the ring onto her hand with an ear-splitting grin. At its unfamiliar weight, tears pricked at her eyes again, and she repeated in her head that this was right, this was what she’d always wanted, this was her life, this was her path. She was saved from being much distracted from her task by the crush of people rushing over to hug and congratulate her, all of whom seemed to be satisfied if she smiled distractedly and clung to Ron’s side while looking dazed, maybe muttering a few platitudes about excitement and being overwhelmed. Well, except for Ginny, who hugged Hermione tightly but looked deeply unsatisfied by anything about the events of the afternoon, though she put on a convincing facade in front of everyone but Hermione.

That night, Hermione laid in bed as Ron snored beside her, trying not to think about the awkward and fumbling celebratory sex they’d had earlier that evening. Her body should have still been strung tight with unfulfilled tension, but even that seemed beyond her reach tonight. Instead, her limbs felt heavy and her head throbbed, and she fell into a restless sleep dreaming about molten silver eyes and an endless conversation in which she she said every thought that had ever crossed her mind and those eyes just watched her out of a face that had a crooked smile.
The Incarnations

Chapter Summary

Hermione attends the Ministry's Yule Ball, and has several shocking realizations.

Chapter Notes

Another monster of a chapter, but things are getting really juicy now! Also, in case anyone else needs to be feeling the ball #aesthetic, I didn't have any particular dress in mind when describing Hermione's, but I one hundred percent pictured Ginny in the dress from Atonement every time I thought about this scene, and I listened to SO MUCH Anna Karenina soundtrack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Incarnations

The next morning dawned too early for Hermione’s taste, as she remembered immediately upon waking that that very evening was the Ministry’s Yule Ball. She would have to go, of course, to announce the cultural committee’s initiative, to float around the room on Ron’s arm and socialize with seemingly endless numbers of acquaintances, and she felt herself grow even paler as she realized that their engagement would surely come up. There was no hiding it, not now, not with the ring on her hand, not with Ron so bloody giddy to talk about it, and Hermione rolled over and groaned into her pillow. Would this winter, with its parade of emotional turbulence and eventful weekends, never end?

It was only much later that evening, when she was getting ready and pulled out the dress she’d chosen weeks ago - a more daring number than she’d usually go for, with a plunging neckline and a slit up one side, in a color she recognized with sinking heart as molten silver - that she realized Lucius would be in attendance tonight. He usually made it a point to stay out of the public eye, but they’d debated this very point, his attendance at the Yule Ball to announce their first initiative, and he’d reluctantly agreed to come at her insistence that his presence would help others to see that he had changed and push their cause in front of still skeptical purebloods. And so he’d see her, wearing this dress so clearly chosen for him, and wearing Ron’s ring, and that thought alone made her want to fake a sudden and debilitating illness.

As if summoned by her thought, Ron came into the room, his eyes widening at the gown draped across their bed. “Wow, ‘Mione. If you wear that I think every bloke at this ball is going to wish he were me.” He said it good-naturedly, but Hermione couldn’t help but hear how his compliment of her came back around to him, even though she knew that wasn’t what he’d meant. She caught herself before her inward wince reflected outwardly, and instead gave him a shaky smile in return.

As Ron busied himself with getting ready, Hermione went to the bathroom and took a steadying breath. Lucius had made his views clear, and she’d made her decision. She was not some trembling girl, heartbroken and ashamed and lost (no matter that that was how she’d felt for weeks). She was
Hermione Granger: she’d taken Viktor Krum to her first Yule Ball at 15, she’d defeated the Dark Lord, she was the brightest witch of her age. And she was going to march into this Yule Ball with her head held high, looking as beautiful as she could, and reap the results of her hard-fought work on the cultural committee. No man would stop her from doing that, not Ron Weasley and not Lucius Malfoy.

When she was finished with herself, she took a look at her handiwork in the mirror and was pleased. Her dress was as stunning as it had been a month ago when she’d chosen it, she’d smoothed her hair into an artful updo with messy ringlets falling loose around the nape of her neck, and the unfamiliar makeup she’d carefully applied felt like a costume, felt like armor. She could see the appeal of this. She felt like the kind of woman who could stride into the Ministry Atrium and command the attention of the crowd, never once showing that the weight of the ring on her left hand felt like an anchor full of her doubts. She even felt like a woman who could meet the eye of Lucius Malfoy without showing that her heart still fluttered and ached at what a fool she’d been.

She stepped out to meet Ron, taking a cool, dark pleasure in the way his eye traced her figure with open lust. “Come on, we don’t want to be late,” she said with a small smile that could almost be a smirk, turning abruptly and walking to the Floo, not even glancing over her shoulder to see if he was trailing behind her.

* * *

Hermione’s new attitude lasted for a solid thirty minutes of the Yule Ball, thirty whole minutes, one thousand eight hundred seconds of confident, collected, unruffled Hermione. That Hermione, though, was struggling to make it through a lengthy conversation with a number of Ron’s coworkers in the Auror office, whom Ron was regaling with details of his perfect proposal with one arm slung around her waist possessively. Her head was beginning to throb, her brain feeling stultified by the lack of engaging conversation and the incessant reminder of the day before, when she felt a small, strong hand grab her by the arm and pull her out of Ron’s grasp into a hug. She blinked into a mass of long, red hair and stepped back with a nervous, though truly grateful, smile at seeing Ginny.

“You looked like you needed rescuing,” Ginny said in a mock whisper, laughing as the attention of the assembled Aurors turned to the two women. “Ron, give your poor girl a break and let her go get a drink with me?” At the assorted chuckles, Ron was forced to acquiesce, and Hermione happily trailed Ginny’s form across the ballroom to the drinks table.

“You’re welcome. You did look like you needed rescuing, you know. And you'll definitely need a glass of champagne if you’re going to keep up that fake smile.”

Hermione almost came to a stop but Ginny reached back to tug on her hand and keep propelling them toward the drink table. “I-I... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ginny just shot Hermione a silencing, disdainful look as she grabbed them each a champagne flute, shoving one into Hermione’s hand as they started making their way back to the area where Harry had now joined Ron and the rest of the junior Aurors.

“I’ve known you since we were children, Hermione. I know politely-pretending Hermione smile from genuine Hermione smile, and unlike my brother, I don’t have a vested interest in deluding myself into seeing something that isn’t really there.”
Hermione just flushed in response, but Ginny had paused just out of earshot of the group and whirled around to face her. Hermione was shocked by the look on Ginny’s face, which wasn’t stern or disappointed or even amused, as she’d thought she’d find. Instead, it was... deeply pained, a little desperate.

“Why? Why did you have to say yes? I thought... Just... Ugh! I thought you were supposed to be smarter than me,” Ginny said, and Hermione frowned, brow suddenly furrowed in concentration as she tried to push her brain out of the tired, stressed fog it had been in all month to seize on this, when she heard Ron exclaim loudly enough to be heard over the din of the nearby crowds.

“Are you bloody kidding me? Look who’s here.”

Ginny and Hermione’s heads both swirled to the main entrance to see Lucius and Draco Malfoy enter, nearly identical expressions of cool indifference on their faces, each dressed impeccably in tailored dress robes. Hermione could have sworn she felt Ginny tremble next to her, heard a sharp intake of breath, but before she could ask Ginny about it she heard the swish of cloaks as Harry and Ron approached the pair.

“Are you alright, Gin?” Harry asked gently, and Hermione tore her gaze away from familiar grey eyes that were watching her intently from across the room to look at Ginny, who actually did look slightly odd, her face paler than usual but for the pink flush rising high on her cheeks, her brown eyes shining with an unusual, animated gleam as she watched the pair of pale blonde wizards make their way into the room.

After a moment, she shook herself back into something that more closely resembled her usual self. “Yes, sorry. I don’t know what came over me. It’s just... strange to see them in person, you know, after everything.”

“Of course, Gin. I’m sorry, of course, the diary... I-I didn’t think.” Harry pulled Ginny to him in a tight hug, though Hermione noted, with a stare that was finally sharp and not buried under a fog, that the muscles in Ginny’s back stayed tense and Ginny never confirmed or denied Harry’s eager explanation. Ginny had never once seemed at all perturbed by the mention of Lucius Malfoy when she was talking to Hermione, though she’d said odd things and had had the strangest expression on her face at times; in fact, she’d been supportive, encouraging, said he was lonely. Hermione once again had that frustrating feeling that the puzzle pieces were all within her reach, just not quite in the right shape or order.

She was drawn out of her reverie by the sound of Harry’s voice, oddly sharp, and she flushed, realizing she’d been staring at Ginny with eyes narrowed. “You said he’s on Doge’s cultural committee with you, didn’t you Hermione?”

She blinked, trying to remember when she had told Harry, while Ron gaped at her like a fish flung onto dry land. The memory suddenly trickled into her brain, fuzzy and dull because she had been drunk, drunk and reckless when she’d told Harry that, and though Ginny had said he was clueless Ginny had also said she looked like she’d been snogged senseless, and now Harry was looking at her with his head tilted and that oddly bright gaze he got when he wasn’t quite sure what he was seeing.

“Oh, yes. Andromeda invited him. That must be why he’s here... for the presentation tonight,” she said lamely, looking to Ginny for backup but seeing only that the redhead’s gaze was surreptitiously trailing the two white blonde heads of hair, tall enough to be seen through the crowd.

Ron finally ceased spluttering and formed words. “You - Wha- Why didn’t you ever tell me that,
Hermione?” Ron said, sounding angry and slightly hurt.

Hermione shrugged, trying her very best to shrug back on the cool, confident, unruffled Hermione armor she’d so carefully donned before she arrived. “I’m sorry Ron, I don’t know. It never seemed important. There are loads of people on the committee, and it wasn’t as if I was going to invite him ‘round for tea,” she said, trying to make herself sound slightly amused, as if the thought of having tea with Lucius Malfoy were the most outrageous thing she could think of.

“Well of course not, but still - I just thought,” Ron trailed off lamely, eyes still flashing with anger but unable to articulate any particular reason, simply the feeling that something about the situation should make him upset.

“Don’t be silly, Ron. Hermione’s right,” Ginny finally chimed in, though her voice was distant, distracted, as if her mind was elsewhere.

For a moment tension hung thick in the air between the four, as Ron watched Hermione with barely concealed frustration, Harry kept shooting anxious, confused glances between the two women, Ginny scratched absentmindedly at the thin column of her throat, her eyes darting around the room with a false casualness, and Hermione watched Ginny’s gaze, noting the pauses when it stopped on Lucius and Draco Malfoy before darting along as if to pretend she had never looked at them at all. The moment was broken by the appearance of a dreamy-looking Luna Lovegood, wearing a simple gown in a shocking shade of fuchsia and her familiar radish earrings.

“There you all are. I’ve been looking for you, but I got quite distracted on the way by a crowd of Wrackspurts.” She smiled beatifically at them, as if she was entirely unaware of the awkward moment she’d intruded upon, and then continued in much the same manner, apparently untroubled by the lack of greeting she received as the group shook themselves out of their respective thoughts. “Well, don’t you all look lovely. Gin, you and Hermione look like you could be a matching set, dressed up for Slytherin. This wasn’t a themed party, was it?”

Hermione started, properly noticing for the first time that Ginny’s dress was a vibrant shade of emerald green, which, combined with the silver of her own dress, left them in fact looking quite as Luna had described. She flushed slightly, and Ginny tilted her head, biting a lip as she clearly pondered what to say in response to Luna’s odd observation, when Luna plowed on, happy to carry along the conversation unaided.

“Well, it’s also precisely the color of Harry’s eyes, I think, Gin.” The dreamy blonde gave Ginny a knowing smile, and Ginny blinked, seeming to have regained her lost composure.

“As green as a fresh-pickled toad,” she said with a wry grin, and at that everyone laughed heartily and began to reminisce, the moment of awkwardness past.

* * *

A blessedly brief period of time later, Hermione found herself called to the front of the room, where Elphias Doge already stood, a contented smile on his face as he cleared his throat and looked out at the crowd. Pushing through the curious crowds, Hermione took a place among the assembled committee members next to Andromeda, who gave her a warm smile and an appreciative nod at her dress. Hermione couldn’t take more than a moment’s pleasure at the older witch’s approval before she realized, with a mixture of cold fear and tingling anticipation that shot down her spine and curled low in her stomach, that the spot she’d chosen was directly in front of Lucius. She didn’t even have to look back to know that he was there, could smell his cologne wrapping itself around her and feel the heat of his solid body. Her breathing turned shallow as she noticed him step imperceptibly closer, still not quite touching her but close enough that she could
almost, if not quite, feel the brush of his fine robes, close enough that if she wasn’t quite careful she’d sway backwards and press herself against him, and then she knew she’d be lost.

She could barely focus on Elphias’ speech, she was so preoccupied with Lucius’ proximity and the Herculean task of keeping her face a mask of pleasant contentedness when her mind was racing and her heart was skipping and she wanted to either run from the room or swoon backwards into that intoxicating scent. It was as if her forced limits to her exposure to him had had the opposite effect, and where she’d felt for weeks like she was in a cool, grey fog, now it seemed like every cell in her body was sparkling with electricity, as if the dullness had simply been a pause, replenishing and recharging for this moment when he was near her again, her mind racing, all thoughts down roads that led back to the tall blonde behind her.

She was so intent on controlling herself that she only managed to sharpen her focus back onto the small wizard speaking in front of them long enough to hear the tail end of his speech.

“And, while each and every one of our committee members deserves our deepest gratitude for the work that they’ve put in to bridging the gaps between two important communities in the magical world, it’s come to my attention that one witch in particular is deserving of an altogether different sort of congratulations.”

Hermione suddenly felt herself grow cold, the heat she’d been filled with just moments before fading into icy dread, her heart still pounding but now with a dull, anxious thump. Her wide eyes searched through the crowd, finding Ron grinning wildly at her, and she blinked as if in anticipation of tears, but she was in too much a nervous panic for tears to come. She looked for Ginny in the crowd, but couldn’t find the redhead, and, as mysterious as the her behavior had been, Hermione was suddenly desperate for her friend.

“I think I speak for all of us when I say that I’d like to offer my heartfelt congratulations to Miss Hermione Granger on her engagement to Mister Ronald Weasley.”

Hermione felt Lucius jerk behind her as if he’d been slapped, felt his muscles grow tense, though she knew without looking that his face was a perfect mask of cool civility. Her chest felt tight, and looking out over all of the people, all of them staring at her, clapping, whispering, she heard as if from a distance her breathing grow faster and shallower, almost a pant, felt her chest grow tight, though she was sure she still had a smile pasted on her face. It must look grotesque now, though, with the panic seeping into her eyes. She felt a hand clasp her own, and the sudden warmth startled her out of her spiral - she looked down in surprise to see Andromeda’s hand clasped around her own, the older witch giving her a reassuring squeeze. Hermione flushed in relief, mouthing her thanks across for the witch’s keen eye for Hermione’s discomfort.

After what felt like a lifetime of polite clapping and Doge’s last words, Hermione was finally free to leave the center of the room. She had turned to head to one of the faux balconies that had been created for the evening, her desperate flight already taking her almost to the edge of the room, when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She spun around to see Lucius standing behind her, looking at her with stormy slate grey eyes, and she forgot to breathe for a moment.

“Dance with me, Miss Granger.”

Unable to refuse him, Hermione found herself following helplessly, a small crowd of people taking to the floor as an enchanted orchestra began playing a spirited but tension-filled waltz. She placed one hand on his broad shoulder, trying to remember to breathe as one of his hands wrapped around her waist, and then their free hands were clasped together and they were soaring across the floor.
“I suppose congratulations are in order.” Lucius’ voice was cold and the small smirk on his face didn’t reach his eyes. Hermione clung desperately to his hand and shoulder to keep herself steady as her thoughts raced and their bodies brushed against each other closely, his robes just as soft as she’d imagined they would be.

“I... Yes... Yesterday...” she murmured, barely aware of what she was saying.

“What a pleasant surprise,” he drawled, though the downward twist at the corner of his mouth and his long, drawn-out distortion of the word made it clear exactly how pleasant he found it. Hermione’s lips drew thin, refusing to rise to his obvious bait. She wanted to meet his gaze defiantly, but when she rose her eyes to do so she was taken aback by the intensity in his opaque gaze, which was fixed on her face as if he’d been waiting for her to look at him, and she quickly dropped her eyes to the pounding pulse point in his neck.

“Well? You aren’t going to show off the ring to me? I’m sure it’s spectacular,” he said with a mocking smile, and after a moment in which she merely flushed, avoiding his gaze, her spun her gracefully and unexpectedly through a turn, catching her halfway through and drawing her close, so that her back was pressed against his tall, sturdy frame and her left hand was caught in his grasp. She fought against the shiver that ran down her spine as he leaned over to look at it, strands of his long blonde hair brushing her cheek.

“Oh, my. How... quaint.” Hermione flushed somehow deeper, feeling the color spread down her neck and in splotches across her chest, acutely aware of how small the plain ring must look on her hand, how painfully childish the Gryffindor colors. “Have I become so old that diamonds have gone out of fashion?”

He spun her back around, and Hermione tried to take the opportunity to regain some of her lost footing. “Diamonds are unethical. They’re often mined in conflict zones and—”

He cut her off, and she felt anger rise in her, only to die as he finished her sentence for her. “And are often sold to finance brutal conflicts, yes. Though if I’m not mistaken, Gringotts has developed a process by which it can ensure the legitimate, conflict-free provenance of any diamonds it collects. Though those certified diamonds are rather more expensive than others, if I’m not mistaken.” Hermione wasn’t sure whether she wanted to stomp on his foot or cry at the knowing smirk that flitted across his face, his eyes still glittering steel, even as he swept her around in floating circles, their bodies brushing with every step.

“Nor is that an issue with older diamonds... Oh, but I don’t suppose those sorts of heirlooms are particularly plentiful among the Weasleys.” At his sneer when he said the word, Hermione felt her spine stiffen slightly - if not on Ron’s behalf, on Ginny’s and Bill’s and Percy’s and the rest of the family that were totally blameless in this situation - and found her voice at last.

“Why are you being so cruel?” she said softly, voice shaking slightly. “I thought you were my friend. Do you hate the Weasleys that much?”

His mouth tightened, and she watched his eyes drift shut momentarily, as if he were shoring up some inner reserve. “No, it’s not because I hate the Weasleys. Arthur Weasley is and will always be an imbecile, but some of the others of the family have certain... positive qualities.” Hermione watched his eyes drift across the room, and felt her mouth go suddenly dry as they came to a pause on a familiar petite frame draped in emerald green silk.

Hermione nearly stumbled through the next turn, Lucius’ strong lead the only thing keeping her moving, and she closed her eyes to fight back a sudden flood of emotions. Her mind was a maelstrom of random remembrances, of Ginny’s trembling eyes and high blush when she’d seen
the Malfoys enter, the odd glint in her eye when she’d told her that Lucius was maybe just lonely, the fact that Lucius had owled her at Ginny and Harry’s in the first place, the odd, closed off look on her face whenever the two discussed the older man, and Hermione swallowed heavily several times, feeling a tightness in her throat, because at the eye of the storm that was her mind seemed to be the thought that perhaps the reason that Lucius hadn’t wanted her was that he had wanted Ginny, maybe even had Ginny. At that thought, Hermione found her thoughts growing dark, twisted and gnarled words inside of her springing up to describe the witch who was her closest friend, sharp and angry and cruel in her jealous rage -

But just as suddenly as it had begun, her thoughts whirled to a halt, as her brain reached for that one word - jealous - and turned it over in her mind, looked at the path of her thoughts a moment ago, seeing everything suddenly through a new light.

She was interrupted by the sound of Lucius speaking to her, though his voice had lost much of that hard edge it had had earlier in their dance. “What’s going on in that mind of yours?”

Suddenly bold, flush with her newfound thought, she met his gaze and held it. “You’re jealous, aren’t you?” she breathed, sounding a little surprised at herself for even daring to say it.

He was silent for a long moment, but the shadow that crossed across his face told her the truth of it. Her mouth fell open slightly, and she marveled at the simple fact that it could even be true.

“The brightest witch of your age,” he said, her familiar title sardonic and tinged with sadness in his voice. She clapped him more tightly, her mouth falling open in a small ‘oh’ as her brain raced through the past six months.

“But... your letter, after I kissed you...” His mouth tightened again, and she caught a flicker of emotion in his grey eyes that she would’ve called shame on anyone else, though it looked laughably out of place on a Malfoy’s face. “Oh, you really thought... you really thought you’d done something wrong by kissing me back when I was drunk.”

Her mind racing, she felt her whole body increase pace to keep up, her heart thumping and her feet pressing eagerly on to the next step, tripping ahead as she felt the heady lightness of knowledge.

“He hadn’t meant it that way, had even said it in the same mixture of annoyance and amusement as his earlier words, but the phrase, his voice, the memory of her imaginings in bed, their long proximity, sent a streak of heat through her body straight to her core, and she gasped, swaying slightly in his arms, feeling her eyes grow momentarily heavy and bright with the spike of arousal. She looked up to see him watching her closely, a familiar predatory gleam in his silver eyes, and he tugged her slightly closer to him on the next turn, looking smugly satisfied to feel her sharp intake of breath as they brushed together. When she next chanced a glance at his eyes, they glinted with determination.

“Andromeda told me about the unfortunate situation with your parents,” he said at their next turn, his tone artificially light, and Hermione’s brow furrowed as she waited for him to continue. “I’ve been looking into it, and I may have found something promising - a powerful locator spell. It is, unfortunately, a bit more on the grey side than the magic being taught at Hogwarts; it relies on blood for part of its power. But, subject to a bit more research, it may prove useful to you.” His voice changed suddenly, no longer light but suddenly heavy with meaning. “I wasn’t going to tell you until I was certain, but now...”
He trailed off, looking for a moment uncertain, and Hermione’s breath caught in her throat, hearing the words he was thinking hanging in the silence between them as certainly as if he’d spoken them. *But now that I know there may be a battle to be fought, I intend to fight it, to fight for it, for you.*

He looked as if he was about to give voice to his thoughts, but the music ended and, as the pair stopped moving, Hermione felt a hand wrap around her waist and tug her away from Lucius. Her mouth opened in protest, but the words died in her throat as she realized it was Ron who had wrapped himself around her possessively.

“Malfoy,” he spat, nostrils flaring and face already beginning to turn red. Hermione could smell the mixture of champagne and Firewhiskey on his breath.

“Mr. Weasley,” Lucius answered smoothly but coldly, though now there was an amused glint in his eyes, which stayed focused on Hermione. “I believe congratulations are in order.”

“Sod off, Malfoy. I don’t want your congratulations, and I don’t want your hands on my fiancée either.”

Hermione flushed, and turned to Ron, her voice low. “Ron, it was just a dance, come on. It’s over now, let’s go,” she pleaded, horrified images of a repeat of the Weird Sisters concert flashing through her brain.

“Oh, no, Mr. Weasley, you must have misunderstood me. You see, I merely noted that congratulations were in order, not that I was prepared to bestow them,” Lucius continued smugly. Ron, for his part, looked a tad dumbfounded. “And I believe that unless I am very much mistaken, Miss Granger is an adult and fully capable of dancing with whoever she chooses to. But I see I’ve overtaxed your delicate mind,” he said with an amused smirk at Ron’s blinking eyes and furrowed brow, “so I shall take my leave. Good evening, Miss Granger.” And with that, Lucius, reaching out with all of the self-possession of a born and bred Malfoy, took Hermione’s hand and brushed a kiss across her knuckles, eyes remaining on hers the entire time, and then turned and strode off through the crowd. Hermione watched him go, eyes sparkling as she tried to suppress a smile, before Ron came to his senses and pulled her off to rejoin their group of friends.

* * *

That night, when they’d finally returned home, Hermione had been unable to sleep, her mind turbulent as she picked over the events of the last six months, reexamining each and every word, each and every interaction. The rational part of her mind was screaming that it didn’t matter, it shouldn’t have mattered one whit how Lucius Malfoy felt about her when she decided whether or not to say yes to Ron, but she couldn’t deny the sinking guilt that proved that, whether or not it should have, it had. She had been a fool, despondent over an imagined slight to her already fragile self-esteem, and when Ron had put her there, at Hogwarts, in front of all of those people, she’d grabbed at the easiest path, the one that didn’t require any introspection. She’d been hurting, and Ron had been an easy balm.

She rolled over, trying to pose to herself the counterfactual: would she have said yes to Ron if she’d known? Or, more importantly, would she have said yes to Ron if Lucius Malfoy hadn’t been involved at all? But it was all too tangled to smooth apart, because, of course, she hadn’t seen anything seriously wrong with her relationship with Ron until Lucius Malfoy was involved, hadn’t realized how dissatisfied she was with evenings of gossip and telly, with endless Quidditch matches and clumsy, fumbling sex. Maybe she would’ve come to acknowledge it eventually, maybe only after it was too late and they were married and she was stuck in an unhappy marriage, or maybe she would have gone on, quite content with her life. Maybe she could grow to be content with her life with Ron again, if given time. It was all such a mess.
She thought she dozed briefly, but when she sat up again, outside the window was still only pre-dawn winter darkness. Nevertheless, she knew she wasn’t going back to sleep anytime soon, and meandered out to the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee and read a book, anything to distract from her racing thoughts and intractable problems. She’d settled onto the couch and made it halfway through a trashy period romance when she heard a pop from the fireplace and jumped to see Gwenog Jones’ heard in her fireplace, sloshing lukewarm coffee onto her pajamas. Gwenog winced.

“Sorry, Hermione. Didn’t mean to scare you, but it’s a bit urgent.” Her face was grim, and Hermione’s heart began racing.

“What’s wrong? Is Ginny okay? Is she hurt?”

“No, no, she’s not hurt. I just... need your help with something. You’re her friend, and you care about her, which is why I’m here.” Hermione frowned, puzzling over Gwenog’s words and noting that the older woman had not answered her first question about whether the redhead was okay.

“Sure, Gwenog. Anything you guys need.”

The dark-skinned witch nodded, her face turning serious, reverting to the clipped and efficient tone Hermione was familiar with when she talked about Quidditch and was steering people through her plan. “I need you to go down to Hogsmeade and buy every copy of the Daily Prophet and Witch Weekly that they have, from every shop that sells them.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “Gwenog, what...”

Gwenog interrupted her. “Don’t worry, I’ll reimburse you when you’re done.”

“No, no, that wasn’t what I was asking about. What’s going on here?” Hermione looked sharply at the older witch, studying her carefully opaque face. “I need to know what’s happening. What does this have to do with Ginny?”

Gwenog’s face remained tight and closed off. “You’ll see when you go. It’s... it’s not my story to tell.” Hermione waited, hesitantly, but Gwenog plowed ahead, revealing nothing else personal. “You need to hurry, before people wake up. There are other people handling Diagon Alley and the other major wizarding villages. Oh-” she said, as if suddenly thinking of it, “is Ron up?”

Hermione shook her head. “No, he’s still asleep.”

“Good. Then go now, and hurry.” Hermione frowned, a little confused as to why she wouldn’t tell Ron about any trouble his sister was in, but Gwenog seemed to be unconcerned about that, and very concerned about her hurrying, so Hermione, with a quick goodbye, rushed into the bedroom to change and apparated to Hogsmeade.

She was lucky - the village was small, and only a couple of places sold the Daily Prophet or Witch Weekly. She approached the first, a small newscart in the center of the village that was just opening, and grabbed the first Prophet she saw.

If she’d thought she’d have to flip through it to see what Gwenog was talking about, she was very mistaken. She stifled a gasp when saw that all mention of the Yule Ball had been relegated to the bottom corner of the front page; most of it was taken up by a large headline proclaiming “HARPIES CHASER, HARRY POTTER’S WIFE CAUGHT IN THE ACT” and an even larger picture, showing Ginny stepping out of the doorway of a nondescript mews apartment in London, still wearing her emerald green dress from the Yule Ball, before turning back and pulling an
unfamiliar sandy-haired man towards her for a long, searing kiss.

Hermione leaned against the man’s cart heavily, heart pounding. She’d known that something was off with Harry and Ginny, but... but this? As she was bracing herself, she heard the sound of a door opening and closing somewhere and remembered with a start what she’d come for.

“I need every copy you have of the Daily Prophet and Witch Weekly,” she said brusquely to the newsman, who looked at her with a curious glare.

“I don’t know if I’m amenable to that,” he said hesitantly, gazing longingly at the eye-catching headline.

Hermione frowned, her lips pursed together. “I’m prepared to pay double.”

A greedy grin split the man’s cheeks, and he nodded his assent. A few moments later, Hermione had incinerated all but one copy of each publication, and was on her way to the bookstore. Thankfully, the owner still recognized her from her time at Hogwarts and was happy to let her purchase every single copy he had in stock of the offending publications, and watch as she burned them.

Grey wintry dawn was just beginning to break across the cold winter sky, and, shoving her two copies into the small bag she’d brought along, a look of grim determination on her face, Hermione apparated directly to 12 Grimmauld Place.

Chapter End Notes

I feel slightly evil leaving it on this note, but SO MUCH will be revealed next chapter! :)


Letters of Two Brides

Chapter Summary

Hermione confronts Ginny.

Chapter Notes

*Trigger warning!* This chapter contains mentions of attempted suicide and self-harm.

Would you believe that I actually swear I cut a bunch from this chapter and it still wound up this long? Whoops! I don't think we need much of an intro to this chapter - you know what's coming.

Letters of Two Brides

The pop of apparition echoed through 12 Grimmauld Place, seeming out of place and much too loud in the silent entry hall. Hermione paused, having half-expected to hear the sounds of shouting already. At the silence, she felt a flutter of anxiety - maybe they hadn’t woken up yet, and she would have to wake Harry to tell him this, of all things, and so close to the holidays. Hermione was biting her lower lip in frustration, gnawing on it as she tried to envision all of the possible scenarios, when she heard a small noise from one the parlors.

“Hello?” she called, walking towards it with more confidence than she felt.

She heard a sniffle, and then a voice that was unmistakably Ginny’s, even though it was hoarse with crying and cracked in the middle of her sentence, called out. “Harry’s already left, and no, I don’t know where he’s gone.”

Hermione finally turned the corner and saw Ginny, sprawled out on the sofa with her head in Luna’s lap, her face bright red and eyes puffy from crying. Even through her anger, Hermione felt a twist in her heart to see her friend, always so vivacious and full of life, looking so pathetic.

“I wasn’t looking for Harry. I came for you.” A bit of a lie, but a white one at that. And, besides, Hermione realized, she couldn’t really adequately comfort Harry or give him counsel without knowing what was going on, whether this was a one-time mistake or something ongoing, what had happened after they’d left the Yule Ball, whether it was related to Ginny’s strange behavior over the months - so many questions left unanswered - and for that she needed Ginny.

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“Really?” Ginny said, sitting up slightly, her eyes shining brightly up at Hermione.

“Yes,” Hermione said, but she could tell that the tightly restrained anger in her voice had shot down whatever Ginny had been hoping for. “Ginny... what were you thinking? How could you do this, how could you do this to Harry? He loves you so much, and you’re going to throw it all away over this... this... boy?” She pulled the Daily Prophet out of her bag, brandishing it as her anger and
voice rose. “Who is he anyway? Some Quidditch groupie? Did the fame finally get to you, Gin, one too many handsome men throw themselves at you after a game?”

“No, no! It’s not like that, it’s not!” Ginny protested from the sofa, her face growing paler.

“Oh, really? Because it looks like that to me. I mean, god, I’ve never even met this man, where did you find him? Somewhere you were traveling for the World Cup? Get taken in by a pretty accent? A pretty face? Although I’ve been staring at this picture and I can’t for the life of me see that’s he’s handsome enough to throw over Harry for.”

“No! No, he’s not... that’s just some Muggle!”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open briefly before her eyes narrowed even further. “So you were willing to break Harry’s heart over... what was it you just called him, just some Muggle? God, Gin, you’re a piece of work.”

Hermione was yelling now, all of her turbulent emotions and lack of sleep fueling this new rage at Ginny, and Ginny had begun to sob again, crumpling under the weight of Hermione’s anger, and the increased din seemed to have carried into one of the other rooms, because one of the portraits had woken up angry, and was now screaming at the top of its lungs, repeated cries of “MUDBLOOD, A MUDBLOOD BESMIRCHING THE THRESHOLD OF THE MOST NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK” and all of the sound was making Hermione dizzy.

Ginny gulped down air and shot up, turning her head to bellow down the hall, “SHUT UP YOU BLOODY HARPY, OR I SWEAR I WILL BURN THIS HOUSE DOWN WITH YOU IN IT.” The portrait stunned or threatened into silence, Ginny turned back to Hermione with a dazed, slightly apologetic, slightly hysterical look on her face. “Merlin, I hate this bloody house,” she said faintly, a small smile breaking across her face before she burst into tears again. “I know Harry loves it, loves that it came from Sirius and honors him and all that, but for me it’s all filled with ghosts, bloody ghosts of Sirius and Professor Lupin and Tonks and Mad-Eye and F-Fred,” she said, her voice trembling when she spoke about her brother, and, a bit of Hermione’s anger subsiding, she sank down into one of the armchairs opposite Ginny. “That’s how it all started, you know,” Ginny continued, tilting her head at Hermione. “Harry and I had been fighting over this stupid house and I had to go for a walk to clear my head, and I found him.”

Hermione cocked her head, feeling a little afraid that Ginny had gone off her rocker. “So you told this Muggle stranger all about your marital problems?”

“No, I yelled at him,” Ginny said, with an odd smile as if she were remembering something fondly. Hermione shifted uncomfortably, now growing more certain that Ginny had absolutely bloody lost it somewhere along the way.

Luna, who had until now been watching the scene between the two other women with her usual almost unnatural calm, now spoke up. “Gin, love, maybe you should start at the beginning. We don’t know the end, and you’ve tried the middle and it’s been very confusing for poor Hermione, so the beginning seems right.”

Hermione leaned forward. “Yes, please do start at the beginning. The very beginning, like who on earth this man is.”

Ginny looked at her intently, blinking fiercely, and Hermione suddenly felt uncomfortable at the redhead’s penetrating stare. “You really haven’t figured it out yet, have you? I thought you would... I... I wanted to tell you, but I was so scared, so I thought maybe if I just made it easy, you’d figure it out, thought if anyone would understand it was you.”
Hermione frowned deeply, both at the implication that she’d understand Ginny’s infidelity and at the realization that she was right for feeling like Ginny had been acting oddly and had been a puzzle she couldn’t quite put together. “No, Gin. How could I have figured it out, when I’ve never seen that man before in my life?”

“It’s Polyjuice, Hermione. You should be familiar with it, I think,” Ginny said, the ghost of her normal wry grin tilting at her lips at Hermione’s dumbfounded expression. “It’s a... precaution, when we want to go out somewhere, when we might be seen, so that he won’t be noticed, won’t be recognized, so that if this happened his name and face wouldn’t be dragged through the papers again. Merlin, this is terrible enough for me but I don’t know if I could live with myself if it was happening to him too...”

Ginny was wringing her hands, any trace of amusement already faded from her face, and Hermione closed her eyes as she felt her brain race down paths familiar from last night. Polyjuice, then, a man she knew and a man whose very presence would be notable for the papers, who wanted to stay out of the spotlight, and her mind was flashing back to Lucius’ glance in Ginny’s direction and certain positive qualities, and the way Ginny’s gaze had followed the man through the ball, the flush on her cheeks.

She hated the way her voice grew cold and small and disappointed but she couldn’t help it as she said, “Ah. It’s Lucius, then,” with an air of resigned finality.

She was stewing in her thoughts, unable to meet Ginny’s gaze as the hope that had just been resparked in her heart was put out again, when her morose train of thought was interrupted by a very unexpected sound - peals of hysterical laughter. Her head shot up to see that Ginny had sat up, her hand pressed to her chest and near to falling off the couch with the force of the laughter shaking her body. Even Luna appeared to be restraining herself from a fit of giggles.

“What? What are you laughing at? Pulling one over on me, the two of you leaving me clues and enjoying that you even had the brilliant Hermione Granger fooled, so surely you’d keep Harry in the dark?” Hermione’s anger had returned at Ginny’s laughter, mixing with shame that she could be so foolish as to think a second time that he’d really wanted her, shame that maybe they had just been tricking her all along and she’d been such an easy mark to seduce.

Ginny’s giggles subsided and she looked at Hermione seriously - or rather, she tried to keep her face serious, though a smile kept flashing across her face. “No, ‘Mione, I’m not laughing at you. It’s just... If I were having an affair with Lucius Malfoy, don’t you think I’d be the slightest bit upset that he’s madly in love with you?”

All the color drained from Hermione’s face, and she gaped at Ginny for a moment. “He’s not... What?”

The spark of amusement was back in Ginny’s face as she grinned at Hermione. “Oh please, you’re all he ever talks about. It’s Hermione thinks this and Hermione said that, and oh no, we can’t possibly buy a box of wine unless we know Hermione’s tastes. And he thinks he’s so bloody subtle about it.”

Hermione felt like the girl that had fallen through the looking glass in the Muggle stories. “But - how do you know - what? And, then who - ?” And then she stopped, mouth frozen in the instant that it took for everything to suddenly fall into place, so blazingly obvious that she wanted to smack herself.

“Draco Malfoy, Ginny, really?”
The flush that spread across the redhead’s face and the defiant, animated gleam in her eye told Hermione that she’d guessed at the truth of it this time.

Momentarily speechless, all Hermione could do was exhale heavily, eyes looking desperately at Ginny as if she could figure out what had happened simply by looking at her. After several long moments of silence, stunned on Hermione’s part and stubborn on Ginny’s, Luna stepped in.

“You should tell the story now, Gin. You already started it - you and Harry had fought over the house, and you went out for a walk and found him...” She gave an encouraging nod to Ginny, who seemed to pull herself back together and swallow her pride long enough to lay the explanation at Hermione’s feet.

“Yes. Of course, no Polyjuice then, obviously, or I’d have just walked right past him, but he was sitting in this park that I like to go to when I need to clear my head, in the spot I usually sit in, even, and... I just... I was so angry, I’d been fighting with Harry all day and into the night and all I’d been able to think about was everyone who was dead and all the terrible things that had happened during the war, and then there *he* was, and I blamed him for so much of it, but he was free to walk around, even sit in my spot, and I think he said something typically Malfoy-ish, I can barely remember, but then I just... exploded. Screamed at him, told him I blamed him for everything, he deserved to be in Azkaban with his father, he’d killed so many people even if he hadn’t been the one holding the wand.”

Hermione felt unsettled, at Ginny’s description of the tirade she’d gone on (which Hermione could easily picture, having seen the redhead’s temper in action before), at the discrepancy between what she’d said then and the views that Ginny had espoused just months ago in Hermione’s own living room, and at the oddness of this being the beginning of some sort of romance between the unlikely pair.

“And... he just took it. Just sat there and listened to me and let me yell myself out, and then got up and said he’d leave me to it.” Ginny sat there, looking at her hands, and Hermione saw tears glistening in her eyes.

“How long ago was this, Gin?” Hermione asked, trying to figure out how things could possibly have gone from that state of affairs to, well, the current affair.

“But a year and a half.” Hermione’s brow furrowed, surprised by the length of time and trying to count back the months, when she was interrupted by Ginny again. “No need to do the math. It was the next day. I found out about it the next afternoon at practice, a bunch of the girls had read about it in the papers. I... I went straight to St. Mungo’s. Skipped practice. Just bolted.”

Ginny’s face looked drawn and pained, and Hermione blanched as she realized what Ginny was saying. About a year and a half ago she had been testifying for Lucius’ early release from Azkaban, and she was testifying because she didn’t think even he deserved to go back to an empty home, because Narcissa Malfoy had fallen gravely ill, and because Draco was in St. Mungo’s after he’d attempted to kill himself. The day after Ginny had run into him, apparently. Hermione blinked at the redhead, stomach sinking as she tried to even begin to imagine what must have been going through Ginny’s mind at that point.

At the drawn look on Hermione’s face, Ginny had paused, eyes shimmering with unshed tears again, and Hermione gave her a reassuring nod. “So you went to St. Mungo’s? And what did you do?”

Ginny drew in a deep, steadying breath and nodded. “I wasn’t technically supposed to be allowed into his room, but I think I looked a right terrifying mess, so they let me through. He was awake,
just sitting there staring at the ceiling, and, Merlin, I can’t even imagine what I must’ve looked like to him, bursting into the room still in my Quidditch gear. First I started yelling again, telling him how he was a bloody idiot for thinking that anything I’d said mattered, why would he even listen to me or care what a Weasley thought, I was mad at Harry and not him, why would he do something so stupid, and then somewhere in there I started crying. Honestly to this day I think the only reason he didn’t kick me out is that he was too surprised.” She had a faint smile on her face, but it didn’t reach her eyes, which had drifted up to meet Hermione’s. “I... It felt so horrible, Hermione, I felt so selfish and small and... bad, so bad, because it’s one thing to kill someone with your wand, but it’s another thing to weasel into their head with your words and kill them. I would’ve felt like... Tom.”

Luna had resumed stroking Ginny’s hair, which was good because Hermione had a hand pressed against her mouth, suppressing a small sob of her own at the look of despair on Ginny’s face. After a few deep breaths and a hug from Luna, Ginny seemed to be able to continue.

“After I cried myself out a bit, he told me that while he very much appreciated my whole noble speech, I had nothing to do with his decision, that he’d been told yesterday his mum was deathly ill, some rare side effect of prolonged exposure to Dark magic.” Another of those small smiles flitted across Ginny’s face, and Hermione wondered just how deep the bond between Ginny and the younger Malfoy ran, that even these fraught memories of him could bring some sort of smile to her face. “That took the wind out my sails a bit, of course, but then I realized that no one was there, even though it’d been in the papers, and his mum was sick and his dad was still in Azkaban, and that... that probably no one else was coming.”

Hermione started at the realization. “But- but what about all his friends?” The glint of cold fire in Ginny’s hard gaze said everything that needed to be said, and Hermione frowned, trying to rearrange her preconceived notions and expectations as Ginny continued telling the story.

“So I stayed. He didn’t look happy about it, but he also didn’t look like he had the energy to argue with me and kick me out. Finally he just looked at me, and I can still remember it so clearly, he turned and he said ‘Well, if you’re not going to leave me in peace, at least tell me what Potter fucked up now so I can enjoy myself a little bit.’” She was positively beaming now, an amused wry grin splitting her face, absolutely radiating warmth at the memory, and Hermione stared in shock, wondering if she herself had ever looked that way when she was thinking about Ron. “So I did. I was still so frazzled, it just kind of all came spilling out of me, and... he was a good listener. He...” A flash of guilt contorted Ginny’s face for a minute, and she looked at Hermione as if thinking about whether to say something or not.

“Out with it, Gin. I think at this point we’re entirely done with secrets,” Hermione said, intensely curious about what Ginny could be feeling guilty about saying at this point.

Ginny flushed, and looked at Hermione. “No offense, Hermione, you’re a great friend and a great person to talk to... But... You were friends with Harry first, almost everyone was, and even the people who weren’t, well, he saved the bloody world. It’s kind of hard to complain about your husband when everyone, including you, feels like nothing you can do is ever enough to repay him for what he’s gone through. Like, the house - Harry has all of those ghosts here too, plus even more, but he still feels like this is one of the only ways he can feel close to Sirius, and... what are my feelings to overrule that? But Draco... I think somewhere between hating him and being jealous of him all those years, and all the things that Harry did for him... I think his feelings for Harry wound up somewhere in the middle after all that. He did save the world, saved Draco’s life too, but Draco’s always seen all of Harry’s faults and found him irritating, so now he’s just... a man. So I could complain about Harry without feeling like I was betraying a hero.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open. “Oh, Gin... I... I had no idea you felt that way. I’m sorry, Ginny, I
wish you’d…” She paused, about to say she’d wished Ginny had told her, but to be perfectly honest she wouldn’t have had any idea of what to say to Ginny to help. The redhead was right - Harry and Hermione had been friends far longer, had fought side by side, had carried that bloody Horcrux together, they shared something deeper than friendship. She couldn’t have given Ginny what she needed.

Ginny’s mouth quirked in a smile. “It’s okay, Hermione. I didn’t tell you, and you couldn’t have guessed. It’s not your fault. Besides... it turned out I liked talking to Draco. He’s funny, when he’s making fun of the Mediwitch and not my family, and we had a lot more in common than I thought. Did you know he always wanted to play professional Quidditch? He has this encyclopedic knowledge of old plays, strategies, match moments, he’s very smart. He helped me come up with some plays to get Gwen off my back, since I was missing loads of practice at this point.”

Hermione started, suddenly realizing something. “Gin, if you were hanging around St. Mungo’s all the time, what did you tell Harry? Did he know?”

Ginny’s mouth contorted sharply, somewhere between a grimace and a frown. “No... He still doesn’t know. I... It wasn’t like I wanted to hide something from him, Draco and I were barely even friends at that point, but... I felt so guilty, still. Harry’s so good, and how could I tell him that it all started because I thought... because I thought... I thought I’d made someone hurt themselves?”

Hermione sighed, reaching over to grab Ginny’s hand reassuringly. Ginny gave her a wan smile and continued. “So I told him Luna was sick, nothing serious but something I’d had as a kid, but he hadn’t, so he couldn’t come near or he’d get sick too. And... you know when I told you Luna had helped me realize I needed to let go, to forgive people? That was real, that happened when I told her about everything with Draco.” Hermione’s eyes widened, going to the dreamy blonde who’d been keeping Ginny’s secret from them all as long as Ginny had had it, and Luna just gave her a slight shrug.

“Besides, I found it much easier when the people I’d hated actually apologized to me,” Ginny said with a far-off grin. “I was asleep when Lucius finally got there, so I don’t know exactly what happened, but to hear Draco tell it there was quite the whisper fight when his dad finally got to his room at St. Mungo’s and found a Weasley asleep in the armchair, drooling on a stack of Quidditch plays.” Hermione couldn’t suppress her own small smile at that, trying to picture the exact mix of shock and utter bewilderment playing itself out on Lucius’ face. “When I woke up, the first thing he did was thank me for being with Draco, and then apologize for everything he’d done and said, explained that he didn’t know what the diary was when he gave it to me, just that it was something Dark. And, Merlin, he looked so bad, just out of Azkaban, his eyes on Draco the whole time... I just felt all the anger rush out of me, because he looked so small and sad in that moment.” Ginny shrugged. “It was so easy to hate them as abstract figures, an evil man in a dark cloak, a bully, but so hard to do it when they were there in front of me, a heartbroken father about to be a widower, a lonely, misguided son.”

Hermione gave Ginny’s hand another squeeze, unable to stop herself from thinking of her own thoughts on the matter, which had trodden similar paths over the past few months. “Gin, I... this is all really lovely, and I’m glad that you found some peace on this, but... I still don’t understand how this led to you cheating on Harry now.”

Ginny flushed, and cleared her throat before she spoke, keeping her gaze steadily on a corner of the rug. “It’s not like I meant for it to happen, we just... We became kind of friends, so we kept up the friendship, kept spending time together. We actually came up with the Polyjuice so I could give him my box tickets to the Harpies games. And then, his Healers had told him he had to actually
talk about what had happened to him, during the war, all of the things he was feeling, so... he
talked to me. And then I wound up talking to him, about the war, about Fred, about Tom.” She
leaned back against the sofa, crossing her legs and looking pensive. “Have you, Hermione? Really
talked about it all?”

Hermione pressed her lips together tightly, thinking, and shook her head. “No, I don’t like to...dwell on it. I’ve... processed it and moved on.”

Ginny gave her a small smile tinged with something like pity, and Hermione shifted
uncomfortably. “You should try it. I thought I’d done that too. I mean, I’d thought I’d managed to
move on and get over the whole Tom thing ages ago, but, obviously I really hadn’t, was still
carrying around all this guilt and sadness and anger. I tried to get Harry to talk to me about it, but,
you know Harry. He’s still never really talked about what it was like growing up with those
Muggles of his, much less anything from the war.” Hermione gave her a small smile, knowing
exactly what she meant. While none of the Golden Trio were winning awards for their emotional
intelligence anytime soon, Harry was in a class of his own when it came to bottling up his
emotions until they exploded spectacularly.

“So, suffice it to say Draco and I became quite close. I think I realized he was in love with me
sometime around last Christmas,” she said, a soft sad smile drifting across her face.

Hermione’s brows rose. “Really? He told you?”

“Oh, no, he didn’t say anything to me. Part of it is that he’d never want to pressure me like that,
possibly force my hand and ruin our friendship, but I also think that part of it is that he’d never
have wanted to put himself out there and lose something he wanted to Harry again.” Ginny’s voice
trailed off, growing thin as she frowned pensively at the corner of the rug again. “I could just... tell.
The way he looked at me, something... shifted. He looked at me like he was a little afraid, and at
first I thought it was of me, but it turns out he was afraid of the way he felt about me. A little
afraid, and a little in awe.” Her voice trailed off, and she had that radiant look again, even though
she wasn’t even smiling, just something in her eyes.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably at the intensity of it. “So, when did you realize you loved him
back?”

Ginny started at that, her mouth falling open slightly, and Hermione frowned, wondering if it was
possible that Ginny had really never thought of it in terms quite like that. As Ginny sputtered, Luna
leaned forward and smiled. “Well, I realized it in the spring, but I think it took you until the fall to
accept it, Gin.”

Ginny’s head whipped around to look at her friend, seeming a little surprised and a little hurt.
“What do you mean, you realized it in the spring?”

Luna smiled at Ginny, that familiar dreamy, beatific smile, and tapped a hand to her chin. “It was
right before you went off to the World Cup. You were so nervous, and you just kept pacing
around, muttering about how you were going to be terrible and it was all going to be a disaster.
Harry and I couldn’t do anything to settle you down, and Harry went out to get dinner and you
opened an owl from Draco. I didn’t think there was anything special about it, he just said that he
wished you’d let him throw the other team’s Beaters in the Malfoy dungeons and that if you got hit
by a Bludger he’d get to be as annoying to you as you were to him when he was in St. Mungo’s,
that he’d be cheering you on. Just that stuff you two always do where you say nothing but mean
something. But you read it and you suddenly just... relaxed. Smiled, laughed, kept walking around
packing and just smiling at nothing.”
Ginny flushed at Luna’s description, and ducked her head to try to hide the smile that had appeared on her face. “Well, whatever Luna realized when, I started to realize I wanted...” Here she paused, as if trying to figure out what it exactly it was that she had wanted, did want, before finally deciding on a word she still didn’t seem quite satisfied with, “more, sometime in the fall, around when Harry and I were having all of those arguments about kids and Mum wouldn’t give me a break. I had all this pent-up energy I didn’t know what to do with, I was irritable all the time, around you, around Harry, even around Draco, and finally he just looked at me in that way of his and I... kissed him. And everything slid into place. And, then, of course, I cried, and he just held me while I cried and told me he’d do what I needed him to do, go away or act different or give me up or stay the way things were, and I... I told him I needed him to kiss me again.”

Hermione frowned, her mind and her heart feeling as turbulent as they had been last night, because while all of this was beautiful and sweet and surprisingly touching, there was the thorny issue of Ginny’s marriage to deal with. “So, you’re leaving Harry?” she asked, her tone flat and lips pressed together.

Ginny blanched at this. “I... I don’t know. I love Harry, I still do. He’s so sweet and kind and brave, I’ve loved him since I was eleven, really. You know that, Hermione. I thought he was my soulmate. And in some ways he still feels like it. But... sometimes I feel that way about Draco too. And, oh Merlin, I don’t know what to do, Hermione, I don’t know what to do.” Burying her head in a pillow, Ginny groaned and ran her hands through her long, tangled hair.

Hermione felt her heart sink, realizing with a sudden lurch that Ginny hadn’t been so far off when she’d begun this conversation by saying that Hermione would understand. She’d never understand Ginny’s infidelity, of course, she’d never have let things get so far, but... but then hadn’t Ginny said it herself, just last night, that Hermione was supposed to have been smarter than her? She felt a flash of ice down her spine as she realized what Ginny had been implying, about her, about Lucius, about Ginny herself and her marriage, about both of their marriages.

She shook herself out of those thoughts and instead turned to the path forward. A plan. That she could do. That was much easier than untangling the emotional tangle that had suddenly grown to surround her. “Does Harry know? That it’s Draco?”

Ginny shook her head into the pillow, looking up at Hermione with desperate eyes. “No, and you can’t tell him, you absolutely can’t. He’d let it slip and then it’d be all over the papers, Draco’s name would be everywhere again, everyone would hate him even more, and I won’t... I can’t do that to him. Not even for Harry.”

Hermione frowned. “I understand that, but surely Harry would understand too, the need for discretion, what it could do to surround her. “Does Harry know? That it’s Draco?”

Ginny shook her head into the pillow, looking up at Hermione with desperate eyes. “No, and you can’t tell him, you absolutely can’t. He’d let it slip and then it’d be all over the papers, Draco’s name would be everywhere again, everyone would hate him even more, and I won’t... I can’t do that to him. Not even for Harry.”

Hermione frowned. “I understand that, but surely Harry would understand too, the need for discretion, what it could do to Draco...”

Ginny laughed coldly. “Really, Hermione? I know Harry’s practically a saint, but you really think he’d go out of his way to avoid hurting his wife’s lover who just happens to be a former Death Eater and his childhood bully?”

Hermione sighed. Every ounce of her soul rebelled against the idea of keeping this from Harry, but she couldn’t deny Ginny’s legitimate concerns. Her mind flashed back to the expression on Lucius’ face in that Muggle coffee shop when he’d spoken about almost losing Draco, and Hermione’s eyes drifted shut and her shoulders sagged. “Fine. I won’t tell him. But you need to. You need to figure out what you want, Ginny, and soon. You’re just hurting them both.”

When she opened her eyes, Ginny was looking at her with an oddly fierce stare, flushed and defiant and a tad ashamed. “I know. I know I do, Hermione. So do you.”
Hermione pressed her lips together, a sudden flash of anger at Ginny’s audacity when she was the one whose face was plastered on the front page of the newspapers for being a cheat, for hurting Harry, but roiling beneath the anger was guilt, because Ginny was right. If Ginny’s situation had been an explosion, Hermione’s was only better because the ring on her finger was at least a countdown.

“I’m going to go find Harry,” Hermione said, standing abruptly, breaking Ginny’s gaze.

“I think that’s a good idea. He... he’ll need you,” Ginny said, her voice softening slightly, and Hermione sighed heavily at what a mess it all was.

“Bye, Gin. I’ll... I’ll talk to you later, I guess,” Hermione said, walking back out to the entryway of Grimmauld Place before she apparated home, her mind spinning as quickly as her body.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there it is! Ginny's secrets are out.

I actually really seriously considered flipping perspective/doing flashbacks from Ginny's perspective in this chapter so that it wasn't just one long conversation of telling, not showing, but I decided having just that one flash to Ginny's perspective didn't make a ton of sense. So! I actually have some rough stuff plotted and written showing some of the important scenes of Ginny and Draco's relationship from their perspective (and have thought quite a bit about certain scenes from Lucius' perspective too, with Hermione as well), so if that's something people are interested in I might tidy them up and pop them up after I'm done with the fic/if the insatiable urge strikes me. Let me know if you'd be interested and I'll either scrap the idea or put it on my list!
Poor Folk

Chapter Summary

Hermione deals with the aftermath of Ginny's mistake.

Chapter Notes

Hi all, and I am so, so sorry for the very long delay! I have not given up on this story, and I'm sorry I couldn't get back to you guys any sooner. The very short version is that I've been dealing with some health problems and the departure of someone from my team at work (which has meant a really increased workload) so the writing process has been a bit of a struggle. Thank you all SO much for all of the kind comments and support for this story while I've been on a bit of a hiatus. It has meant so much.

I've had a bit more daylight recently, so I've been trying to write by hand while I'm at work when I get a few moments, which is great but means a much longer editing process than usual (why did I stop in the middle of a scene and begin a different one? why can I not read my own handwriting on this key bit of dialogue?). I'm still planning on updating, but it will likely be a slower pace than we've been used to, and/or shorter chapters (for which you guys have my thousand apologies).

I may also, depending on how things go, put out some of the side pieces/deleted scenes/other perspectives I'd mentioned earlier, just because they will be quicker to finish up than some of these chapters, so if it's been awhile without something and I just don't have a new chapter in me you might get one of those instead?

Poor Folk

She’d no sooner arrived back in the entry hall of her apartment than Ron appeared from the kitchen, face flushing a deep red as soon as he saw her.

“And where in bloody hell have you been?” he hissed through clenched teeth, eyes cast about as if Harry would pop out unexpectedly to see them fighting. “Harry’s been here since early this morning, he needs us, and you’ve been off... gallivanting who knows where.”

Hermione fought against the urge to roll her eyes, nails digging into her palms as she struggled to contain her own temper after the draining events of the night before and the morning. “You sound like your mother, Ron. I was hardly gallivanting. Gwenog gave us a firecall early this morning, so I was in Hogsmeade, clearing out the village of Prophets and Witch Weeklys, and then I went to see Ginny.”

Ron’s frustration wouldn’t be appeased, however. “You were out there covering for her when Harry, our friend, needed you here?”
They’re both our friends, Ronald Weasley, and Ginny is your sister. I did what needed to be done, for both of them. Unless you think Harry would’ve preferred that the entire Wizarding world wake up to this everywhere they looked this morning,” Hermione said coldly, pulling the Prophet out of her bag and tossing it at Ron’s face. “You’re not the only one trying to help. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to see Harry.”

Ron, seeming slightly cowed by either the flash of cold anger in her voice and eyes or the smack of the newspaper against his face, mumbled something and gestured to the guest bedroom. Upon entering, Hermione saw Harry, laying back against a pile of pillows, thumbing through an old copy of a Quidditch magazine, though his eyes seemed unfocused on the text in front of him as he flipped each page listlessly.

“Hi, Harry,” Hermione said softly as she entered, suddenly tentative. For all they’d been through over the years, it had almost all been either schoolyard mundanity or life and death situations, and what was right and what Hermione could and needed to do to help were always so clear, so straightforward. This situation was anything but, and Hermione lamented once again how nothing in her life seemed like it could be so easy anymore - everything was a conundrum, a moral grey area, filled with people who were no longer unabashed villains or heroes but flawed, complex humans on all sides. Harry looked up from the magazine he was reading and gave her a small smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Hey, Hermione. If you’ve come to let me know how terrible Ginny is, I hate to disappoint you but Ron’s got that one pretty much covered.” He tried to crack a wry grin, but somehow it didn’t reach his eyes and he still just seemed sad, and Hermione flung herself at him in a crushing hug. He looked startled at first, but slowly relaxed and gave her a squeeze.

“Harry, I’m so sorry.” She pushed back to perch on the edge of the bed, legs crossed as she looked intently at her friend.

“There’s no need to apologize, ‘Mione. You didn’t know.”

“No, but... I knew something was up,” Hermione flushed in shame, looking down at the corner of the bedspread. “I knew you two had been fighting, I knew something seemed to be going on with Ginny, I knew about the separate bedrooms, after I stayed with you that night... but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to stick my nose where it didn’t belong, for once. But... I never thought it would be this.”

Harry reached out to give her hand a soft squeeze before readjusting himself against the pillows. “It’s alright, Hermione. I promise.”

The two fell into companionable silence for a moment, before Hermione resumed the thread of the conversation. “So, Ron’s been that bad, has he?” she said with a wry grin.

Harry laughed slightly. “Ron does righteous outrage very well, but it’s a bit one note at this point.”

“So... how did you... what happened?” Hermione bit her lip, avoiding Harry’s gaze.

He sighed heavily, but sat up to face her, leaning his chin on one palm. “Luna came by, woke us up to let us know. Well, let Ginny know. Apparently Luna found out about the picture through some contact from the Quibbler, that the Prophet was going to be going to print with it. Ginny had said she had to run by and see one of the Harpies for some emergency after the ball, and I... I hadn’t thought a thing of it.” He sounded not quite sad, just... lost, and Hermione scooted over so that the two were pressed side to side, leaning against him. “Anyway, I guess Gin knew there was no hiding it, so she told me. Said it hadn’t been going on long, just some guy she met at the World
Cup she’d kept in contact with. I... She looked so miserable, but I was so mad, and so miserable too.” Here, Harry sighed heavily, letting his head fall back against the headboard. “I almost wish it was some grand love story, her and this other bloke. It hurts more to know that she’d... I mean, I knew we were having our issues, but every couple has those. I didn’t think they were bad enough that she’d throw us away for just... some man.”

Hermione was nearly twitching with the effort of not screaming out the secret she now held inside of her, but the thought of Ginny’s pained face when she’d thought about what being dragged through the papers might do to Draco, and the choke of Lucius talking about almost losing his son, made Hermione hesitate. “Well, maybe there’s more to it than just some bloke. If it’s more than just once, and they kept in touch, it doesn’t sound like it was just... well, sex. You should talk to Ginny about it... I feel like there might be more to the story.”

Harry nodded, running a hand through his already ruffled hair. “I suppose...”

He looked so small, and so defeated, that Hermione squared her shoulders. “I... I talked to Ginny, you know. And... I know it sounds bad, but I think it’s a good thing, that it sounded like all of this... her unhappiness... this man... started with problems in your marriage. Those are things you can work on, together, and if that changes then maybe so will the... the other things.” She tried not to think about the defiant gleam in the redhead’s eye when Hermione had realized her mystery lover was Draco Malfoy, or the radiant joy that had suffused her face when she was thinking of him.

“You really think so?” For the first time she’d seen him that day, Harry seemed slightly alive. Hermione avoided thinking about the guilty pit in her stomach at the thought that she was lying to Harry, both about the identity of his wife’s lover, and about the fact that she wasn’t entirely sure that what she’d said was even true. Maybe Ginny had first turned to Malfoy because of unhappiness with her relationship with Harry, but nothing in the woman’s demeanor earlier this morning had indicated that she wasn’t breathtakingly in love with the blonde now. But Harry seemed so cheered by the possibility that Hermione just smiled and nodded, avoiding the gnawing guilt while the pair began discussing the array of Hermione-driven things she and Ron did to work on their relationship, the date nights, the dinners, all of the tricks that had ultimately, tragically, secretly failed Hermione but which she hoped wouldn’t fail Harry.

* * *

Christmas went on at the Burrow as usual, though it was certainly the most strained and awkward gathering Hermione could remember. Ginny, depending on the moment and the people she was near, alternated between walking around with her head held high and a defiant glint in her eye and trembling, near to tears. Everyone kept trying to speak privately to Harry and looked at him with pity in their eyes, which had the result that Harry spent most of the day hovering near Hermione or trying to avoid all company. The other Weasleys seemed to be arrayed somewhere between dismay and anger at the recent events; Bill kept looking at his youngest sibling out of the corner of his eye, as if she were going to turn into someone else unexpectedly, and Ron kept mumbling angrily under his breath about betrayal and loyalty. Molly didn’t seem sure whether she wanted to scream or cry, or both, both uncertain and unhappy, and Arthur just looked sadly befuddled. All in all, the assembled were not the picture of a happy Christmas, and Hermione was certain that no small part of the foul moods were enhanced by the fact that they’d all been envisioning a joyous celebration of her and Ron’s engagement, which had rapidly morphed into another take on marriage altogether.

Hermione, for her part, mostly floated around in a daze, oddly grateful for the general malaise, and the distraction it brought from what would otherwise have been overwhelming attention to the ring on her hand. Everyone else’s odd moods and behavior conveniently meant that she was free to drift through the gathering, shooting absent-minded smiles at people and wishing them a Happy
Christmas, and otherwise could remain firmly ensconced in her jumbled, tangled thoughts. She kept re-playing the events of the past few days over and over in her head, the rollercoaster of the proposal, ring still heavy on her hand, Lucius’ jolt of astonishment and cruel words, the elation of the realization that their flirtation had been more mutual than she’d dared to think, the horror of the next morning and all the conversation with Ginny, the moment when Ginny had claimed that Lucius was in love with her. She couldn’t bring herself to be ashamed that what she wanted desperately, more than anything, was to talk to Lucius, let all of the thoughts and secrets she’d been clutching so tightly to her chest spill out of her before him until she felt like she could breathe again. She’d entertained a brief fever dream of telling Ron everything, but then he’d cast a furious glance in Ginny’s direction and she’d realized that, while Harry might prefer that Ginny had found love with another man, instead of just a dalliance, Ron would see it as a greater betrayal. And she didn’t forget all the remarks he’d made about the Malfoys over the months. No, she simply could not tell Ron.

She was frowning, still in this daze, when she wandered outside and ran (literally) into Andromeda, who was watching Teddy and Victoire, ignorant of the conflict inside but still made uneasy by the palpable tension, make snow angels.

“Oh! Merlin, sorry Andromeda, I’m a bit not all there today.”

The older witch gave her a warm, forgiving smile. “That’s alright. I gather the past few days have been rather eventful for you.”

Hermione shot her a grateful grin and then turned to watch the two children playing in the snow, giggling excitedly as they smacked at and rolled in the snow. After a few moments had passed in companionable silence, Hermione turned, gnawing on the inside of her cheek anxiously, and gave Andromeda an appraising look.

“Andromeda... Do you know Draco Malfoy at all?”

Andromeda raised a brow, but otherwise didn’t let any emotion cross her face. “Yes, he’s my nephew. Why?”

Hermione fiddled with the hem of her Christmas jumper, eyes dropping to the ground. “What’s he like? I mean, I know what he was like when we were at school of course, he was horrid, but... what’s he like now?”

Andromeda’s gaze grew sharper, her eyes narrowing, but a small smile was playing at the corner of her lips. Hermione wasn’t sure that she altogether liked whatever thoughts were crossing the woman’s mind, but as long as they weren’t the truth of her question, Hermione didn’t mind.

“Well, I can’t personally speak to how he used to be for comparison, though from the stories I’ve heard, he was dreadful. He’s still rather sharp-tongued, prone to teasing and harsh words, especially for his father. But there’s a bit less sting behind them now. He’s... rather quiet, irritable, tense, or at least he was for a long while. He seems to have opened up and relaxed a bit more in the past few months. He likes Teddy, and even though he’s not much of a natural with kids he tries, which counts for a lot in my book.” Andromeda gave her a sharp stare, and her voice lowered slightly. “I’ve never once, since the war ended, heard him espouse supremacist beliefs, or say Mudblood, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Hermione dropped her gaze to the ground, a flush growing across her face. That’s what she should have been asking, of course, given the number of times he’d called her that dreadful name at Hogwarts, was even the person who’d called her a Mudblood the first time, had introduced her to the concept that her blood might be something dirty, unclean, unworthy. But her mind had been
firmly fixed on whether or not Ginny had fallen in love with someone who might be kind to her, attentive, loving, instead of the sneering ferret she’d known at Hogwarts. She supposed that she’d just... imparted Lucius’ change in attitude, words and actions onto his son.

Lucius, of course, must be the reason Andromeda assumed she was asking. To sniff out whether Lucius had really changed, or what Draco might think of the friendship between the unlikely pair. She rubbed a palm against her face, gently massaging one temple. “Thanks, Andromeda. I’m... glad to hear.”

Andromeda gave her a knowing smile that almost looked like a smirk, and looked like she was about to say something further when the two witches heard a wail from in front of them. Victoire had tripped and fallen face-first into the snow, and both women hurried forward to pick her up and brush the snow off of her face and clothes. They heard the creak of the door to the Burrow open and Hermione looked up to see Molly peeking her head outside.

“We had a little spill in the snow,” Andromeda said, giving the redhead a smile. Molly nodded but it was clear that her attention was already focused on the child in her arms.

“Well...” Andromeda said, turning to beckon Teddy closer, “I think we’re going to say our goodbyes, and finish the holiday at Malfoy Manor.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, a flash of guilt that she’d been wrapped up in her own thoughts and drama while Lucius and Draco had been alone on Christmas, followed by a swifter flash of guilt and anxiety that she’d not sent Lucius a letter since the ball, and had failed to get him a Christmas present. Everything had seemed either not enough or much too much, nothing just right for the beguiling blonde wizard. “I... I think I’m going to leave as well... Have a happy Christmas.”

Andromeda gave her a knowing glance, and Hermione flushed under the older woman’s gaze, but just turned and hurried into the bustling home to find Ron. She found him talking to George heatedly, and pulled him away with an apologetic smile at the older brother. They’d found a somewhat empty corner in which to chat, so Hermione turned to Ron with a sigh.

“I know it’s a bit early, but I’d really like to head home,” she said hesitantly, brow furrowed as her thoughts continued their turbulent jumble, barely noticing the spread of a frown on Ron’s face.

“Head home already? It’s barely 5, Hermione, and it’s Christmas. You want to just... abandon Harry and my family?”

Hermione started, taken aback at the sadness in his tone, like he was a lost puppy she’d kicked. “No, Ron, I don’t want to abandon anyone. It’s just... it’s been an exhausting past couple of days, and I’d like some rest. Besides, I rather think Harry and Ginny would like the excuse to leave as well. They look wretched.”

Ron’s frown deepened. “But... but it’s Christmas, ‘Mione.”

Hermione sighed heavily, a hand coming up to gently massage her temple. “Yes, it’s Christmas. But... I just need some time alone to... process everything. I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

Ron stepped forward to wrap an arm around her, but try as she might she couldn’t relax into his
warm, lean body. “I’m sorry, ‘Mione. You mind if I stay behind?” Hermione shook her head, not trusting her voice to stay steady. She made her rounds and said her goodbyes, cognizant of the nearly identical expressions of relief that crossed Harry and Ginny’s faces (as she said goodbye to each separately, Harry in the kitchen and Ginny in the garden) at the prospect of being able to leave the crowded Burrow.

Hermione had barely finished the final whirling turn of her Apparition home before she was pressing a hand to her mouth, trying to stifle the sob that had been rising in her since Ron had hugged her and she’d felt cold and stiff and uncertain. She turned to find a familiar owl at the window, holding a letter addressed to her in handwriting she’d recognize anywhere now, and as she took it over to the couch she realized she couldn’t hold it in any longer. She bent double, silent tears streaming down her face. Daedalus gave her a soft hoot from the windowsill before he took off into the night, but Hermione was too busy letting the cold breeze from the open window refresh her as she finally cried, for her crumbling relationship, for the ring on her hand, for Harry’s sad eyes when he’d sat on her bed, for the radiant glow she’d seen in Ginny, for the way that Ron had hugged her tightly tonight, for Draco Malfoy sad and alone on a park bench near Grimmauld Place with a dying mother and a father in Azkaban and a Dark Mark on his arm, and for Lucius, for what he’d done for his son, for what he’d done for her, for what he did for Andromeda and Teddy, for the way he’d looked when he’d told her about Voldemort and for the burning intensity in his eyes when he looked at her and thought she wasn’t looking.
Julie or the New Heloise

Chapter Summary

The cultural committee meet again, and Hermione and Lucius have an unexpectedly intense coffee date.

Chapter Notes

Sometime in the past few days I gave up on the illusion of sleep so decided in lieu of sleep to write more! Yay! Apologies for any incoherence.

Thanks as always for all of your lovely and complimentary comments! I enjoy them so much, and still hold out pipe dreams of responding to all of you one day. I've seen a lot of flak about the Draco/Ginny pairing since it was revealed, and some about the Lucius/Hermione, and I'll (plan to) only address it this once - this is ultimately a story about redemption, about the way that war and trauma can change people in surprising ways, and the way that what you thought would make you happy when you were 13 or 15 or even 18 can be very different from what makes you happy when you're older, and you have to adapt and figure out what you really want. I know it might be a little harder to believe the evolution of Draco and Ginny's relationship since much of it has taken place off the page (since, y'know, this is a Lucius/Hermione story), but trust me, I've thought about it! And if you're reading just because you're waiting for the moment when it all comes out that Hermione is under some curse or spell, y'all, we're 15 chapters in so I don't think I am spoiling anything when I say please don't torture yourselves by continuing to read, because that moment is not coming.

PS. The next chapter will include more Lucius and Hermione, and a return to some smutty programming, so beware or get excited, as you like.

Julie or the New Heloise

The next few days’ correspondence with Lucius was light, their letters focused merely on the texts the two shared between them, and Hermione was inestimably grateful that Lucius either shared or could sense her reticence to discuss all of the events of the holidays over owl post. She knew that the conversation would happen at some point, knew that as much as she'd like to avoid a conversation about the Yule Ball, she couldn’t bear it if she didn’t talk to him about the other events of that night and the next morning, and see what he knew about Ginny and Draco.

A week later, she found herself again winding her way down the now-familiar route through corridors of the Ministry that led to the conference rooms near the Wizengamot, where Doge held their committee meetings. She’d been up early, steeling her mind and body to see Lucius again, not sure if she would be able to maintain the charade of mostly indifference she’d kept up all fall and winter with the knowledge that she’d gleaned at the Yule Ball. She sank into a seat near Andromeda, grateful for the older witch’s reassuring smile and pleasant small talk about Teddy as
she waited for Lucius’ arrival, feeling she was holding her breath the entire time. When he finally entered the room, it was as hard as she’d imagined it would be, to keep from noticing the way his eyes darted first to her, how his body angled towards her even as he sat in an open seat across the room, the softening gleam in his eye as he watched her talk to Andromeda, his large hands and the calmly efficient way he unpacked his things and began his notes. If Andromeda noticed any new tension between the two of them, she wisely kept any comments to herself, though Hermione could have sworn she saw the witch’s glance darting back and forth between the two of them when she thought neither were looking.

Luckily for Hermione, the meeting was brief and, for once, everyone seemed to be mostly in agreement on the best path forward as they ironed out certain details about their upcoming event - a special exhibition at the National Gallery, which the Ministry had bought out completely for the evening, and during which members of the committee and select others would be giving tours, describing the intermingling of Muggle history, culture, and mythology with Wizarding history and lore. Hermione had at first argued for something more contemporary, more likely to appeal to the Wizarding youth, but Andromeda and Lucius had convincingly persuaded the group that the older purebloods would find such a thing distasteful, proof of the low state of Muggle culture, whereas something like this would appeal to that ancient, classic sense of aesthetic purebloods found themselves attached to, allow for education on the ways in which the cultures had historically overlapped and woven together, and let the tour guides point out which Muggle artists and historical figures had been suspected of having magical talent in their blood. Hermione had to admit that it was a master stroke for a first event, and was glad the Ministry had been willing to devote the resources to renting out the entirety of the gallery (supplemented, she had no doubt, by a generous donation from the Malfoy vault).

The meeting came to an end quickly, and Hermione was packing her things when she noticed Lucius approaching. He cleared his throat softly to get their attention, as if Hermione hadn’t been aware of his every step around the small conference room without any need for her eyes to track his movement, as if there were some invisible tether of tension between them. She kept her head turned towards her things, waiting for him to begin to address Andromeda, when she heard his voice call out, even and sure and strong.

“Miss Granger.”

She hesitated for a moment, breath caught in her chest as she turned her gaze up to him. He was leaning against the table, casual and self-assured even as he must have felt the eyes of everyone else in the room on him. Even old Elphias Doge, who usually bustled out quickly, was pausing by the door, eyes glancing hesitantly back towards the unlikely pair.

“Would you like to join me for coffee?” She could have cursed him at the mischievous twinkle in his stormy grey eyes as he continued, “I know a delightful little place in Muggle London.”

Hermione was broken out of her hesitant trance by the sound of Justin Finch-Fletchley choking on his coffee, and she fought hard to stifle a giggle at the poor boy. From the viciously amused gleam in Lucius’ eye, she could tell that she wasn’t doing a particularly good job at keeping the grin from her face.

“It’d be a pleasure, Mr. Malfoy.”

With a half-smile, half-smirk that Hermione knew was as close as she’d get to a real smile from him in front of all of these people, Lucius pushed off of the table and reached out to offer her his arm. Hermione, scooping the last of her papers into her bag, primly took his arm and the two breezed out of the conference room past Elphias Doge, who had only just managed to remember to
stumble out of the door frame moments before their departure.

* * *

Hermione managed to make it until they were in Muggle London before she began laughing, at first a slight chuckle, but growing to a full-blown belly laugh at the full memory, just a tinge hysterical as the frenetic energy and tension of the past few days spilled out of her. Lucius paused beside her as she clung to his arm to keep herself upright, his smirk growing into one of his rare, true smiles she’d grown to recognize.

“I take it you enjoyed my methods?”

Hermione gasped for breath as she replayed the memory. “Poor Elphias... looked as if he’d never been more confused in his hundred years... And then... Justin... choked! Literally bloody choked on his coffee in shock! What I wouldn’t have given to see the look on his face.”

Lucius grinned, just a hint of viciousness in his eye, as he crowed, “Oh, it was delightful. Maybe someday I’ll give you the memory as a gift.”

“Oh!” Hermione started, blinking wildly up at him. “Speaking of gifts... I have something for you, for... Christmas.” She flushed, plunging a hand into her bag. “I... I brought it just in case we got to speak... And I’m not totally satisfied with it, but...” Lucius was still staring at her, catching up on the rapid change in conversation, when she presented him with the soft leather-bound book. “I was going to wrap it but I wanted to see you open it, and didn’t know if you’d just take it with you when I gave it to you so.”

Lucius gently took the book from her clutching grasp, smoothing his hands reverently over the old leather, carefully paging through the delicate paper.

“It’s... it’s an old edition of Idylls of the King. They’re poems, by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. I wanted to get you a book but thought you’d have all the Wizarding ones I could think of, and we’d been talking about Merlin, and what with the event coming up, I thought maybe...”

Hermione trailed off as Lucius held up a hand to halt her. “Hermione... It’s perfect. It’s brilliant. I have nothing like it but already know it will have a long and cherished place in the library.”

She was positively beaming, her gift having gone over much better than she’d expected, when he reached into an inner pocket of his cloak, no doubt magically expanded, to pull out a package for her. “It appears great minds think alike. I also brought your present, though it’s wrapped, more for its protection than out of any gift-giving tradition. I’d suggest you wait until you’re home to unwrap it fully, so that it can be protected from the elements.”

He passed her the book with a deep exhale that Hermione only barely registered as nervousness, before the thought raced from her mind and she gasped at the cover of the book she was holding beneath a thick layer of magic, protecting the book without concealing it. It was an old text, one of the earliest known on magical theory from Britain, and from the look of the book this might not even be a reprint. Hermione must have been gaping at it, because she could hear the self-satisfied purr in Lucius’ voice as he continued. “Unfortunately I can’t exactly verify its age or provenance, but if you believe the Malfoy family legends, annotated by Merlin himself.” Hermione let out a breath in what could only be described as a squeak, clutching the book tighter, and looked up to meet Lucius’ gaze, which had turned warm and intense again, watching her closely. “Of course, good luck to you, his handwriting is utter shit.”

He gave her a Malfoy smirk, but those eyes were still watching her closely, fiercely, soft grey like
the sky on a rainy day of tea and reading, and she was barely breathing as she swayed forward. “Thank you,” she murmured softly, looking up at him, hoping that her tone or the look in her eyes could convey how much she meant that, how much this book and all it represented meant to her. He seemed to lean forward, eyes dropping to her parted lips, and she was a half a second away from kissing him in the middle of Muggle London with his perfect present to her clutched in her hands, consequences be damned, when one of the passing Muggles bumped into her without so much as a sorry, knocking her into his broad, solid chest. She took one, two deep breaths of that intoxicating cologne he always wore, mixed so well with the crisp January air, felt the hard muscle beneath her splayed palm through his dress shirt, curled her hand against it slightly, fingernails scraping slightly against his abdomen, heard his sharp intake of breath, felt him go still beneath her, and then pushed away, panting as she turned to place the book in her bag.

She took a deep breath and counted to four, feeling the heavy weight of the ring on her hand reestablish itself, and turned back to Lucius. He was watching her impassively, his expression guarded but a glimmer of that same intensity remained in his eyes. “To coffee?” she offered breathlessly, and, he gave her a small smile as he put her gift to him in that same pocket and offered her his arm again.

* * *

The pair found the same table they’d sat at the last time they’d been here, what felt like years ago but which had in reality been only months. After they’d begun their coffee and pastries in companionable silence, Hermione looked up at Lucius, mouth growing tight as she wondered how to bring up the one question she needed answered.

He noticed her stare and looked up from his croissant with curiosity. “Out with it, then.”

Hermione blinked several times, a frown crossing her face, and Lucius gave her a wry grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “The last time you had that look on your face, sitting here, you asked me about the Dark Lord. Is there another painful subject you’d like to dredge up or is your scone not to your liking?”

Flushing, she turned away from his gaze. “No, I just... Well... I’m sure you saw, in the papers, about... Ginny.” She waited for his confirmatory nod before she took a deep breath and continued, raising her eyes to meet his gaze, steeling herself for whatever the answer was. “I talked to Ginny, and I just need to know... Did you know?”

There was a long pause, and then. “Yes.”

Hermione exhaled heavily, a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, frown already growing. “And you didn’t think to tell me?”

Now it was his turn for his lips to thin, the set of his jaw growing tight. “It wasn’t my secret to tell.”

She felt her face growing red, and leaned forward across the table. “I don’t particularly care. Ginny is my friend, Harry is my friend, and I thought you were my friend. I didn’t think you’d keep something so big from me.”

His scowl deepened and, where she leaned forward in her anger, trying to get in his face, he drew himself up to his full height, that old imperiousness back in full force. “I’d think you should be more mad at your friend Mrs. Potter for keeping her secret from you than at me.”

“Oh, I am plenty mad at Ginny, don’t you worry,” Hermione breathed, but Lucius leaned forward
to cut her off.

“And no matter the relationship between us, Hermione, because I am your friend, and you have become one of my closest and dearest friends, Draco is my son, and I will keep his secrets to the grave, whatever they may be, whatever he may ask of me.” Hermione heard the tightness in his voice, the unspoken rest of the sentence, rather than fail him again, and swallowed heavily, gaze falling to the half-eaten scone in front of her.

“I—I’m sorry,” she said, quietly. “I know you would keep Draco’s secrets. I just wanted to know. I...” She paused, weighing the shame of the truth against the soothing balm of honesty after she’d gotten his feathers ruffled over Draco. “When I talked to Ginny and she told me about the Polyjuice, I thought... after the comments you’d made at the ball, about positive qualities and whatnot... I thought that it might have been you taking the Polyjuice.”

Well. The painful shame she’d felt at confessing the depth of her insecurities was very nearly made up for by the way that Lucius blanched and began coughing, breath seemingly having escaped him at the thought of carrying on an affair with Ginny Potter.

Hermione shot him a smug grin. “I’ll trade you the memory of Justin’s face this morning for the memory of your face just now.”

He gave her a glowering stare that would have been intimidating had his eyes not still been watering from the coughing. “I have no interest in bedding the Weasel girl.”

“A Weasel girl for a ferret boy, a match made in heaven,” she cooed, enjoying the way the vein in his neck throbbed. She chickled softly, and he seemed to relax into the pause as she let him come down from the shock before continuing, softly. “Is he... Are they good together? For each other?”

Lucius paused, as if considering the question. “Yes... I think so. I don’t pretend to understand it, but... she makes him a better man than... than I could ever make him.” Hermione’s chest ached at the strain in Lucius’ voice, to say those words, but she let him continue. “Draco was in a... dark place, after the war, after Narcissa...” Hermione looked away at the woman’s name, face flushing as she once again wondered what on earth she could possibly think Lucius would see in her after a woman like Narcissa, hands going unconsciously to pull at the loose curls of her hair, twisting and tugging as she bit her lip, before Lucius slid one of his long legs to brush against hers under the table, gaze meeting hers with a sad, knowing look, and Hermione slowly lowered her hands, the roaring anxiety within her assuaged at his gentle reassurance. “Ginny helped Draco out of that dark place, somehow. And I believe he helped her out of one as well.”

Hermione paused, brow furrowing as she thought of the best way to phrase her question. “But... why Draco? No offense, but, it doesn’t seem as if Draco would be a logical choice to help Ginny work through that trauma, given...” She paused and waved her hands awkwardly, as if that could encompass all of the varying ways in which Draco Malfoy’s and Ginny Potter’s pasts would not seem to be similar enough to lead down a shared road of healing.

Lucius frowned, one corner of his mouth turned down in an expression that Hermione had grown to learn meant he was puzzling over something in his head. The question was whether he was puzzling over what the answer to her question was, or how to say it to her. “I think...” he began, slowly, watching her cautiously, and Hermione realized that it had been the latter, steeling herself for the rest of his answer, “that, while Potter, and you, and the Weasley brute, withstood unspeakable horrors during the war, you very infrequently committed them. Ginny... in the thrall of the diary, didn’t have the choice, and during that year at Hogwarts, didn’t have the luxury. And Draco knows what that is like, where Potter doesn’t.”
Hermione paled, looking down at her scone with faint nausea. She’d never asked Ginny about her year with Tom, because Ginny had never brought it up except to throw in their faces how she’d come to terms with it, to remind Harry that she could help him, and they’d been so busy with Voldemort, but... As an adult, Hermione could sway in her chair at the realization that Ginny had been eleven years old when she’d woken up with blood on her hands and no clue how it had gotten there, but the knowledge that she must have done something terrible with those hands. And the Carrows... She’d heard rumors, but both Ginny and Neville had merely gone pale and distant whenever that year was brought up, and Hermione had never pushed.

“She’d never blame you,” Lucius said gently, his leg pressing against hers again, warm and reassuring pressure that she leaned into, sighing. “But you can see how she and my son might have had more in common than would first appear.”

Hermione nodded heavily, and gave him a wan smile. “It seems like you, at least, have warmed to her.”

Lucius’ face twisted into something like a grin, but with a heavy hint of bitterness. “Yes, though I’d warm a great deal more if she’d stop treating my son like her dirty secret.”

Hermione started at the harsh words, tilting her head in confusion. “But... I thought she was doing it to protect him... She didn’t want him dragged through the papers and lambasted again.”

Lucius shrugged, the too-casual movement doing little to mask the tension underneath from her knowing eyes. “Yes, perhaps. But don’t think that Mrs. Potter isn’t also trying to save herself the discomfort of change, to have her cake and eat it too. And perhaps the cost of being a secret, like she is ashamed of him, is more than whatever cost Draco would pay in the tabloids.”

Hermione bit her lip, wondering over the truth of his words, which echoed thoughts she’d had about Ginny about trying to avoid consequences, living this in-between world that hurt both Harry and Draco, and even echoed Ginny’s words, from so long ago, before Hermione had any idea what they might reference. …things will have to change. And I don’t want them to. I want everything to go on, just as it is right now. Words Hermione’s thoughts had echoed not too long ago. She felt a pit in her stomach, looking up in shock, at the realization that maybe she had been just as bad as Ginny. Not, of course, in all of the ways that Ginny had lied and deceived and hurt those around her, but at least in the fact that she, too, had kept Lucius a secret, like she was ashamed of their friendship. Her hands tightened on the edge of the table as she considered that that might have been the cause of Lucius’ newfound boldness in his invitation to coffee, considered that she might have been hurting him the way he’d described Ginny hurting Draco, and she found herself unable to meet his eyes as she sighed.

“I... I think you may be right, in some ways. But... she’s in a difficult position, and she’s trying to do the best she can.”

He raised one brow, his sharp eyes hiding nothing about the extent to which he understood the line she was walking, between talking about Ginny and about herself, but he didn’t challenge her statement, simply nodded. “She needs to figure out what she wants.”

Hermione nodded grimly, her eyes cast down. “I know. I told her the same thing.”

There was a heavy pause between the two, before Lucius looked up and gave her a small smile, but a real one, and leaned his leg against hers again, another reassuring brush of contact. “Now, the tours should begin and focus on the history of Great Britain...”

“Certainly not, they should begin with the earliest Muggle legends, including Greece, Rome, and
When she returned home after a long and fruitful discussion regarding the plans and focus of the
tours that they would give during their first event, Ron was sprawled on the couch, watching a
game of Muggle football (for which she could blame Dean Thomas). As she entered, he turned
back to her with a wide grin on his face.

“Hi ’Mione. What have you been up to all morning?” he said, eyeing the lack of packages in her
hand.

“Oh, you know, the committee meeting ran long,” she began, but paused, even as his eyes turned
back to the screen in front of him, satisfied with her answer, mind turning over the conversation she
and Lucius had had over coffee, the way he’d described Ginny as treating Draco like a dirty secret,
the casual way he’d invited her to coffee in front of them all, and continued, voice wavering only
slightly, “and then I had coffee with Lucius Malfoy.”

The roaring of the crowds on the television seemed deafening in the silence that fell in that
moment, Hermione’s breath caught in her throat as Ron froze before turning around to look at her,
slowly, his face steadily turning redder.

“I must be losing my bloody mind, because I thought you said you had coffee with Lucius
Malfoy.”

Hermione’s pulse was pounding in her ears, but she drew herself up, back straightening and chin
lifting imperceptibly. “Yes, that’s what I said.”

Ron looked stunned, face beet red, as if she had come in and said she was going to go live in
Narnia or something else similarly outrageous. His mouth opened and closed momentarily, and
Hermione couldn’t stop herself from making the unflattering comparison to a fish out of water.

“We’ve been working together quite closely on Doge’s cultural committee, and he invited me to
get coffee in Muggle London to discuss some matters further.”

“Oh, is that it then? That’s quite simple.” Hermione smiled tightly, a little hesitant at how quickly
Ron had come around and the tightness in his voice, before he carried on. “You’ve just gone
completely round the bend.”

Hermione’s jaw tightened as she cast a glare in his direction. “Ronald.”

“How?” he shot back, leaping up from his seat to stalk around the couch towards her. “You’re
just back from coffee with a Death Eater.”

Hermione felt her nails digging into the soft skin of her palm as her fists clenched tightly. “A
former Death Eater. One who served his time and was released by the Wizengamot. One who I’ve
been working with for months now who has been nothing but polite and helpful.”

“I cannot believe you would do this! He watched you tortured in his parlor! I... You... I won’t let
you put yourself in danger like this!”

“You won’t let me?” Hermione’s voice was soft and slow now, her eyes flaring with a glint that
even Ron must have recognized as dangerous, as he took a step back closer to the couch. “I think
you’ll find that I’m a grown woman, Ronald Weasley, and I dare you to try to stop me from doing
whatever the hell I want.”
Temporarily cowed but not defeated, Ron slouched his way back to the couch, glowering at the West Ham game. “Fine. It’ll be your bloody funeral.”

“Fine. I’m going to go read.”

“Fine.”

Hermione stomped over to the coffee table to pick up the book Lucius had lent her before she whirled off to the bedroom, pausing only to look back over her shoulder from the hallway. “But you will see him at the cultural committee events, and you will be polite to him. We’re giving tours together at the National Gallery event next week.”

Ron’s spluttering disbelief was drowned out by the roaring sounds of a goal on the telly, and Hermione cut both short with a quick slam of the bedroom door.
The Devourers

Chapter Summary

The night of the cultural committee's first event arrives.

Chapter Notes

This chapter focuses a lot more on Lucius/Hermione and has a lot of their interaction (yay!). And, as I said, there be smut ahead. You were warned. This was a fun chapter to write, so I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Devourers

Over the next week, Ron and Hermione went about their lives as if the events of Sunday afternoon hadn’t occurred, just a coolness to their interactions that was growing familiar. Friday evening came quickly, and Hermione was bustling about the bedroom, trying to get ready for the event, halfway into her dress and fretting over her hair, when Ron came in and cleared his throat for her attention. She gave him a sidelong glance, pausing with her dress halfway up her body, and nodded.

“You’re going to be giving your tour with Malfoy, I remember,” he began, spitting the name out like it was a dirty word. Uncertain of where Ron was headed with the conversation, Hermione just nodded cautiously, watching him closely.

“What would you say if I refused to come, if he would be there? If I told you that I think it’s bloody terrible what the Ministry is doing, letting him be on this committee and represent the Ministry and all, like this?”

Hermione stiffened, casting a long glance over to where Ron was leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest, shoulders squared. She turned her head back to the ground in front of her, and slowly and deliberately pulled the black sheath up the rest of her body and zipped it before turning to face him.

“I guess I would say...” She paused, taking a deep breath. “I would say that was your prerogative to attend or not attend.” Ron leaned forward as if to speak again, but she held up a hand. “I would suggest you reconsider, both because I have put a lot of work over the past few months into this committee and this event and it is important to me, and because I think it is disappointing that you feel that there is no hope for or chance of change or rehabilitation.”

Ron stared at her, eyes wide for a moment, clearly thinking through his response, but Hermione, suddenly bold, took a deep breath. “And because he is my friend. I will be giving this tour with him, whether you come or not.”

The atmosphere in the room was tense, silent and still and charged, electricity sparking through the
air between them as Hermione’s words hung there, weighing on them both, neither quite meeting each other’s eyes. Hermione felt like her heart would pound itself right out of her chest, wild and frantic and suddenly anxious at her impetuous burst of honesty, but she also felt... lighter, freer, as if some of the dreadful weight that she’d felt hanging around her neck for months on end had lifted. She tried not to let it weigh on her too much that she’d told Ron her friendship with Lucius was more important than his opinions and feelings, that she’d chosen Lucius over him, at least in this scenario. She chanced a glance up at Ron, who was frozen, a throttled look on his reddening face. After another few, long moments, he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and looked her in the face.

“Have a nice night. I’ll be at the pub.”

And with that, he turned and walked out of the room, down the hall, and when she heard the door of their flat slam shut, Hermione hated the rush of relief that overpowered her disappointment.

* * *

When the Ministry’s secured Portkey finished depositing her in the entry hall of the museum, Hermione was greeted by the soothing sounds of classical music and soft murmuring. She opened her eyes and breathed in deeply, a steadying, calming breath, as she took in the already gathering crowds, admiring the soaring architecture and gawking at the still paintings and sculptures.

She heard the crowds rouse to a gentle roar behind her and turned to see Harry and Ginny, arriving together, Harry’s arm wrapped around Ginny’s shoulder, Ginny’s reddening face turned into Harry’s chest. The many pictures that were snapped of them would depict a solid couple, a united front, Hermione was sure, but to her familiar eye she could see the tension in the lines of their bodies, could discern the hard set of Harry’s jaw and that Ginny’s face wasn’t flushed with ardour but with annoyance. The two pushed through the crowds and made their way over to Hermione, greeting her with warm hugs.

“Where’s Ron?” Ginny asked, craning her head in the direction of the refreshments table (a good guess).

“He’s, ah,” Hermione paused, flushing and shifting uncertainly on her demure heels, “he’s not coming.”

“Is he sick?” Ginny asked, brow furrowed, but in this instance Harry was the perceptive one, eyebrows knitting together and green eyes flaring as he looked at her with something like pity.

“Erm, no,” Hermione said, twisting her hands. “He, uh, he said that, as I’d be giving my tours with Lucius Malfoy, he wouldn’t be attending.”

Ginny flinched, while a frown deepened on Harry’s face. Ginny was the first to speak, recovering her composure enough to protest, “But Hermione, you’ve put so much work into this! What a rotten prat. I’ll tell Mum, I swear I will-”

She was interrupted by Harry, who leaned forward with a strained grin at Ginny. “I think what Gin means to say is that we’re very sorry Ron can’t make it, but we’ll be your two biggest fans on the tour. We’ll cheer at everything you say - very quietly,” he amended quickly at Hermione’s wide-eyed glare in his direction at the mention of loud noises. “Although,” he continued, “I hope you won’t mind being on camera. The press will be drooling - Harry and Ginny Potter cavorting around an art museum with a Malfoy.”

Ginny choked slightly, covering it up with a quick coughing fit that had Harry giving her an odd
look, but Hermione just frowned at the both of them. “Don’t be silly, photographers won’t be allowed in the museum proper. Those giant flashes could do serious harm to the art, and we’d really rather not any unfortunate accidents.”

The pair both looked relieved that the cameras, at least, would be left behind, though Ginny still looked apprehensive at the prospect of an evening spent in close contact with both Harry and Draco, who would undoubtedly accompany his father. Hermione almost felt bad for the witch, or would have if Ginny hadn’t thoroughly deserved her discomfort. It was her own fault she was in this position.

Noticing the tension in Ginny’s face, Harry turned to her. “Oh, I’m sorry Gin, will you be alright going on Hermione’s tour? I know you were... bothered at the Yule Ball.”

Ginny couldn’t hide the flash of guilt that rippled across her face, and Harry’s look of concern turned confused. “No, no, I’ll be fine. I... I was being silly. It didn’t really bother me that much.”

“Oh,” Harry said, brows furrowed as he tried to think through the sudden change, when the entire trio were blessedly distracted by a gentle cough from Elphias Doge, signaling he was ready to begin his introductory speech.

Hermione took the opportunity to scan the crowd and find two, tall white-blonde heads of hair, standing out from the clusters of people across the hall like a beacon. Hermione let her eyes drift over them, intending to focus on Draco, the first time she’d seen him since Ginny’s revelation, to take some measure of the man, but she found herself unable to focus on the younger man, her eyes drifting constantly to Lucius. He was wearing Muggle clothing, as they all were, and Hermione swallowed, thinking that it was perhaps a good thing for her poor, confused, reckless heart that it was the first time she’d seen him in Muggle clothing. The suit was tailored impeccably, showing off the broad, powerful build he’d been slowly regaining over the months they’d been corresponding and that was usually at least somewhat hidden by his billowing robes. His hair was pulled back, as usual, and Hermione shook her head to clear her mind of thoughts of tearing the tie out of it and running her fingers through those long, silky strands.

She felt a gentle nudge against her foot and and jumped, only to turn and see Ginny looking at her with knowing eyes. Hermione flushed, but she couldn’t take Ginny’s approbation seriously when the redhead herself couldn’t seem to keep her eyes on Elphias Doge for more than a minute at a time before they flitted back across the hall. Hermione took a deep breath, trying to calm herself and regain her focus. She had to give a tour with Lucius, and she couldn’t let herself get like this, no matter how stupidly, ethereally handsome he looked in that suit.

* * *

The tour had started off wonderfully. Hermione and Lucius had a large group, something that Hermione chalked up to the combination of the fact that a number of the purebloods who had deigned to come had flocked to Lucius, that she and Harry and Ginny drew a crowd of their own, and that there were a large number of people who had come just to gawk at the odd pair that Hermione and Lucius made as guides. Or, at least, that they anticipated Hermione and Lucius would make. On the contrary, the two slipped into an easy partnership, as if they’d been doing this for ages. It was a relief to Hermione, who knew that she was starting off the tour in a terrible headspace, her brain swirling with disappoint and relief and guilt over the relief about Ron’s absence and the conversation that had led to it, the guilt heightened by her earlier, terribly distracting thoughts about Lucius in that suit. She had started off the presentations anxious, her explanations easily straying into the didactic and eye-glazing, but found herself relaxing as Lucius joined in when she strayed, his strong voice supporting her, gently nudging her back to the topics
they’d planned, setting her up to deliver points they’d discussed and allowing her to regain her confident footing. In front of so many people, he didn’t dare do anything more than shoot her a brief smile when she finally got herself into a steady rhythm, but she felt herself grow warm - somewhere low in her core at his lopsided grin, and somewhere achey in her chest at his gentle, confident support. After her first few nervous stumbles, the rest of the presentation carried on spectacularly from their point of view; they delivered their content clearly and their group was obviously interested, with a number of questions coming from the audience, even from the handful of purebloods.

It was around halfway through that the tour started to break down. Not, to Hermione’s great relief, from anything she or Lucius were doing, nor, she felt certain, did many people even notice that things had started to go awry, other than perhaps the feel of a strained tension in the air. But Hermione was considering hexing Ginny the next time she saw her alone, if not for disrupting the tour than for what she was doing to poor Harry. The witch had been doing a passable job of not staring at Draco Malfoy when he was standing alone at the edge of the group, listening to Hermione and his father with pleasant interest, but when he was approached by a thin, willowy blonde witch with a sweet face and dragged over to join a group consisting of the blonde, a familiar-looking witch Hermione thought she recognized as Daphne Greengrass, and an older couple who were presumably the girls’ parents, Ginny had tensed instantly. From that point on, it had been a losing battle to disguise Ginny’s interest, between her frequently flitting gaze and her sudden inability to focus on anything Lucius and Hermione were saying. By the time they had reached the pre-Raphaelite works and were discussing the popularity of Arthurian legend, even Harry was growing confused by the flush rising high on Ginny’s face and her flustered demeanor.

As they led their group down a hall, Lucius leaned close to Hermione to murmur under his breath, only for her ears, “That glance of theirs, but for the street...”

Hermione looked up with delighted surprise, recognizing the lines from Tennyson’s pen, flushed with pleasure that he’d enjoyed her gift enough to read it, and closely. The comparison to Lancelot and Guinevere, while it made Hermione a bit queasy, given the ending, was apt enough to make her eyes dance with mischievous delight. She raised a brow and answered quickly, in similar murmured tones, “Of thee they dreamed not, nor of me, these.”

She started as she felt his hand brush against hers, but by the time she’d looked down between them, he’d already snatched his hand back to rest inside his suit pocket, as if the reach for her hand had been involuntary, instinctual. One part of her brain was screaming to get his hand back, to feel his large, strong fingers wrapped around her hand, take their measure and feel his reassuring warmth, but another part of her was noticing how the angles he made as he slid his hands into the pockets of suit pants were undeniably sensual, casual and confident and highlighting the breadth of his chest, the stretch of his bicep against the shirt. A pitifully small part of her was arguing that she should neither be holding Lucius Malfoy’s hand nor admiring his physique.

They finally reached the last gallery room on the tour. At this point, Lucius and Hermione’s easy camaraderie was unmistakeable, even to the onlookers apparently, from the curious and confused glances Hermione could feel pointed her direction as the two bounced ideas rapidly back and forth, laughing at each other’s jokes, finishing each other’s sentences, but she couldn’t bother to worry like she once would have. She was having fun, after a long and terrible week of tension with Ron, and this, with Lucius, was easy. She felt competent, confident, charming and assured of Lucius’ support should things start to go wrong. So they ended the tour on a high note, Hermione positively suffused with triumph and barely able to stop herself from grinning up at Lucius and hugging him then and there. As the crowd talked amongst themselves before beginning to disperse, Hermione could even hear several of the older purebloods remarking on how shockingly civilized this affair had all been, how unusual that the Muggle paintings, still as they were, could portray
And then Hermione heard a high, tinkling laugh, and noticed the blonde witch from earlier leaning against Draco’s arm as she giggled at something he had said, looking up at him through fluttering lashes. He looked impassively pleasant, as always, but a quick glance at Ginny told Hermione all she needed to know about the redhead’s level of rationality. No, instead, Ginny turned and practically bolted out of the room, leaving Harry to hurry after her with a frown across his face. Hermione sighed, feeling almost bad at noticing Draco’s stricken expression as he watched Ginny leave the room over the blonde woman’s head. What a mess. At least it had mostly waited until after the tour was complete before it had all gone terribly sideways, she thought.

As the last of her group made their way back to the main reception room, Hermione found herself pushing the opposite direction, deeper into the museum, a hand coming up to rub at her temples as she tried to calm her racing thoughts. Her heart was racing with adrenaline from the triumph of their tour, but her elation was undercut by the anxious thrum of tension caused by Ginny’s actions. Her flushed and distressed face, Harry’s confusion and concern, the pained expression on Draco’s drawn features when Ginny had rushed out - all of them flitted through her mind in quick succession, intercut with Ron’s sullen, set expression, the shock that had spread across his face when she’d told him Lucius was her friend and that she would choose this tour with him, the finality of the door slamming shut.

She found herself staring up at a familiar painting, alone in a side alcove of the Renaissance section, when she felt Lucius approach behind her, smelled his distinctive cologne, and closed her eyes, breathing it in deeply.

“Going to tell me what’s been bothering you all night now?” he asked, stepping up behind her, so close she could have relaxed, just slightly, and been leaning back against him, letting his sturdy frame support her physically the way he’d been supporting her all night, but she stayed upright.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said with faux-lightness in her tone, not even sure she wanted to begin the story. “I was just nervous about the presentation.”

She heard an undignified snort from behind her, and was glad that he couldn’t see the small smile that flitted across her face at the knowledge that he, the great Lucius Malfoy, could make such a plebeian noise. “Please, Hermione. I’m trying not to be offended you think so little of my mental acumen. You’ve been so tense it must be painful all evening, and your ginger brute is nowhere to be found. Now, tell me what’s wrong,” he said, tone erring just slightly into the commanding at the end.

Hermione pressed her lips together in a thin line, hating him for his wretched attention to detail in that moment. She decided to ignore the latter part of his statement. “I’m not tense.”

“Oh, really?” he said, and she didn’t have enough warning to steel herself against her body’s treacherous reaction as his hands came up to rest on her shoulders, the feel of his long fingers against her bare skin enough to make her stomach flutter slightly. The pleasurable sensation was cut short, however, when he gently pushed, rolling her shoulders back and down, causing a stretch as Hermione realized she’d been tensing her back, holding her shoulders hunched and close to her ears all night.

She couldn’t stop the small groan that escaped her, or the way her head lolled back at his touch, but she could close her eyes as she grumbled, “Stop smirking, I can feel your smugness.”

He didn’t bother to respond, content in his victory, whenever it would come, and so he just continued the pressure on her shoulders, working through the tension there with precise motions of
his strong hands. They’d been standing there in silence, Hermione growing increasingly more relaxed by the minute, when Lucius’ voice startled her out of the pleasant nothingness her brain had begun to settle into.

“She’s beautiful.”

Her eyes flew open, looking around for someone he could be talking to or about, when she realized with a flush that he meant the painting directly in front of them. “That’s what David thought too.” She could sense the eyebrow raise from behind her, and fought to stifle a giggle. “King David, that is. That’s Bathsheba.”

“I’m unfamiliar with the story. You’ll have to enlighten me, my brilliant tour guide.”

Hermione let herself grin, even as she was leaning further into his touch. “King David was an ancient king of Israel and Judah, a brave warrior who slew a giant and conquered Jerusalem. When he was king, he was on a roof and he saw Bathsheba bathing below. He was struck by her beauty and arranged for her to be brought to him. She became pregnant, but she was married, so David first tried to call her husband home from war in the hopes people would think it was his, but he refused to violate an ancient rule prohibiting intercourse by soldiers in active service, so David arranged for the husband to be sent to the front lines of battle, where he was killed. Then David married Bathsheba, and their second child grew to be the wise king Solomon.”

Lucius was silent for a few moments, contemplating her story. “And what did the beautiful Bathsheba think of all this?”

Hermione was speechless for a moment, both because she had no well of knowledge from which to draw on this point, and at the fact that he could still surprise her. “Well, um... I suppose no one knows. It’s not exactly like her viewpoint was well-represented in history.”

Lucius hummed in agreement, his fingers slowing as he looked again at the painting. “And what do you think Bathsheba thought of this? What did she want, in all this?”

Hermione frowned, biting her lip as she caught the undertone of his question, her heart beginning to pound in her chest. After several long moments, she decided to ignore the most recent question he’d asked and answer an earlier, easier one. No doubt precisely as he’d intended.

“Ron didn’t come tonight because I was giving my tour with you.”

His hands faltered momentarily against her shoulders, but he caught himself and continued those long, languorous strokes. “Is that so?”

“I told him that I hoped he’d reconsider, both attending and his view on you. I told him that I’d give my tour with you, regardless of what he thought or said, whether he came or not. I told him that... that you were my friend.”

The stilling of his hands was unmistakeable now, and there was a pause in which Hermione wondered if she’d overstepped somehow, when his hands began moving again, this time slipping under the fabric of her dress, the touch more caress than massage, and he stepped forward, leaning down to whisper to her, his warm breath on her ear and the brush of his long hair against her bare shoulder sending a shiver down her spine. “Is that what I am, Hermione? Your friend?” His hands rose to the thin column of her neck, caressing and massaging, soft and then firm, and Hermione couldn’t stop herself from moaning softly, her head falling back to rest against his warm chest, engulfed in that intoxicating cologne, as the simmering lust that had been lurking beneath her skin all evening that she was watching him, interacting with him, suddenly burst into sharp, beautiful
tension. She was gratified to feel his breath catch in his chest at her moan, the knowledge that she was having an effect on him too sending a pleasant throb through her.

“Is that how you think of me, Hermione? You don’t think of me as anything more than a friend?” He was murmuring against her neck now, words interspersed with the barest fluttering touch of his lips against her skin, and she was afraid to let herself speak, found herself mindlessly reaching back to thread her hands through his long hair and pull his head closer to her. He laughed darkly against the dip of her collarbone. “You don’t ever think about me in a non-platonic way? Never about, say... my hands caressing your bare skin?” As he spoke, he ran his hands past the length of her neck and down to cup her breasts, just barely skimming against the fabric. Hermione whined, his words as bad as his teasing touch on her body, and his soft chuckle into her neck had her arching wantonly, trying to press her breasts into his warm palms. His hands were skimming down to gently caress her hips before she could get the firm touch she wanted, but she was at least pleased to feel that he was hard against her back, to feel his sharp intake of breath when she ground back against him.

“Never laid in bed at night and thought about my hands on you, my mouth on you?” His hands were sinking lower now, tugging at her dress and sliding it up her thighs, and her grip on his head tightened. When he finally slid a hand to gently ghost over her core, Hermione moaned, almost drowning out his deliciously guttural curse at finding her knickers soaking wet. “Never touched yourself imagining it was me?” His breath was coming faster now as he stroked her through the thin fabric of her underwear, the other hand coming to clamp on her hip and hold her against him. She squirmed into his touch, desperate for more, even as the sparks of pleasure arcing through her had her body tensing. She whined again as he slid his fingers to her clit, motions fast and sure now, and she was on her toes, her body clenching desperately at the pleasure his dextrous fingers were giving her, even as Hermione tried to grind down onto his fingers, tried to get more pressure, to get him to slip inside of her, to get what she needed to come. She raked her nails down his scalp, murmuring pleas and curses into the soft wool of his suit coat, and felt more than heard his low growl. His pace increased, fire igniting across her skin as he whispered hoarsely against her skin, “Never imagined me there with you, touching you, telling you what a good girl you are when you come for me?” Hermione gasped brokenly as he finally let her grind against his hand, gave her the precise speed and pressure she needed, unable to stop herself as she whispered desperately against him, confessing in a trembling voice, “Yes, yes, I have, I’ve imagined it, thought about you, only you, Lucius,” and between his words and the blessed pressure on her clit, it was only his other hand, quickly coming up to clap over her mouth, that stifled her keening moan as she felt her world collapse in on itself, orgasm shuddering through her with more force than any she’d ever had before, and she came with his name on her lips.

He held her against him, panting heavily, as he let her come down, and she wasn’t sure whether she hated herself for ever giving him the knowledge he’d been able to use against her or darkly grateful that he’d used it to give her the best orgasm of her life. Coming back into herself, she felt the press of him against her back and the aching emptiness between her legs, and, heat flaring within her again, she turned around to face him, already reaching for those damnable suit pants, sinking to her knees almost instinctively, desperate to touch him. She’d only just gotten him unbuttoned when he stepped back, eyes wide with something like awe even as his eyes were molten silver, the look he was giving her heated enough that she felt she would begin to melt under it.

“No,” he said, his voice hoarse, and he cleared his throat before continuing. “No - as I think I’ve thoroughly demonstrated, whether you let yourself acknowledge it or not, you’re already mine, Hermione Granger. But you have to get rid of that,” he said with a pointed stare at the ring on her left hand, “before I’m yours.”

He took a deep shuddering breath, and she wasn’t sure whether she was grateful that she realized
his hands were shaking as he refastened his trousers. She was still on her knees when he leaned
down to press a chaste, gentle kiss to the top of her head, one hand caressing her cheek gently as he
murmured “I’m sorry, I’m sorry Hermione” against her skin, and then he walked out of the room.

Hermione took a few minutes to pull herself together, both from the shattering orgasm and the
seeping sense of guilt that was rising within her, cold spreading through her limbs that had been on
fire just minutes before. She covered her face with her hands, as if she could hide from the
knowledge of her shame. Though, if she was being honest with herself, Lucius had been right -
she’d been his, in every way but this, before this moment. It had just taken this for her to see it, to
admit what she’d been afraid to acknowledge. She hadn’t been able to touch Ron in months, and
even before that hadn’t been able to touch him or herself without thinking of Lucius. She’d as
much as told Ron tonight that when it came down to it, she would choose her connection with
Lucius and her faith in the changed man over Ron and his discomfort. Which had been the bigger
betrayal, she wondered - that or this? At that thought, a dam burst inside of her and she felt tears
running down her cheeks as she wondered how she’d let herself get here.

* * *

When the event was almost over, the museum almost ready to close, Hermione finally wandered
back to the main hall, squaring her shoulders and walking quickly in the hopes that any stragglers
wouldn’t notice her, particularly not in her disheveled state. She wasn’t lucky, though, because she
was halfway across the room when she heard a voice call out her name. She whirled, with a shaky
smile, to see Harry and Ginny standing near the refreshments table, waving her over.

“We were wondering where you’d gone,” Harry said.

“I, uh... I was just.. looking at the art,” Hermione finished lamely, feeling a flush rising on her face.

Neither Potter seemed to notice, however, and Hermione suddenly noticed that Ginny’s face was
red and puffy, as if she’d been crying, and Harry couldn’t seem to focus on anything but the ground
in front of him. “We just wanted to, uh, apologize,” Ginny said hoarsely, with a glance at Harry,
“for running off so soon after the end of the tour. You did a great job, Hermione. This whole event
was amazing, and we both learned a lot. And I thought I knew a ton about Muggles, what with my
dad and all.”

Harry nodded, raising his gaze to Hermione’s face. “I can’t believe you guys put this all together,
Hermione. And I see why Lucius Malfoy was a tour guide - I couldn’t believe the
number of
purebloods I saw here, and whether or not they really cared, it means something that they acted
like they cared. What you guys are doing is important, Hermione. We’re so proud of you.”

Hermione suddenly found herself fighting tears, and sniffled heavily before she flung herself at the
couple, wrapping an arm around each of them. “Thank you guys,” she muttered to them, squeezing
them tightly. She pulled away to see them both smiling bashfully at her, clearly somewhat taken
aback by her sudden show of emotion.

“Well, erm, I’ll go get our cloaks, Gin,” Harry said, shifting awkwardly before setting off.

With Harry gone, Hermione turned to stare at Ginny. “Did you apologize to Harry already for
making a fool of yourself?”

Ginny sniffled, avoiding Hermione’s gaze. “Yes.”

“And did you explain why you were a proper idiot over some giggling, or did you have a handy lie
about a World Cup lay for that one too?” Her voice was acid, all of Hermione’s seething self-
loathing suddenly bubbling over, directed at Ginny, and she winced as she saw the hurt in Ginny’s eyes, but couldn’t stop herself from lashing out.

“No,” Ginny whispered at the floor.

Hermione leaned in close to the redhead, looking for all the word like she was whispering a secret to her friend, but her tone was ice. “Buck the fuck up, Ginny. Stop snivelling and crying and fretting. Yes, you’ve hurt Harry, yes, you’ve hurt Draco, yes, you’ve put yourself in an impossible position. But you’re in it, so be the Ginny Weasley I’ve known my whole life and stand up and accept your choices and move forward.” She paused to draw breath and saw Ginny looking at her with wide eyes. “Tell him, Ginny, or I will.”

Harry walked back over, cloaks in hand, and gave Hermione and Ginny a broad smile. “Ready?”

Ginny looked pale and drawn, and Hermione felt like she was going to be sick. “I’ll take a Muggle cab. See you guys,” she said with a wave, and turned to go out the main doors, desperately gulping in the refreshing, cold air of winter London.

Chapter End Notes

The poem Hermione and Lucius quote is from Merlin and Vivien, from Idylls of the King, when Vivien is talking about Lancelot and Guinevere. The full quote is as follows:

"Is that the Lancelot? goodly—ay, but gaunt:
Courteous—amends for gauntness—takes her hand—
That glance of theirs, but for the street, had been
A clinging kiss—how hand lingers in hand!
Let go at last!—they ride away—to hawk
For waterfowl. Royaller game is mine.
For such a supersensual sensual bond
As that gray cricket chirpt of at our hearth—
Touch flax with flame—a glance will serve—the liars!
Ah little rat that borest in the dyke
Thy hole by night to let the boundless deep
Down upon far-off cities while they dance—
Or dream—of thee they dreamed not—nor of me
These—ay, but each of either;"

The painting I was looking at was Bathsheba, by Artemisia Gentileschi. I am by no means an expert on Bible stories and leaned heavily on Wikipedia, so please forgive any errors/lack of nuance there.
Hermione, Harry and Ginny have a day for honesty.

Somewhat shorter chapter, but I hope you all enjoy! A lot of things are coming to a head, obviously, but from here on out there will be much more smut to look forward to (!!!).

On that note, thank you all very much for all your lovely comments again! It honestly makes my day to read them.

When Hermione arrived home that night, she found the apartment empty, Ron presumably still down at the pub. She felt guilty relief flood through her body as she slid into the empty bed, heart still pounding with anxious, restless energy. She had cheated on Ron. She had been cheating on Ron? Emotionally, yes, if not physically. But she’d tried, hadn’t she? Tried to talk to Ron about her ideas, thoughts, emotions, interests, all of those things she’d ultimately poured into Lucius, but she’d been rebuffed at every turn. Perhaps she and Ron had just... grown out of compatibility, and Lucius had nothing to do with it at all. But thoughts of Lucius and compatibility led her mind down paths on their obvious sexual compatibility, in addition to their intellectual match, and Hermione shivered against the cool sheets, pressing her thighs together at the memory of Lucius’ hands on her earlier. She had been on fire, completely consumed with her lust and sexual pleasure, forgetting herself entirely even in the semi-public of the gallery. And Ron had told her she was frigid, and she’d believed him. She rolled over, toying with the ring on her left hand. No, Ron had certainly been mistaken on that front. They just didn’t have that sexual spark she felt with Lucius, and where once she’d been fine without it, content to believe that the other parts of the relationship made up for its absence, that she would likely never feel that anyway, now she knew it simply wasn’t true, none of it. She had evidence to the contrary. And with Ron’s stinging words of that night, what felt like so long ago but just months, ringing in her ears, the truth of what he thought of her, she slipped the ring off her finger and, tucking it into her nightstand drawer, fell into a heavy, restless sleep.

In the morning she woke up to the grey flush of early dawn, and steeled herself for the inevitable confrontation. But when she rolled over, Ron’s side of the bed was empty, looking like it had never been slept in. Frowning, she got up and padded down the hall to the living room, expecting to find Ron snoring on the couch. Nothing. She peeked into the guest bedroom, the kitchen, even the bathroom. Nothing. No sign Ron had ever come back from the pub. Anxiety rose in her blood, pulsing through her veins as she imagined him mugged, lying in Knockturn Alley hurt, hit by a Muggle car and bleeding, alone in a Muggle hospital, all kinds of horrible scenarios flashing one by one through her mind. Midway through her third, frantic lap of the apartment she paused,
drawing in several long, deep breaths, pulling herself back together.

Owls. Owls to the places Ron might be. He hadn’t said where was going exactly or who with, but she assumed the usual blokes form work. Which meant Harry might know. He could also have gone to stay at Grimmauld Place, as she had before. Work. He could have had to go in on a case unexpectedly. His parents. He could be staying at the Burrow. Or with George.

Continuing her steadying breaths, Hermione wrote out her set of owls and sent one off immediately. Harry first. No need to stir everyone else up if Ron were in the most likely place. She’d made it halfway through a pot of coffee and a rather small, lumpy scarf when she heard a familiar bleary voice call out her name from the fireplace.

“Harry!” She jumped out of the armchair and rushed into his line of sight. “Is Ron with you?”

Harry shook his head, frowning, and Hermione cursed under her breath. “I got your owl, but no, he’s not here. I don’t know of any cases that could’ve come up urgently, but I’ve got an owl out to Robards and some of the other blokes Ron likes to go out with.”

Hermione nodded, trying to force herself into relaxation. “Thanks, Harry.”

His eyes, still puffy with sleep, seemed to finally focus on her, taking in her anxious state and the discarded knitting beside her. “Want me to come sit and wait with you?”

“Oh, I-I mean, you don’t... That would be wonderful,” she finally said, relief flooding through her at the prospect of Harry’s companionship instead of being forced to sit alone in her empty apartment, stewing on all the events of the past few days and the possibilities for the future.

Harry smiled up at her reassuringly and she felt herself relax just a fraction. “Gimme just a minute or two,” he said, head disappearing from the fireplace, and Hermione resumed her knitting in the armchair. True to his word, Harry stepped through her fireplace in a flash of spinning green just a few moments later, wearing pajama pants and a well-worn jumper.

“Thank you, Harry, thank you.” She got up and flung her arms around him. “Do you want some tea? I’ve already had coffee, and I don’t think more is a good idea, given...” She stepped back and gestured at her clearly anxious, jittery self, and he chuckled.

“Tea sounds great, ‘Mione.”

The two moved into the kitchen, Hermione busying herself with the kettle and hoping Harry didn’t notice her shaking hands.

“So he wasn’t home when you got back last night, either?” Harry called from the other side of the kitchen, where he was getting them down teacups and starting on eggs.

“No. Everything was just as I’d left it when I went to the museum,” Hermione said, hoping Harry didn’t notice her hands beginning to shake as she set the tea to steep, the kettle clinking as she set it down. If he did, he didn’t mention anything, just nodded with a grunt of affirmation as he salted and peppered their eggs. Almost robotically, Hermione pulled out some bread and toasted it with a bit of magic, then put down bread and jam. It was only a few minutes later that the pair were sitting at the table, everything spread out before them. Hermione kept trying to take bites of her eggs, only to lose her appetite with the fork halfway to her mouth, and had taken to holding her teacup with both hands so that Harry wouldn’t notice their unsteadiness.
Finally, he sighed, putting down his fork and fixing her with a steady stare. “Hermione, come on. What’s bothering you so much? This isn’t the first time Ron’s had to sleep it off at Dean’s or somewhere before he comes home.”

Hermione took a deep breath, averting her gaze from Harry’s. “We... had an argument before he left.” The patiently waiting look Harry gave her made it very clear that he had already realized that fact, and knew there was more to the story. “And...,” she continued, anxiously wringing her hands, “I have something I need to say to him before I lose my nerve.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, mouth opening in confusion, when his eyes suddenly dropped to her fidgeting hands, fingers conspicuously bare, and his expression fell into a small ‘oh’ of dawning comprehension. Hermione flushed and furiously slathered some butter on her toast.

“I had... wondered. Since the Weird Sisters concert.” Harry’s voice was soft, and oh so kind, and Hermione dared a glance up at him. She reached over and grabbed his hand impulsively, tears stinging her eyes.

“Oh, Harry, I’m so sorry, I just... I just can’t.” He squeezed her hand tightly, keeping it together admiringly in the face of his crying best friend.

“Oh, Hermione, you don’t have to apologize to me. To anyone,” he continued firmly. “I’m your friend, and I just want you to be happy. And it doesn’t seem like you’re happy. Either of you.” Hermione sniffled, and Harry summoned a box of tissues for her, earning a teary-eyed grateful smile. “It would’ve been nice if it could’ve been like we imagined it would be when we were 16, you and me and Ron and Ginny, but we’ll still be friends... still be family even if we’re not literally family. Besides, it all seemed a little too good to be true, in the end.” His voice turned wistful at the end, and Hermione abandoned her seat at the table to come around wrap him in a giant hug.

“Who are you and what have you done with Harry James Potter?” she murmured into his messy hair. “You’re much too mature and thoughtful to be the same boy who told Professor Snape his nickname was Roonil Wazlib.”

He chuckled into her shoulder. “Says the girl who had a crush on Gilderoy Lockhart.”

Leaning away, she swatted at him playfully, and felt a tremulous smile spread across her face. “Thank you, Harry.”

“Any time, Hermione. Do you want to... talk about it?”

Hermione looked thoughtfully down at her eggs. “I... I actually don’t. I’ve done nothing but think about it for weeks on end, and...”

“It’s okay, ‘Mione, I get it. No need to explain.” Harry gave her a broad smile. “Besides, I’m happy to heap some more praise on you for the event last night. Gin and I went home and spent time talking about all the Muggle stories I’d grown up with, and the Wizarding stories she’d heard as a kid. I’d bet we weren’t the only ones.”

A genuine smile spread across Hermione’s face. “Oh, Harry, I’m so glad! That’s exactly what we wanted to happen. If either of you are curious there’s a researcher in America working on compiling an annotated comparative collection of Muggle and Wizarding children’s stories that I could probably get an advance copy of, I know I have her contact information somewhere-”

“I think we’ll be okay without, Hermione. Or at least, we can wait until it’s actually published.” He shot her a knowing grin at her sheepish smile, before his grin turned slightly more mischievous.
“And I have to say... one thing did surprise me. You and Lucius Malfoy.”

Hermione’s lips tightened, readying herself for the same fight she’d had with Ron, only to see that Harry had noticed the tenseness in her face and jaw, grin turning into a frown. “Not here to criticize you for giving your tour with him, ‘Mione. I’m not going to pull a Ron on this one, and like I said, after being there, I totally got it. You wouldn’t have had nearly the impact without the pull Malfoy still has on the pureblood community.”

Hermione relaxed slightly, but still gave him a questioning glance.

“What surprised me was how comfortable you two were with each other. I mean... was it all an act? Because while I believe he could make himself into whatever the situation called for, the snake, I’d like to think I can see through any act you put on, and you seemed to genuinely be having fun.”

“It, um. It wasn’t an act,” Hermione said, feeling her throat beginning to tighten under Harry’s gaze. Had she been so obvious, so indiscreet? But then, hadn’t she been trying to be more open about Lucius? Not treat him like some dirty secret she kept out of sight, ashamed of? And while it had gone terribly with Ron, Harry was looking at her with such genuine concern in his eyes, and he was Harry, her kind, noble friend, who’d always supported her. He’d never had the flights of resentment or jealousy that Ron had had, not when she’d been with Viktor, not when she’d forced them to study for exams for hours upon hours. Harry had always been patient and understanding (though sometimes exasperatedly so). She took a deep, steadying breath, meeting his gaze.

“I might not have told you everything about my fight with Ron last night.” Harry’s eyebrows shot up so far they almost disappeared beneath his mop of tousled black hair, but Hermione kept going. “I... After he told me he wasn’t coming, I tried to convince him to come. I told him that I hoped he’d change his mind, because I’d worked hard and it was important to me, because I wished he would believe in redemption and possibility of change for people like Lucius, and... and because... because Lucius is my friend.”

There was a long silence as Harry stared at her, brows furrowed tightly together as his brain began to process the words she’d said. Swallowing heavily, Hermione plowed right on ahead. “Lucius and I have... become friends. Over a while now. We’ve had to work closely together, we’ve spent a lot of time together, and I don’t say or take any of this lightly, Harry. I know what he was, but I also know what he went through, and I believe he’s changed.”

Harry nodded, slowly, as if he was still taking everything in. “Right. The cultural committee... And... that night, after the Weird Sisters concert... you told me Lucius Malfoy helped you get to our house, and I thought you were drunk and completely off it but... He did, didn’t he?”

Hermione flushed, but nodded in affirmation. “Yes, he did. He found me drunk and drinking even more at a restaurant bar in Hogsmeade, and he got me water and listened to me cry and tipped the bartender enough that he didn’t go straight to the gossip rags, and then he walked me to the public Floo and made sure I made it to your place alright.” Hermione was aware she’d left out a somewhat major component of her and Lucius’ behavior that evening, but thought that perhaps she should take things in stages. At least until after she’d actually managed to find and talk to Ron.

“He... he did all that for you? Lucius... Malfoy?” Harry sounded... distant, confused, but not angry, at least not angry.

“He... We... It didn’t start with the cultural committee...” And then it all came spilling out of her, Twilburg’s book signing and the letters and her initial suspicions, their long correspondence, the cultural committee, what she’d learned from Andromeda, the coffee meetings, the way he...
described the events that had changed him, all of it. “And Harry, he’s been kind to me. He was worried, after the concert, owled your place to make sure I’d made it alright, even asked Andromeda when I hadn’t answered. I know it all sounds crazy, and you’re probably like Ron, you think I’ve gone right off my rocker, but... whether you believe he’s changed or not, whatever the answer is... please accept that I believe that people can atone for their pasts and work to change, and that Lucius has.”

Harry sat through her story in silence, staring at her intently as if she were a puzzle he were trying to figure out. As she got to the end, her rubbed his eyes blearily, blinking down at the table. “Wow, ‘Mione, I... And... you’ve kept all of this a secret from us? All this time?”

Hermione sniffled. “It may have come to my attention that hiding people as if they are a dirty secret and you’re ashamed of your acquaintance with them is rather poor behavior for a friend.”

Harry snorted. “So is keeping secrets this big.”

Hermione buried her face in her hands. “Oh, I know, Harry, I’m sorry, I just... I thought you’d be so mad, and I was ashamed at first.”

Harry sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair. “I’m not-- Look, ‘Mione, I’m not mad at you. I’m a little... confused, I guess, and a little disappointed you didn’t tell me sooner but... I trust you, Hermione. You’re the smartest person I know, and probably the smartest person in the entire bloody world. If you say he’s changed, well... I guess I believe you. I don’t know that I would if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, but, with everything you’ve told me, and everything I know he did for the Auror office, and after last night... I guess I do.” He leaned back in his chair, covering his face with one palm as he exhaled sharply. “It’s all just... a lot.”

“I know, Harry, I’m so sorry. I know it’s a lot to process, but I’m trying to be honest.”

She was startled as Harry started laughing, low at first, and then bursting into big, open chuckles. “Merlin, Hermione, you really do see the best in everyone, don’t you? Goblins, werewolves, vampires, house elves... and now the Malfoys.”

Hermione stiffened, worried that he was laughing at her, but he gave her a small smile through his spread palm, and she shot one tentatively back at him. “I have always prided myself on having logical, consistently applied principles,” she said primly, and his smile grew.

Hermione ate a few bites of her eggs in companionable silence, feeling lighter and freer now that Harry knew everything, as if yet another piece of the heaviness that had been weighing on her these past months was set free. Harry knew, and he didn’t hate her. Harry and Ginny, two of her best friends, knew, and everything would still be okay. Harry, for his part, seemed to be going over her story in his brain, slowly connecting dots and coming to terms with her unexpected announcement.

“And you just... accepted the book from him?”

“No, Harry, I had Bill check it for curses. Only when the both of us were certain it wasn’t a trick did I keep it, though I still thought there might be some scheme involved.”

“Oh.” He resumed poking at his own breakfast, expression ponderous. “And... he said he really was under the Imperius the first time around?”

“Yes, that’s how the Wizengamot was able to prove it and let him off. But he as much as admitted he didn’t even try to throw it off.”
Harry snorted, but she could tell that the fact had done for him the same thing it had done for her, gone no small ways toward convincing them of Lucius’ veracity.

“And--wait. Did you say that he owled you at our place after the Weird Sisters concert? I don’t remember you getting an owl, or getting one for you.”

Hermione started, blood rushing from her face as she realized what she’d inadvertently revealed. She hadn’t wanted to reveal Ginny’s knowledge of everything, both because it could implicate her involvement with Draco and because she hadn’t wanted to be the person to reveal to Harry yet another piece of information Ginny had been keeping from him, especially when it seemed that they’d gone home and had a good, solid chat after the cultural committee event.

“I... Well, uh, you see, erm.” Hermione was relieved from the responsibility of having to struggle to come up with a lie by the rush of the Floo in the living room.

“Hermione? Ron?” a familiar voice called out.

“In the kitchen, Gin! Ron’s not here, he still hasn’t come home,” Hermione yelled in response, any hopes that Ginny might bring news of Ron’s whereabouts extinguished by the fact she’d called his name. Or perhaps she’d known he was on his way home, but didn’t know whether he’d arrived yet. Her thoughts preoccupied by this line of thinking, she didn’t have the presence of mind to stop the trainwreck that happened next.

They heard Ginny step out of the Floo and immediately begin furiously babbling, the anxious urgency in her tone clear, as she made her way across the living room towards the kitchen, the pair still hidden from her sight. “Oh thank Merlin. Hermione, you have to talk to Lucius, you have to go, please. He’s talking about Draco marrying Astoria Greengrass, you have to, I can’t-”

She stopped abruptly as she rounded the corner and saw Harry sitting at the kitchen table, a slowly dawning look of comprehension on his face. Ginny squeaked and clapped a hand over her mouth, as if that could take back the words that had spilled out of her. For her part, Hermione suddenly felt nauseous, watching the pair before her. “Oh thank Merlin. Hermione, you have to talk to Lucius, you have to go, please. He’s talking about Draco marrying Astoria Greengrass, you have to, I can’t-”

He looked up at her, slowly meeting her gaze, and his voice was hoarse as he asked her, “Draco Malfoy, Gin, really?”

Her pulse leapt at her throat as Hermione wondered for one brief delirious minute if Ginny would try to lie, to deny it, but she shot a glance at Hermione and, finding something in Hermione’s hazel eyes that apparently she’d needed, Ginny slowly lowered her hand from her mouth, straightened and squared her shoulders, even as tears leaked down her face. “Yes,” she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. “There was never any man I met at the World Cup. It’s... it’s always been just Draco.”

Harry was staring fixedly at a spot on the kitchen floor, scarly still.

“And... Harry,” Ginny said, a note of tenderness creeping into her voice at his name that caused him to look up at her, “I... I wasn’t being fair to you, not telling you sooner. But... I was scared, I still am scared, but I’m ready to talk now. Honestly. To tell you everything. And... I hope we’ll figure it out... together.”
Hermione rose slowly from her seat at the table, starting as two pairs of eyes swiveled to her. “I’ll just... you stay. Please. You two clearly... I’ll go.” Lowering her eyes from their gaze, Hermione darted into the living room and hurried to the Floo, barely breathing as she quickly threw some powder at her feet and called out her destination.

“Malfoy Manor!”

Chapter End Notes

So, it's (mostly) all out! I struggled a bit with writing Harry in this, and how he'd be handling everything, but I think I was true to Harry's character, especially as he's developed in some of the post-DH stuff. Hopefully you all agree!
Interlude

Chapter Summary

A special interlude while I've been hella busy: the events of chapter one from Lucius' perspective!

Chapter Notes

Hi friendos, it has been a stupid busy month at work, and I am trying to plan a cross-country move, and while I have been trying to write in whatever spare time I have, the content that's coming up next in the series is very heavy, very delicate to write, and just a lot. So, as I promised a while back, I'm trying not to totally disappear when I can't get around to getting a full, real chapter out for you, so here is a tided-up chapter one, the events of Twilburg's lecture, from Lucius' perspective! It's a little rougher than I'd like real chapters to be, but I just didn't have the editing time to make it perfect (sorry!) I won't normally plan to put these in the fic itself - I'm going to upload a related work that's just all the drabbles/extras/etc. - but I didn't know how to let subscribers, etc. know about it without putting it here. Hope you enjoy!

Interlude

He noticed her as soon as she came in.

He was absurdly grateful she’d chosen a seat in the front row (know-it-all twit) so he could continue staring at her, face mostly hidden behind his book. He’d recognized her as soon as he saw her, would forever have the memory of her calmly and primly laying out all that he’d done over the years, all the horrors and all he’d done to try to atone, describing his “extenuating circumstances”, as she called them, with mouth downturned slightly and only the slightest creeping hint of sadness in her otherwise scientific tone, and then, with a small defiant tilt to her delicate face, firmly telling the assembled Wizengamot that she supported his early release from Azkaban. He’d been shocked to his core, even through the dull, cold numbness that had inundated him during those interminable days between the news of Narcissa’s illness and Draco’s incident and the emergency Wizengamot session, because even at that point he’d known her face. Recognized her as Potter’s Mudblood bitch, as the face that had writhed and screamed, withstanding Bellatrix’s torture on his drawing room floor as he stood by, wandless, helpless, prisoner in his own home. Somehow she always seemed to appear at the lowest moments of his life.

And yet here she was, on an otherwise unremarkable evening, wearing Muggle jeans and a jumper, reading a book just like he was. He hadn’t expected to see anyone but the few old industry stalwarts here, all of whom were perfectly content to pick his brain and use his thoughts without bothering with the pretense of friendship, which was just as well to him. But now she was here, too, and he wasn’t sure what to do with the unexpected opportunity. He’d heard stories, of course, from the Weasley brat who teased Draco incessantly but seemed to make him smile, but he was intensely curious to get a measure of her for himself, this woman who’d been tortured in his home.
and then spared him from the darkness of Azkaban. He knew that, no matter what the Wizengamot was supposed to consider, all of the circumstances, what had made a difference was having a war hero, one of the Golden Trio, publicly make a case for mercy, justice, clemency, all of those virtuous ideals she stood for and chose to bestow upon him in his time of need. He ran her name over in his mind, her true name, not the derogatory epithets he’d used for her over the years, tripping over the unfamiliar syllables: Hermione Granger.

She was as prim and proper as she’d been in front of the Wizengamot, back straight, head held high as she raced through the text on her lap, if the speed of her page flipping was any indication. Her companion, on the other hand... Lucius would recognize the shockingly orange hair and gangly limbs anywhere, though he couldn’t place with certainty which particular Weasley this was. In any event, the Weasley was clearly impatient and anxious, jiggling his legs, crossing and uncrossing his arms, shifting in his seat so as to just knock the sides of Granger’s book. Lucius didn’t understand how she could bear his ceaseless movement when she was trying to concentrate. He found the redhead so irritating he considered hexing the boy into stillness just as a favor to the witch, though he wasn’t sure she’d see it that way. Still, though, he was beginning to notice the tension in her jaw, in the tight way she turned the page, and felt an odd, morbidly curious sympathy for whatever errant choices had led her to bring this lout to an academic presentation of this sort.

Finally, even her patience seemed to grow short, as she began to speak. “Ron, we can just leave.” Ron, then. That solved the Weasley question.

“No, ‘Mione, it’s date night and it’s your turn. I’m sorry.” Lucius smirked behind the cover of his book, taking no small amount of satisfaction in the way the witch’s displeasure caused the Weasley boy to shrink suddenly. Not out of any real admiration for her, of course, he told himself, but because it meant that the Weasley boy finally stopped shuffling and being distracting. The blonde meant to turn back to his book, but instead found himself watching the Granger girl, noticing the unruly curls which kept springing free from a bun that aspired to staidness, the almost tunnel-like concentration she shifted towards her book, the way she tugged at her lower lip with her teeth when she appeared to hit a particularly troublesome paragraph.

Just as he was beginning to draw himself away and back toward his reading, the Weasley boy drew in breath, and Lucius waited for the show to continue.

“It’s just... It’s just... the night of the Cannons’ game?”

Lucius tried valiantly to suppress a derisive bark of laughter, but succeeded only in stifling it to an ungainly snort. Luckily, the book he was ‘reading’ obscured his face from the eagle-eyed glare of the witch in front of him, and she could turn the full force of her fury to the pathetic redhead. Honestly, a Cannons’ fan? The underdog complex was not subtle.

As they began arguing in earnest, he kept his attention focused on the pair, his book forgotten. He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop on their conversation, but he was curious about the witch and, well, it wasn’t as if she or the ginger were being particularly quiet. And now it had devolved into this delightful drama. Since his release from Azkaban, his life was mostly a blur of quiet and grey. All of the things that once seemed so important, that had taken up so much of his time, had lost their luster or disappeared. His former friends were all some combination of only so-called friends, still in Azkaban, and dead, his investments were quietly running themselves, Narcissa was nothing but a ghost in his memory, and Draco still seemed worse when it was just the two of them, only coming alive when he was out flying or, inexplicably, with the Weasley girl. Instead, Lucius had buried himself in the academic world he’d only dabbled in before; complex formulas and knotty theoretical arguments that took up all of his mental energy, crowding out the grief and regret that
had threatened to drown him immediately after his release from Azkaban. He was mostly content
to focus his days and nights on this, and whatever he could do to make up for the pain he’d caused
his son over the years, but he wasn’t averse to a little entertainment when it fell into his lap like
this, and the fight unfolding before him was certainly entertaining.

He found himself fighting back a grin, surprised to see the Granger girl finally ruffled out of her
prim and proper demeanor; apparently it could withstand the attention of the full Wizengamot, but
not the incessant wheedling of her child-boyfriend.

“Ron, the Cannons are not going to win! They have an eighteen-game losing streak and the Harpies
could beat them even if I was their bloody Keeper! It is my turn to choose date night and I have
chosen that we are attending this lecture and signing, so that we can enjoy learning about the
intersection of magic and Muggle physics, and come away with a greater understanding of the
world in which we both live, so you will sit here, learn, and enjoy!”

As she got into the full swing of her rant, her voice growing higher and sharper, she turned her head
slightly, angled her body just so, and Lucius was struck by the unexpected realization that, her eyes
flashing self-righteously and her cheeks flushed with irritation, curls dangling from her forehead as
if they had sprung free from the sheer force of her frustration, Granger was pretty. He was thrown
so off-kilter by this errant thought that he didn't manage to hide his appreciative snicker, and soon
found himself on the receiving end of the witch’s wrathful glare.

When he met her gaze, the flicker of recognition in her eyes followed by a flash of what was
unmistakably fear was ice through his veins. For a few blissful moments, he'd been able to forget
himself, the unendingly heavy weight of being Lucius Malfoy in a world that wished his existence
wiped from it shrugged off for a few moments of schadenfreude and amusement, but the reminder
that even she remained afraid... He felt something deep in his chest, some hope he hadn't even
realized he'd been carrying, crack, as he realized that Hermione Granger may have saved him from
Azkaban when his world had been falling apart, but not because she saw something in him no one
else did, had not gleaned the truth of some hidden Lucius who was worthy of redemption. She still
saw the monster who’d watched her blood spill onto his wooden floor and called her a Mudblood
with a twisted sneer, who'd driven his son to drink and nearly death, whose choices had killed his
wife.

His pulse throbbed heavy in his veins, thick in his throat, but she was still looking at him, and
she’d asked a question that was still hanging in the air between them, and the Weasley boy was
turning around, and, well - the show must go on, mustn’t it?

He slowly let a smirk make its way across his features, shrugging back on the mask that had served
him so well for years, like a well-worn cloak he just couldn’t toss away, as he thought of how to
play his next steps, even as the space in his chest he’d long ago assumed was well and truly hollow
ached anew. He didn’t have the courage to try to be anything other than what was expected, but the
memory of the fear in her eyes made him hesitate when he thought of what he could do and say,
the slurs and taunts; he didn’t have it in him to be the worst of that monster any longer. That man
had died with Cissa.

“It’s nineteen.”

“Nineteen what?” Her tone was flat, her lips pressed thinly together, exasperated but not afraid, not
full of hatred.

“The Cannons’ losing streak. It’s nineteen games, not eighteen.” He thought he saw a flash of
humor flit across her face, but it was quickly lost as she reached over to restrain her companion,
who looked as if he was going to fight over the honor of his pathetic Quidditch team. Rolling his
eyes at the boy’s utterly predictable impulsive behavior, he turned back to his perusal of the final book, willing himself back to the safe harbor of abstract ideas and Twilburg’s drippingly pretentious prose.

He would’ve managed to do it, too, were it not for the fact that he sensed eyes on him, and looked up just in time to see the Granger girls’ darting away from him, then flicking back, all as she made a rather sad go of pretending to apply lipstick. Lucius hid an amused smirk at the smear of coral that skidded well outside the line of her lush lips as she craned her neck to change the angle of her vision in the compact mirror she held. When she finally looked back at it, he’d lowered his book and was meeting her gaze, which was startled, but some other emotion seemed to have overpowered the fear she’d felt when they’d first made eye contact.

“Something to add, Miss Granger?” he parroted back at her, fighting a full-blown grin as she flushed and scrambled for her dropped things. It was really too easy to get to this pair, and he basked for a moment in the memory of a time when his imposing presence alone caused this much fluster among his companions, instead of the now-normal mixture of fear, disgust and pity.

She popped her head back up, but instead of turning away, ashamed, she was meeting his gaze head on. Brash Gryffindor, then. “Where did you get that book? It’s not out yet.”

It was not the question he was expecting, which startled him into answering mostly honestly. “You may be aware, since I believe you’re published yourself, but authors do usually get advance copies of their books.” He hadn’t meant to reveal that he’d known she was published, had intended for her to think that her very existence was beneath his notice, but she seemed to be pondering over his answer, looking at the book in his hands, her intellectual curiosity getting the better of her.

“So what author did you steal it from?” the Weasley chimed in, drawing a cold sneer from Lucius. The few moments of conversation he’d had with the Granger girl had been almost normal, at least in the sense that she’d been looking at him with nearly pure curiosity, not focused on his past or his tragedies, and he felt his temper strain beneath its icy facade at the boy for ruining those precious few moments.

“Charming and insightful as ever, Mr. Weasley. Has it occurred to you that perhaps I was an author?”

Lucius took a visceral delight in watching the shock ripple across the redhead’s face, who appeared to be dumbfounded, taking several long moments to contemplate the possibility that Lucius had presented. For her part, Granger appeared to be mulling the phrase over, biting a lip as she thought aloud.

“I hadn’t heard that Twilburg had a co-author, and Merlin knows his ego is so large I’d never expect it.”

Lucius fought to suppress the amused quirk of his mouth, enjoying both her perceptive take on the insufferable Twilburg and the flush that spread across her cheeks as she realized what she’d said aloud. He took pity on her, letting her statement about Twilburg stand (it was hardly as if he was going to dispute it, he’d certainly weighed the cost of life in Azkaban against the momentary pleasure he’d take in killing the man with his bare hands enough times during the writing process), and finding he desperately wanted to try to keep the conversation in this grey area of academic gossip, as if they were simply two strangers discussing a book.

“I consulted on certain sections and wrote the forward, Miss Granger.”

Her brows flicked upward in quick surprise, and she seemed to be considering her next words. “I
didn’t expect you’d be interested in this topic, given past politics.”

She didn’t say it with any malice; no, if she’d meant harm she could have said it with a sneer, with a flash of anger, in any of a million different ways calculated to injure, none of which she did. And yet even her simple confusion and the consequent reminder of his past was enough to break the spell which had lain over their conversation, notwithstanding Weasley’s best efforts to ruin it earlier, and his voice grew cold at the reminder, even as he met her gaze.

“I wasn’t aware you knew me at all, Miss Granger.”

For a moment they stayed like that, eyes locked for the span of just one heavy heartbeat, before they were interrupted by an angry voice.

“We know you well enough to know you’re a prejudiced git. C’mon ‘Mione, I’m not going to sit here and get heckled by a bloody war criminal.”

Lucius watched, impassive as a statute, as Weasley, flushed red, jumped to his feet and stalked out of the lecture hall, hands balled into fists at his side as if he were still restraining some base urge to hit someone or something with his bare hands, like an animal. “Ron, wait!” Granger had leapt to her feet, starting after her hotheaded companion, but hesitated, casting one last glance at the stage, before she swung back around to him, tears pricking at her eyes as she whispered, “Now look what you’ve done. I guess after all these years you still ruin everything.”

* * *

Lucius had returned to skimming his book after the pair had left, had refused to dwell on the incident, but even through the lecture found himself irritable and tense, unable to focus. His mind was racing, flitting through unsettling memories he could usually manage to suppress, interspersed with Granger’s face - as she testified for his release, as she recognized him with a jolt of fear, as she considered him curiously as an author, as she hissed that he still ruined everything. He was beginning to regret ever coming to this event; it was like he was a muddy pool, and Granger had poked around and stirred up things better left undisturbed, turning his mind into a swirling, turbulent mess.

After the lecture had concluded, Lucius found himself chatting with various academic acquaintances until the hall had mostly dwindled, leaving him to speak with Twilburg himself.

“Malfoy, good to see you here, such a pleasure. Glad you made it out, even though I heard you had yourself a bit of an argument,” Twilburg effused, a sly glint in his eye.

Lucius tensed. “Nothing worth discussing, Twilburg.”

“Oh, no, of course not. Honestly quite glad they left, Granger and Weasley. The Weasley boy looked as dull as a box of rocks, and while I’d been told the girl was quite smart I heard she’s working in some dreadful Ministry position. Clearly couldn’t quite tough the academia path. And besides, it’s all dreadfully vulgar, all that war nonsense. No offense meant, of course, Lucius,” Twilburg prattled on, meaning much offense.

“Of course, none taken,” Lucius managed through gritted teeth. “Not all of us could be as bright as you, have the courage and foresight to hide in Muggle Cambridgeshire for the duration of the war.”

Twilburg grinned slyly, and then, while Lucius wondered again about the cost of hexing the smarmy git into oblivion, started to turn away, when Lucius had a sudden, impulsive thought. He might eventually regret it, but at the moment it seemed to please the roiling turbulence of his mind
and so he gave in.

“Say, actually Twilburg. If you don’t mind, I’d like to snag another copy of the book while I’m here, if you wouldn’t mind signing it.”

Twiburg seemed suspicious, but his ego got the better of him and he grinned, practically bouncing as he reached for a book. “Of course, not a problem at all, dear friend. I suspect you’ll want one for Draco, let him see what kind of great minds his father counts as company nowadays, give him a taste for the theoretical puzzles of our time...”

Lucius felt a dark curl of satisfaction as it was his turn to grin at Twilburg, in an expression that hinted at bared teeth. “Oh no, not for Draco. Please make it out to Miss Hermione Granger.” Lucius’ grin broadened, sharpened, as Twilburg’s brows shot up, unexpected and a little hesitant. “The brightest witch of her age.”
Hermione emerged from a much larger fireplace than the one she’d entered, coughing as she brushed remnants of soot from her jumper. Belatedly, she wished she’d had the presence of mind to be wearing something other than her ragged pajamas the first time she set foot in Malfoy Manor since the war, and hoped that maybe she’d be able to find a spare closet or alcove in which she could transfigure her clothes into something more... well, anything else before she had to see Lucius, but those hopes were dashed when she heard a voice from the other side of the room she’d managed to find her way into.

“Hermione?”

She looked up through her remaining coughs to see Lucius standing up from behind a desk, alarm and concern flickering rapidly across his features. “Are you alright? Has something happened?”

She held up one hand, trying to assuage his concerns, but doubled over with another set of coughs and found him at her side before she could gather the breath to explain. His obvious concern was touching, but as she straightened up, she steeled herself - she’d come here with serious business to discuss, and she wouldn’t let just a small amount of common courtesy distract her from that.

“I appreciate the concern, Lucius, but I’m fine. I just needed to see you to discuss what an utter prat you’ve been.” She turned her sharp gaze on him, appreciating that he shrank back somewhat, leaning against the front of the desk he’d just vacated, shoulders bowed somewhat. “I can’t believe you, Lucius, how dare you.”

“I’m sorry, Hermione. I know it wasn’t my place, and I should have made sure you were okay with it, and maybe I was out of line...”

“Of course you were out of line! You can’t just... just... mess with people’s emotions like that and meddle in their lives! It had nothing to do with you!”

At this, Lucius stopped, raising one eyebrow as his mouth fell open. “Had nothing to do with me? I
should’ve thought it had a quite a bit to do with me.”

“Quite a bit to do with you? Ginny’s relationship with your son is between the two of them! And I suppose Harry, actually, but regardless, certainly you don’t need to be involved. I can’t even believe you would go to these lengths, Lucius, even knowing that you disapprove—”

“Wait, wait,” Lucius said, straightening and holding out a hand to catch her attention. “Just what are you here to chastise me for? Because I was apologizing for last night. For... overstepping boundaries.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open slightly. “Oh. No, I--. well, you--that... that wasn’t what I came here to talk about,” she said, sputtering as she tried to avoid saying anything about the tangled web of emotions that she still kept knotted tightly within herself about those events of last night. “Ginny said that you were talking about Draco marrying Astoria Greengrass.”

“Oh,” Lucius said, looking somewhat relieved at her revelation, but the relief was quickly overtaken by a frown. “And why should I apologize for that? Her father approached me, it seems the girl has some affection for Draco, the Greengrasses would be a good match, and, temperamentally, the two seem like they could grow into real affection and admiration. Of course I would discuss it with him after the event, when she was making her interest clear.”

“Because Draco already has real affection and admiration for Ginny, in case you’ve forgotten,” Hermione huffed, her temper flaring again at his casual disregard for either Ginny or Draco’s feelings and emotions, as if Draco was just a business deal that was being neatly arranged.

“And in case you’ve forgotten, Mrs. Potter is married,” Lucius shot back, eyes flaring sharp steel as he walked over to her. “I don’t care to watch Draco spend his life pining over someone who will never give him the commitment he deserves, when he could have a chance at real happiness with someone else, and I am perfectly within my rights as his father to push the issue.”

“Yes, well, by intervening and pushing the issue, you’ve managed to ruin everything! I hope you’re happy now, because you’ve got your wish - Harry knows.” Lucius slumped back against the desk again, eyes wide as her words seemed to finally sink in. “Yes, Harry knows it’s Draco, so I hope for your sake that either Draco would also have preferred to see his name in the tabloids than go on as things were, since that looks pretty likely, or that Harry continues to be a kinder, more generous and mature man than world deserves after all of the shit that he’s gone through.”

Lucius sighed heavily, and Hermione felt a little of her tension begin to wind down as she watched the thoughts flit across his face - concern, determination, concentration, the little furrow of his brow as he formulated a plan.

“When?”

“Just before I came through the Floo. Harry was over, and Ginny didn’t realize, came through begging me to speak with you.” Hermione frowned at him, watching the play of expressions across his face and feeling just the slightest bit sorry for the blonde.

“I suppose I should reach out to my contacts at the Prophet, what of them I have... try to head the story off before they publish it.”

Hermione sighed, the anger in her chest dissipating (just slightly). “I think you should wait, at least until we know what Harry will do. I don’t think he’ll go to the papers so quickly. But if he does, I suppose I could get in touch with Rita Skeeter.” At Lucius inquiringly raised eyebrow, Hermione continued to explain. “I think she’s still more than a little afraid of me. I might’ve kept her trapped
in a jar as a beetle and blackmailed her fourth year.” She shrugged lightly, fighting the hint of a blush rising on her cheeks.

Lucius, for his part, was giving her a wry grin with a hint of heat behind his grey eyes. “Hermione Granger, I don’t believe I have ever wanted to kiss you more.”

His next moves were almost comical, had it not been for the way Hermione’s breath stopped as she watched the realization unfold across his face. His warm gaze turned cold as it dropped guiltily to her left hand before darting back up, but then he froze, muscles going tense and face blank as he did a blatant double take, staring down at her bare ring finger.

“Hermione... You’re not wearing your engagement ring. Should I assume that you have perhaps just left it at home by accident, since you are, in fact, here in what I believe to be your pajamas?”

Hermione flushed at the reminder that she was standing in Lucius’ study in a (not even particularly good) pair of pajamas, but met his focused stare with her chin held high. “No. It was not an accident.”

He was across the room and kissing her before her brain had even begun to register his movements, and once he started kissing her her brain was blissfully empty of everything except the smell of his cologne, the warmth of his arms as he wrapped them around her, coiled strength pulling her close to him, that taste again, better even than in her drunken memory, of coffee and chocolate and honey and whiskey, and he kissed her as if he would devour her, body and soul. Hermione swayed gently against him, and when his tongue brushed against her slightly parted lips she moaned, opening herself to him fully. She was dimly aware of his grunt, of being picked up and carried to the large desk he’d been working at moments before. She had a brief moment of concern but a quick spell sent the paperwork he’d been examining to slam into a drawer furiously and she felt smooth wood underneath her as Lucius perched her on the edge of the desk, stepping close between her legs, which she’d kept wrapped tightly around him.

With her now comfortably ensconced on the desk, Lucius began to trail his kisses down her body, first hot against her neck, the warmth of his mouth and then the graze of his teeth sparking electricity that surged through her entire body, every part of her wild and sensitive, as if she’d never known what it was like to feel before she felt him. He made short work of her top, which landed on top of a globe in the corner of the room, and then her bra, and she didn’t notice where that ended up because Lucius’ clever, talented mouth, that smirking mouth, that argued with her and gave voice to his brilliant wit and sometimes gave her real crooked smiles, that mouth was now closing around one of her nipples and Hermione fell back against the desk with a gasp, fingers scrabbling against the wood as she arched, all at once everything on fire, between the sharp flick of his tongue, then a smoothing lick, his fingers on her other breast, and she felt like she could melt into nothing but this pleasure. When he grazed his teeth against the hard bud of her nipple she moaned, arcing off the desk to wrap her hands around his neck, the pleasure almost overwhelming, her inner walls clenching desperately in desperate anticipation of the hot length she could feel where her legs were wrapped around him.

The jolt of electricity (and the fact that he’d momentarily stopped doing whatever sinful magic he’d been using on her breasts to plant gentle, worshipful kisses along her breastbone) brought her a brief moment of clarity and she gasped, leaning back on her hands. “Wait, wait - Lucius, wait.”

Dutifully, he froze, looking up at her from between the valley of her breasts, with pupils so blown that she could barely see the grey in his eyes. “I... I don’t want you to think... I don’t want to... It’s not an accident. I’ve made my decision, but... Ron is missing. I haven’t talked to him yet. I just wanted you to know everything.”
He watched her carefully, and in the moment of quiet that passed between them Hermione’s brain raced through no fewer than fifteen successively worse (and more implausible scenarios) before her thoughts calmed at his crooked smile. His voice was low and still raspy with lust as he chuckled. “That does complicate things somewhat. Still... perhaps that damnable Gryffindor honesty should be rewarded.”

Hermione was about to ask him what he meant when he grasped the waistband of her pajama pants and pulled them down, together with her underwear, in one quick jerk. Hermione yelped, but he’d already dropped to his knees and pulled her close to him, his warm breath ghosting over her core. Hermione thought she might have died, that the heat inside of her might have actually melted her insides, so it took her a few moments when he paused, looking up at her with a question in his eyes.

“‘Yes?’”

“Yes,” she gasped, falling back onto one elbow as her other hand reached up to wrap into his hair and drag his head closer to her. When she felt his tongue against her folds, one long, lazy, thorough lick up to end with a sharp suck against her clit, it was a revelation. Her body was singing, alternately filled with tension and loose, every sensation she’d ever felt focused on Lucius’ head between her legs, and that thought alone was enough to make her dizzy, send her spiraling closer to the edge, that Lucius Malfoy was on his knees between her legs, and it was his tongue inside of her, his strong arm pinning her to the desk, the smell of him swirling in the air around her, his cologne and the smell of parchment and ink from his desk, his long hair brushing against her thighs. She realized, as if from a distance, that the soft moans she was hearing were her own, and she was briefly mortified at how vocal she was being, how demanding, with her hand in his hair and her body writhing beneath his, but then she felt him sink first one, then a quick second finger inside of her, her cunt clenching in utter ecstasy of being filled by him, while his tongue focused on her clit, and heard him groan against her, realized he was murmuring softly against her between his sharp, deliberate motions - “fuck, Hermione, so tight, so good, I can’t wait to be inside you, Merlin you’re perfect, Hermione” - and it was this, as much as his mouth and hands, that sent her careening over the edge, her mind going briefly blissfully blank with nothing but sharp pleasure and the sound of his raspy voice muttering her name like a hymn.

When she came back to herself, Lucius was pulling her up to him for a hot, deep kiss. She felt drugged, loose with pleasure and smiling against him, even as she moaned softly at the taste of herself on him. She started to reach for his waistband, hands scrabbling against the solid warmth of his stomach, but he caught her hands in his with a disappointed groan. “Much as we’d both enjoy that, you do have an idiot to find.” At her whimper, he captured her lips in another deep kiss. “Trust me, Hermione, when I have you, you will be mine, utterly and completely... just as I am yours.”

Her heart sang and she felt unexpected tears spring into her eyes at his soft confession. Now it was her turn to find his lips with her own, this time planting soft, gentle kisses on his lips, along his jaw, his nose, his fluttering eyelids, hands running reverently across his face, mapping it as if it wasn’t already ingrained in her memory indelibly. He groaned and dropped his head to her shoulder, turning slightly so that he could mouth at her neck, lightly pressing kisses and murmured praises against her neck, promises of what he’d do to her, and her eyes dropped shut with a soft sigh.

They were interrupted by the sound of the study door being flung open. “Father! We need to talk, right this moment. I cannot--” Draco’s tirade was cut off by the sound of a strangled yelp, and Hermione’s eyes flew open with horror to meet the younger Malfoy’s wide open eyes. She was grateful that Lucius obscured most of her state of disarray from her former classmate, but her wild hair, high flush, and the bare legs she had wrapped around Lucius told his son everything he needed to know.
For his part, Draco didn’t, as she’d half expected, immediately fly into a rage or hex her. Instead, he gulped and turned the other direction. “Toppet! Reeny! Mipsy?! Someone? Please, for the love of all that is magical, I need to be Obliviated immediately.”

Hermione took advantage of the moment to untangle herself from Lucius and hastily pull her clothes back on. Lucius was blushing slightly, but nothing to her tomato red shade, which she felt grow only hotter when Lucius shot her a wink. The man had no shame - but then, she supposed only a man with no shame would have had her on his desk... or in a museum...

She was jolted back to reality and out of her pleasantly wandering thoughts by a sharp crack and the appearance of a wide-eyed house elf, even tinier than they usually were. “Master Draco, Mipsy is sorry, so very sorry, but you know Mipsy cannot obey your commands, Master Draco, even though she would like to very much.” The elf was wringing her hands, and it was only this motion that made Hermione realize that the elf’s long, spindly fingers were horribly crooked, jagged and gnarled as if they’d been broken repeatedly, and she felt a dizzying rush of nausea and cold replace the warm pleasure of just a few moments ago.

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Lucius was advancing on her slowly, hands held up in the universal posture of surrender, murmuring her name to try to slow her tirade, but now that she’d begun she couldn’t stop it, couldn’t stop the verbal equivalent of the swirling nausea pooling in her gut at this sudden revelation of the man she’d thought she’d -- but then she was interrupted when, suddenly, Mipsy herself began wailing loudly, with high-pitched miserable sobs.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Granger, now you’ve scarred me for eternity and made our house elf cry. Happy now?” Hermione stopped, startled both at the vicious bite of Draco’s tone and the abrupt change as, dropping into a crouch, he reached out to the shaking house elf, his voice dropping into a gentle, soothing register. “Mipsy, it’s fine, she didn’t mean it. Maybe you could bring us some tea? It’s not an order-” he shot a glare at his father - “but it would make me very happy if you could bring some tea.”

Mipsy sniffled slightly, casting a glance at Draco. “The special breakfast blend?” Draco nodded. “No milk, one sugar for Master Lucius and milk and two sugars for Master Draco?” Draco nodded again, giving the house elf a warm smile.

“I believe Miss Granger takes her tea with no milk or sugar,” Lucius called from the corner, and Hermione was pleasantly surprised he remembered before she was distracted by a withering glare from the tiny house elf before she disappeared with a pop.

Once she was gone, Draco crossed his arms and gave her a disdainful huff, while Lucius leaned against the desk, fingers pressed to one of his temples.

“What is going on here?” Hermione asked, bewildered by this turn of events.

“Howe all of the house elves at Malfoy Manor are here by choice.”

“Oh.” Hermione’s mouth dropped open slightly, a brow furrowing. “But - she - clothes?”
“Mipsy, perhaps uniquely stubbornly but as is not uncommon among house elves, views wearing clothes as a badge of dishonor.”

“But her hands! What happened to her hands? They were - she’d been tortured,” Hermione countered, shuddering slightly at the memory of the otherwise delicate house elf’s twisted and broken fingers.

“You know as well as I do that she could heal them with her magic if she so chose. They were a punishment. She disobeyed an order of Draco’s, and he was... unable to tell her not to punish herself.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow and gave a sharp glare at the younger Malfoy, who was leaning indolently against the doorframe, still glaring at her. “Unable? What was he doing that was so much more important than stopping that poor house elf from harming herself?”

Lucius cleared his throat, his gaze dropping uncomfortably to the ground, and they sat silently for a moment before Draco rolled his eyes.

“Merlin - *the brightest witch of her age*, my arse. I was otherwise indisposed, as I was bleeding to death on the parlor room floor, Granger.” She blanched, and his tone softened somewhat, though it retained a hard edge. “I told the house elves they were under no circumstances to heal me or to alert anyone else to the situation, but Mipsy is... determined when she wants to be. She’s devoted to the Malfoy family, hard as it may be for you to believe, Granger, but she’s a bit traditional for your agenda - hence, the punishment.”

“Oh.”

Hermione was still staring stupidly at the floor between her and Draco, torn between horror at the story and abject shame at her wild misunderstanding and utterly inappropriate behavior, when Mipsy reappeared with a tea service beside her. She served first Draco, who took the tea with a gentle smile, and then Lucius, who praised Mipsy gruffly on her delightful tea, and then Hermione, shoving the teacup and saucer into her hands with a force that rattled them against each other. Lucius raised an eyebrow and Draco seemed to be stifling a sniggering laugh as Hermione picked up her tea and took a sip, eyes watering - it was somehow both scalding hot, wildly understeeped with weak flavor, but with what little flavor there was bitingly bitter. It was almost a talent to make tea this badly, and as Hermione looked back and forth between the two other men in the room, it was clear that they had delightful tea, the scent of it wafting across the room to her.

“Mipsy, I’m sorry, I think we might have gotten off on the wrong foot--” Hermione began, leaning down towards the house elf, who simply turned her back on Hermione with a huff.

“Is the tea to your liking, Master Draco?” she said lightly, as if Hermione had never spoken.

“Mipsy,” Lucius warned, as if scolding a misbehaving child, but Draco was smirking, eyes dancing with amusement.

“Maybe not right now, Granger,” he said in a stage whisper, giving the elf a wink. “Besides, unless you have anything else you’d like to traumatize us with, I’d like to take my tea in my room with Mipsy.”

He started to turn and head out of the room, but Hermione suddenly remembered the reason she was there in the first place. “Draco, wait!” she called out, and he stopped, turning back to her with an expectant eye raise. “I, uh. I’m sure you’ll hear from Ginny soon--” At the mention of Ginny, there was a change to Malfoy’s whole face - a softening of his jaw line, a slight smile, a bit of
warmth in his cold steel eyes, and Hermione fumbled the sentence, losing track of what she was saying in wonderment at the change that had come over him. “Erm, I don’t mean to step on her toes, but I wanted you to know. I came here because, well... Harry knows. He found out this morning.”

Any openness that had momentarily been present on the younger man’s face disappeared, his expression dropping closed immediately in a maneuver Hermione had come to understand meant the Malfoy men were simply concealing their emotions, not devoid of any. Her heart ached slightly for Malfoy; it was clear that he loved Ginny, hard as it had been to believe, and he wasn’t the one who’d been married before getting into this mess.

After a pause, he gave her a slightly hesitant nod. “Thanks, Granger. Mipsy, I’m going to my room.” Hermione thought she could hear the slightest waver of uncertainty in his voice, but his stride was confident, and in any event the noise of Mipsy disapparating might have made her mishear.

She turned to Lucius with a sigh. “I’m so sorry, Lucius, I didn’t realize--”

Her apology was cut short once again, but this time by the soft whoosh of the Floo. Hermione’s eyes widened to see Harry’s face in Lucius Malfoy’s fireplace, his eyes sunken and haunted-looking, jaw set.

“Harry, are you alright? I’m sorry, I can come home but I didn’t want to--”

“Hermione, Ron’s back.”

Chapter End Notes

In case you could not tell, my favorite character is 150% Mipsy the Malfoys' passive-aggressive house elf.
Last Days of Summer

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Ron talk.

Chapter Notes

A short chapter, but I ultimately decided that this needed its own chapter. :) As always, thank you guys so much for the support and your lovely comments and feedback. I appreciate it all SO much, more than you guys know.

This chapter is kind of a downer, but we're rapidly rocketing towards the end. I only have a few more tricks left up my sleeve ;)

Last Days of Summer

When Hermione emerged from the Floo, her living room was empty except for Harry, sitting heavily in an armchair with his eyes focused blankly on the floor.

“Harry...? Where’s... where are Ginny and Ron? Is Ron alright?”

He remained silent as she walked tentatively over to his chair, gently reaching out to put her hand on his shoulder. As if breaking from a trance at her touch, he looked up at her, his gaze suddenly growing sharp as he looked her over.

“Your jumper’s on inside out,” he said, absentmindedly fingering the exposed threads, and she flushed bright red, but pressed on with the important questions.

“Harry... where are Ginny and Ron?”

He blinked, seeming to remember that he had yet to answer the question, and took a deep breath, shaking his head slightly. “Sorry, Hermione. I just...” Hermione squeezed his shoulder and gave him a small, reassuring smile. “Ginny went home. She’s packing up her things from Grimmauld Place. We haven’t... we’re still figuring things out, but we both agreed that some time apart was probably best for now.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Hermione murmured reassuringly, leaning to perch on the edge of the chair where Harry sat.

“And Ron is in your bedroom. He’s fine. Well, aside from his massive hangover and utter inability to find a Pepperup Potion, but he’s not hurt.” Harry flashed her the ghost of a smile at that, and she nudged him softly with her shoulder.

“You know where we keep our Pepperup, Harry. Are you saying we’re out?”
He shrugged, that grin flickering back into existence as he said, “Nah, I just figured that he could use a little longer in pain. It’d do him some good.”

“Harry James Potter,” she gasped in a faux-scandalized tone that made his smile broaden slightly. After a deep breath, she rolled her shoulders back, steeling herself. “I’m going to go talk to Ron,” she said, standing up.

Harry nodded, but her return to the task at hand seemed to have cleared his head too. “Yes, and then you’re going to tell me everything. Everything that you know.” Hermione flushed, but nodded - she owed this, at least, to Harry.

She had moved halfway across the room to the hall leading to her bedroom before stopping and turning back to Harry in the chair. “Hey, Harry... you know you can stay, right? Not just while I talk to Ron, or while we... talk, but while Ginny’s getting her stuff and... longer, if you’d like. If you don’t want to be alone.”

She smiled tightly at his silence, but had made it only a few more steps before she heard Harry get up and then felt his arms wrap her in a bear hug. She turned and buried her head against him, in a way she hadn’t for as long as she could remember, since the Forest of Dean. After the final battle had felt triumphant, but this was a hug as if the two of them were a rock surrounded by a stormy sea. “I’m so, so, sorry Harry,” she murmured into him, “I’m so sorry it all went sideways somewhere.”

She felt Harry smile against her shoulder. “It’s not your fault, Hermione. It’s no one’s fault. That’s what makes it so hard.” She squeezed him tighter, shutting her eyes against the tears beginning to prickle there, but he slowly drew himself out of her hug and spun her around. “Go. You have an important conversation to have.”

Hermione nodded, looking back at him one last time, and then made her way to the bedroom where Ron was waiting.

* * *

“Ron.”

She heard a grunt from the direction of the bed, where there was a lump under the covers in the darkened room.

“Ronald Weasley. We need to talk.”

Another grunt, louder this time, and all of Hermione’s trepidation and fear and nervousness at the thought that this was all ending, the boy she’d loved since she was fifteen, the boy she’d fought for her life with, parting and going their separate ways - all of it disappeared in the sudden flash of anger at the groaning man laying beneath the covers, reeking of beer and cheap perfume. With a few quick waves of her wand, the blankets were yanked off the bed and the blinds went flying upwards, flooding the small room with the bright midday sun.

“Oi!” Ron yelped at the sudden assault, hands coming up to cover his eyes.

“Explain yourself, Ronald!” Hermione shouted, cringing inwardly as she heard the pitch of her voice rise precipitously.

She felt something inside of her beginning to waver. She hadn’t wanted to get this angry, hadn’t meant to. When she’d practiced this moment in her head, over and over, it had been a calm monologue. She’d start by saying it didn’t matter where he’d been or what he’d done last night. It
wasn’t worth fighting over, and she would magnanimously overlook it all. Then she’d acknowledge that he had been one of her dearest friends and she hoped always would be, that she cherished all of the good memories of these past years, but that things couldn’t keep on as they were, that they were both unhappy and they both knew it, and she just wanted to free them both to find happiness.

Instead, she found herself shrieking as she dumped him unceremoniously onto the floor with another quick jab of her wand. She tried to remind herself of the clarity she’d felt before, or the pleasant warmth of kissing Lucius, trying to remind herself that she could be calm, she didn’t need to be angry, hell she hadn’t really earned the right to be the shrieking fiancee, but that only seemed to fan the flames. Her mind, her heart, was a rollercoaster, rocketing between the life she’d gotten to glimpse in the flickers of time she’d spent with Lucius, his focus on her, his attentiveness to her thoughts, ideas, theories, his worshipful touch of her body, and the simple fact that she’d been denied it, denied it to herself for so long because of Ron. As he rubbed at his head and stared up at her in shock, lips moving to mouth the words **bloody hell**, she remembered everything, every slight, every night spent with his friends watching Quidditch as he explained it all over and over again, as if her lack of passion was because she just didn’t understand the sport she’d been watching since she was eleven, every night when he’d come back from the pub and paw at her clumsily, her body his entitlement, the same way he was entitled to her engagement, how he’d set up her up in front of everyone so soon after their fight, after he’d called her a frigid bitch, because of course she would say yes, he was entitled to her, like he was to her time, to her motherhood, to the expectation that she would, as always, continue to make everything work, organize and plan and research and set them all up for success. Resentment over things that she’d thought she’d long ago gotten over bubbled up to the surface -- his dislike of Crookshanks, the incident with Lavender Brown, even his constant jealousy over Harry.

She was so angry she almost didn’t notice that Ron was talking, furiously spouting explanations at her with a wild, scared look in his eyes, and she felt an odd energy near her head. As he spoke, Hermione lifted a hand to her hair and realized that her curls were moving, almost sizzling with the magical energy her anger had generated, and she was briefly awed by her own power. How had she forgotten that she could be this?

Patting at her hair, she was distracted enough for Ron’s voice to seep into her consciousness.

“... and then Davies showed up, bought us all another round and started a bet about...”

And suddenly, looking at Ron scrabbling backward against the bed, cringing as he tried to frantically recite the events of the past twenty-four hours to her, Hermione felt the anger drain out of her as quickly as it had come on. She was left, she realized, with simply sadness, an overwhelming grief at all that they’d had and all that they’d lost and all that they’d never be.

“It doesn’t matter, Ron,” she interrupted suddenly, not even sure what he’d been talking about when she interrupted.

“Wha-?” he paused, looking at her oddly.

She Accio’d a bottle of Pepperup Potion and sank down to the floor beside him, a few inches of space between them, leaning her head back against the mattress. “Drink up, Ron,” she said, passing him the Pepperup.

He gave her an odd look but did as she said. She didn’t even look at him while he did, or when she heard him slowly coming out of the worst of his hangover. She was afraid that if she looked at him she’d lose her nerve. Or curse him. Her mind was oddly unfocused, running down a thousand different paths, flickers of memories, worries about Harry and Ginny, oddly even Draco and the
house elf, and of course Lucius.

“Hermione?” Ron finally ventured, after the silence had grown unbearable.

“Ron... You are one of my best friends. You were one of my first friends, at least in the magical world. You’ve done nearly everything with me since I was 11. You’ve stood beside me when we literally faced death, and I am so grateful to you for all of that.”

“Hermione...?”

“And because you’re my friend, I want you to be happy.”

“Hermione, what are you talking about?” Ron’s voice was starting to rise in pitch, and she could hear him stirring to turn and reach out for her, but she pulled her knees close to her, arms wrapping around her legs, and finally turned to look at him.

“Ron... I know you’re not happy. I know we’re not happy, and you know it too.”

“Hermione... I’m sorry, I’m so sorry ‘Mione, I shouldn’t have missed your thing at the museum, I know it was important to you and I was being an idiot about Lucius Malfoy, when he shouldn’t matter, all that should matter is you, and I’ll make it up to you. I promise, I’ll be there next time, I’ll go to as many events as the cultural committee puts on, I’ll even stop going to the pub so much...”

“No, Ron. It’s not just about that stuff. I mean, that’s part of it, but... don’t you feel we’ve grown apart? We barely talk about anything but the latest gossip anymore, or sometimes Quidditch or Muggle television programs.”

Ron frowned, his brow furrowing. “I mean, I- I guess I never noticed, but we can fix that. We’ll do more things, more different things, and I can make an effort.”

Hermione sighed, resting her head on her knees. “Ron... I don’t want to. I’m so tired of making an effort. We’ve done the dinners, and the date nights, and I’ve been trying, and I see you’ve been trying too. But if we’re trying and we’re trying, and we’re still here, maybe that’s a sign...?”

Ron grew flustered, grasping at straws. “Is this about last night? About what I said? About not believing in second bloody chances and Lucius Malfoy?”

“No, Ron...” Hermione said, though she felt her voice tremble slightly. “This isn’t about Lucius Malfoy. This is about us.”

“But, Hermione -- we’re engaged. We’ll make it work. We always have, through all of it. We can do it, I believe in us.” His voice had a desperate quality to it, now, undermining the faux authoritative tone he was taking, as if once pleading worked he could just make their relationship continue by saying it in a gruff enough tone.

“Ron... I don’t want it to.” She stood up and walked around to the nightstand on her side of the bed, pulling out the ring she’d tucked there the night before and rolling it around in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” she said, handing it back to him. When he wouldn’t take it, hands hanging limp as he stared at her as if she were a puzzling creature hiding Hermione behind her, she just placed it on the ground in front of him. “I’m so sorry, Ron, but this is for the best. I... I’ll let you process. We can talk again later.”

With that, she turned and walked out the door. Once it was shut behind her, she sagged back
against it, wiping a tear as she heard Ron’s suddenly yelled curse and the unmistakeable sound of a pillow being punched.
The Boy Next Door

Chapter Summary

Hermione deals with the aftermath of the morning.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter! Ngl, this one was not my favorite to write, because 1) I'm still not super confident writing Harry and 2) it's setting up a lot of more fun chapters. But I think this also wraps up the state of things after several big turning points, so that we can move ahead.

The Boy Next Door

Hands trembling, Hermione first went to the kitchen and made tea. Waiting for the water to come to a boil, she tried to let her mind go blank, for once in her life, elbows resting on the counter and head hung low, but the welcome blankness, the single-minded focus on the simple act of making tea, wouldn’t come. Her mind instead replayed, over and over, the events of the morning, until it took on the quality of a movie she’d seen on the telly late at night, distant and hazy and a little distorted. Had Lucius Malfoy really... had her, like that, on his desk? Had she really been so angry with Ron she’d flung him from the bed? The details seemed too much, unbelievable, something she’d have scoffed at had she seen it in this late night movie.

She was startled to feel a soft hand on her shoulder, and she jolted around to see Harry standing hesitantly behind her at the same time as she suddenly realized that the kettle beside her was whistling loudly.

“Sorry, sorry,” she murmured, grabbing the kettle off the heat and fixing the temperature with a quick spell. “D’you want tea? We have earl grey, breakfast blend, chamomile...” She rifled anxiously through their tea, trying to hide the shaking of her hands.

“Hermione...,” Harry said, reaching out and stilling her hands. “Sit. I think we could both use some chamomile.”

Despite muttered protests, Hermione let Harry lead her to the kitchen table and force her into a chair while he put together chamomile tea and brought it over for the two of them.

“Harry... Thank you. You shouldn’t have. I mean, you just... your morning has been...”

“You mean I just learned my wife has been sleeping with my childhood archnemesis and we’ve agreed to separate? Yes, and you’ve just broken off your engagement. I think we’ve both had a bit of a morning, Hermione, so just sit down and drink the tea.” His tone was matter of fact, and just the slightest bit snarky, but at least he didn’t seem so... dead as when she’d first arrived, and she let out a nervous chuckle, looking up at him through frizzy strands of escaped hair.
“Well, when you put it that way...” she said, taking a long sip of tea. They sat in companionable silence, Hermione slowly coming down from the adrenaline rush of the morning, until she put her teacup down decisively.

“I believe I owe you a conversation, Harry,” she said, taking a deep, steadying breath.

Eyes meeting hers, Harry finished his tea and then nodded. “Yes, I think you do.”

Gathering their cups and taking them to the sink, Hermione was struck by a sudden thought. “Harry, d’you want to take a walk?” She turned back to him, leaning her hip against the counter as she smiled slightly. “I just... I kind of think it’d be nice to get outside.”

She watched as the corner of Harry’s mouth turned up slightly, not quite a full smile, but something close, though she wasn’t even sure if he was aware of it. “Yeah, actually. That sounds really nice.”

Several minutes later, they’d shrugged on their coats and had made their way to amble through the chilly, overcast streets of the outskirts of Muggle London. Hermione inhaled deeply, the crisp winter air and the sights and sounds of rows of homes, small gardens, Muggles pushing babies in trams or talking on their cell phones, all seemed to ground her, to bring her back to herself and out of the spiraling disaster that her apartment represented.

“Feel better?” she heard Harry ask from beside her, and she gave him a small smile.

“Actually, yeah. I still sometimes just... need to be around Muggles, I think,” she said with a shrug, and caught Harry giving her a slight grin.

“I get it. I didn’t even particularly like my childhood, but... it feels like if I don’t remind myself that this exists, and I can still go back to the Wizarding world whenever I want, then I start to feel like maybe it’s all just a fever dream, that I’m not really a wizard...”

Hermione laughed, but nodded - she knew the feeling well, the fear that one day she’d wake up and she’d be sitting up in the dentist’s chair after anesthesia, or wake up in a hospital after a long coma, or even wake up in bed at age 11, still miserably strange and awkward and adolescent.

Harry looked at her out of the corner of his eye, with a gleam in his eye that Hermione recognized. “What does Lucius Malfoy think about the fact you like to be around Muggles?” His voice was artificially lighthearted, and Hermione exhaled softly, trying to tamp down on her first, defensive reactions.

“I don’t know that he’ll ever be really comfortable around Muggles, per se, but we do often get coffee at a Muggle coffee shop a few blocks from the entrance to the Ministry. He makes an effort.”

She stifled a chuckle as Harry tripped over a jutting bit of sidewalk, flushing as he looked over at her. “Malfoy? Lucius Malfoy? In a Muggle coffee shop?”

She gave him an arch smile, chin raising imperceptibly. “You’re welcome to join us next time if you’d like. Usually after Doge’s committee meetings, so, tomorrow. If you need to see it to believe it.”

Harry blinked slowly, falling out of step with her as he shook his head slightly. “I mean, I kind of do, but I’m not sure my poor brain can handle coffee with you and Lucius Malfoy in Muggle London tomorrow. It’ll just go... ka-boom!” he said, miming a small explosion, and Hermione laughed brightly.
The companionable silence sank down around them for another block, the laughter and smiles seeming to linger in the air between them. Then, Harry turned to her. “So... I suppose you should start at the beginning. And tell me everything this time.” He tried to sound as if he were telling a joke, a gentle fake scold as if she’d forgotten to tell him that there was cake in the kitchen, but she could hear the slightly broken quality at the end.

She sighed, pace slowing slightly. “I already told you most of it already. For my part, at least, the beginning was at the lecture, where Ron and I first ran into Lucius. But... Ginny found out a few weeks later, after that big fight you guys had at the Burrow. While she was over at our flat, I got an owl from Lucius, just with a book I’d been looking for, but she saw the letter and figured out the initials.” Hermione paused, pensive, her brows furrowing in a slight frown. “Then again, maybe she knew before that, from Draco. She did seem to put it all together rather quickly.”

Seeing the slight pang on Harry’s face, she hurriedly kept ahead with her story. “After that, it’s all rather like I’d told you, except that Ginny knew my secret, and sometimes she’d say the oddest things, like that maybe Lucius Malfoy was just lonely, and not actually scheming. And that’s why she wasn’t surprised when I said that he’d helped me to Grimmauld after the Weird Sisters concert.”

Harry nodded, brows heavy as she watched his mind race along. “And why I never knew you got an owl from him when you were staying with us. Ginny got it and didn’t say anything.”

Hermione nodded, but then closed her eyes, taking in a deep breath. “Harry... There’s something else about that night. Just... I don’t want there to be any more secrets between us. You’ll be mad, but...”

Harry looked over at her and gave her a sharp nod. “Out with it, then.”

Exhaling shakily, Hermione paused on the sidewalk and looked Harry in the eye. “Before I Flooed to your place, I was so angry and so miserable and so, so drunk... When he was walking me to the Floo, I... I kissed him.”

Harry came to a sharp, sudden jerk, and Hermione felt her stomach plummet. “You said you wanted to know... everything...” she said softly, biting her lip and fidgeting with the hem of her jumper, eyes screwed tightly shut as she waited for the yelling, the angry, sullen Harry of fifth year, dealing with stress and grief and loss. Instead she just heard a low exhale, and opened her eyes to see Harry tightening and loosening his fists. “And?”

“And? And, um, well, that was it, he told me I was drunk and pushed me into the Floo, but Ginny knew, she said I looked like I’d been snogged senseless,” Hermione stammered, chancing a glance back over at Harry. It looked as if his shoulders had relaxed just barely, but now he was looking at her with a strange frown.

“Hermione, what in Merlin’s name would possess you to throw yourself at Lucius Malfoy? And... why would he just send you off to us?”

Hermione flushed on both accounts, suddenly feeling defensive and insecure. “Well, I was quite drunk! And, Harry, you remember what Ron had said to me, earlier that night, and I felt so insecure and small and he--, well, he told me I was passionate and brilliant and curious and that Ron was wrong, and he told me if I ever needed someplace to go I could always go to Malfoy Manor, and... I just...” She shrugged, giving Harry a helpless, pleading look.

“Harry, for his part, had turned thoughtful. His hands were still clenching and unclenching rhythmically, but at this point the rhythm was almost mechanical, no real anger behind it. “You
know you are all of those things, right, Hermione?"

“Oh, Harry,” she said, giving him a small smile and reaching out to tentatively squeeze one hand.
“Yes. I remember now, even if I didn’t then.”

“Good,” he said gruffly, and resumed their walking pace, Hermione jolting forward to catch up with him.

“Well, ah, then I guess you know everything up until the ball,” Hermione said, wringing her hands as she approached the crux of the story, as far it concerned Harry. When she had to admit how long she’d known about Draco and kept it from him. “...I didn’t know why, but I knew Ginny was acting oddly. And she told you it was because she was seeing the Malfoys unexpectedly, but she’d known I was talking to Lucius for months and had never once been so flustered or upset. And... Lucius seemed odd too. He was angry, upset about the engagement announcement, and I said something about did he really hate Weasleys that much, and he looked at Ginny and said some of them were alright.” She exhaled heavily, trying to think back to the rollercoaster of emotion that had been the night of the ball.

“Harry, I feel so stupid telling you now that I didn’t figure it out earlier, because it seems so obvious laid out like this, and, I mean, I’m supposed to be smarter than this! But I was exhausted, I was so emotionally drained after the fight with Ron, and then the engagement, and then Lucius was arguing with me, and, well, I know it’s hard to believe, but actually he was jealous, and I didn’t realize, I was confused--”

“Bloody hell, Hermione.”

“I know, I know, I didn’t believe it myself at first, but--”

“No, not that. Merlin, I’ve only known what’s been going on a few hours, if that, and even I already figured out that he was jealous. I just can’t believe you didn’t.”

“Oh,” Hermione said in a small voice, feeling herself blush deeply as she shot a look at Harry, who was looking at her with a mix of frustration and exasperation. “Well, all of that is to say, I didn’t know what was coming, but I had a suspicion Lucius was involved, until Gwenog Floo’d early the next morning to try to control the spread of the papers.”

Harry nodded stiffly, shoulders tensing noticeably as they came to that fateful morning. “I went to Grimmauld as soon as I was done, and Ginny and Luna were there, and that’s when... Well, that’s... I yelled at Ginny, and that’s when she finally explained it all. Their meeting, Draco’s... erm, accident, the friendship between them, and then when it had become something more. I wanted to tell you, Harry, I swear it on my magic, but Ginny... Ginny convinced me that if it got out, if the papers were running front page stories on every bad thing the Malfoys had ever done again, she didn’t want to put Draco through it, not after... well, you know. So I agreed.”

Harry exhaled heavily, eyes drifting closed again, and Hermione stumbled over her next words. “But I pressured her to tell you, I promise. Especially after...” she hesitated, looking over at him. “I know it sounds odd, but no one thought you should know more than Lucius.”

Her hands dropped to twist at her sweater as Harry looked over at her in clear disbelief, brows raised. “Not for your sake, necessarily, but... He wanted Ginny to choose. To stop, erm, having her cake and eating it too. Not stringing you both along.”

Harry snorted. “Well, make that two things that Lucius Malfoy and I agree on.”
“Two?”

Harry gave her a wry grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “That Ginny shouldn’t have strung two men along, and that you’re brilliant and passionate and all that other nice stuff he said about you.”

Hermione flushed. “Oh. Well, erm, that pretty much brings us up to speed. Since Christmas, it’s just been periodic arguing about telling you, and then, well, you know the rest.”

“Oh, so there’s nothing to tell about why your jumper is on inside out?” Harry asked in a faux-light tone, and Hermione flushed.

“I, erm, must’ve put it on that way when I got up,” Hermione said, cursing inwardly. Harry had gotten annoyingly more observant since becoming an Auror.

“Really? That’s interesting, because I don’t remember it being that way when I first came over this morning...” he said, looking at her intently.

“Fine! When I went to tell off Lucius for interfering and forcing Ginny’s hand, I... erm, may have mentioned by decision to break off my engagement with Ron.” She flushed bright red, and chanced a glance over at Harry, who was simply frowning at the ground. “And no, I haven’t said anything to Ron, because Lucius had nothing to do with my decision. Or rather, him being in my life as a friend has, but not anything... romantic.” Harry continued to frown with his brow furrowed, and Hermione stopped to grab him by the shoulders and swing him around to face her.

“Harry. I’m so sorry for what Ginny has done, but she knows she made a mistake. She’s done nothing but try to stop me from making a mistake, too. And Lucius has been... clear about his intentions, but firm about his limits. We’ve both tried to avoid repeating mistakes.”

Harry met her gaze for a moment, tense, jaw tight, before he exhaled heavily and nodded. “I know, Hermione. I believe you. I don’t entirely believe that your decision had nothing to do with Lucius Malfoy, and I don’t think I’ll ever bloody understand it, but... Merlin this all such a mess, and... if you were a worse person, you’d have never said anything to Ron, gone ahead and married him, no one would have ever suspected Lucius bloody Malfoy. And I’m honestly still shocked that Lucius Malfoy doesn’t want to pull one over on a Weasley by sleeping with his wife, but... here we are.”

Hermione laughed slightly, hysterically, rubbing a hand across her face. “Here we are, indeed. I’m so sorry, Harry.”

He just shrugged slightly, lips quirking. “At least no one’s tried to kill me in the last year.” Hermione snorted slightly, shaking her head as she chuckled, and then leaned over to link arms with Harry.

“Time to go back?”

“I suppose so.”

* * *

Ron was in the kitchen when they returned, and Hermione noticed as he eyed their interlinked arms suspiciously. She braced herself for whatever was about to be thrown her way, now that he’d had a few moments to process their earlier conversation.

“Oh, Harry, you’re still here,” Ron said, his voice not sounding altogether warm. “Has she told you?” He gave a nod in Hermione’s direction.
“She has. We just went on a walk talking about it,” Harry said hesitantly, eyeing Ron with suspicion at his tone. “I’m sorry to hear it, mate.”

Ron grunted, and then turned his attention on Hermione. “You never told me why. You told me all this bloody bullshit about wanting us to be happy, but... what was it? Is it money? Is it about having kids? Is it that you think we’re moving too fast, that we didn’t wait until we were financially ready before we got engaged? Or is there someone else?” He snorted, anger flaring ugly on his face, as he continued. “I mean, I know it’s not the sex, because that’d be why I’d break up with you. Makes it seem unlikely there’s another bloke, but...”

Hermione was biting back the sharp sting of tears at Ron’s sudden venom when Harry stepped in front of her, angling his body between them. “Oi! Ron! Out of line, mate.”

“Oh, or maybe it’s not such a stretch after all. Maybe it’s the two of you. After all, most people keep their jumpers on right side out for a walk,” Ron sneered, and Hermione flinched.

“Ron, I’m not seeing Harry. Please, I know you’re upset--”

“It’s been like that all morning, mate, and you’d know it if you hadn’t showed up hungover at noon,” Harry interjected, temper finally seeming to have gotten the best of him. “Now, we’ve all had a morning, so stop bloody sniping at Hermione.”

“Why are you defending her?” Ron said, voice rising. “I’m the one who just got bloody dumped, and you two are out strolling around like the best of pals!”

Hermione noticed the tension rising in Harry’s body, the glowering anger that he’d been suppressing since Ginny’s arrival boiling over, and stepped between them, pulling out her wand.

“Harry, go home. Or to Neville and Hannah’s, or something. I’ll owl you later. I promise,” she said, with a pleading look in her eyes. “Ron, Harry and Ginny have decided to separate. They decided this in our kitchen this morning while you were out, so please cut Harry a break, and then let’s sit down and discuss this like adults.”

She glared fiercely at the both of them, wand held aloft threateningly. Harry was the first to back down, nodding and heading for the Floo with a muttered goodbye, and then Ron sank back into a dining chair, crossing his arms and giving her a petulant glare.

“They decided to separate this morning, huh? Same time as you decided to call off our engagement?”

“Ronald!” Hermione snapped, leaning against the table. “Stop it with the stupid bloody jealousy! We are not seventeen anymore, and there’s no Horcrux around this time. Harry and Ginny have been struggling for weeks, which you well know. Ginny has been cheating, not Harry. And you and I have been unhappy for months.”

When he went a few moments without snapping at her, she exhaled and sank into a chair. “Now, logistics. I’ll of course move out, so you can keep the apartment, but I’ll need some time to find a new place.”

Ron snorted. “And I will too. You know I can’t afford this place on just my salary alone.”

“Er, right. A month, then? I’ll sleep in the guest bedroom until we can figure out alternate living arrangements, but we’ll give the landlord notice.”

“Fine.”
“I think most of the furniture we split the cost on, but you can keep most of it, I want the books and the china.”

“Fine.”

“I figured we could tell your family tomorrow at the Burrow... I’m sure it’ll get out to the papers eventually, but they should know from us, first, and doing it this way might let Harry and Ginny have a little bit of peace when they make their announcement.”

“Fine.”

“Is fine all you have to say for yourself, Ron?” Hermione said suddenly, leaning forward with a glare at the man who’d suddenly been reduced to a petulant child in front of her.

“Why the bloody hell not? It’s not like I get much of a say in this anyway. You just decided, on your own, to end this, and I have no say in it.”

“Relationships are a two-way street, Ron. If both partners don’t want to be in it, it’s over. I didn’t need to consult you about my decision.”

“Whatever,” Ron said, standing up and shoving his chair away from the table. “I don’t care about the bloody logistics. Figure it all out.”

With that, he turned and walked into the living room, followed by the rush of the Floo. Hermione sighed, putting her head down on the table in front of her, arms folded tightly against herself. She’d never looked forward to or dreaded a day so much in her life, as tomorrow - when she saw Lucius again as a truly free woman, and when she broke the news to the Weasley clan.
Feeling Sorry for Cecelia

Chapter Summary

Hermione deals with an unexpected first day after her breakup.

Chapter Notes

... I have nothing to say for myself, only much gratitude to express my very patient and loyal readers. I'm sorry life is a demanding bitch, but I this story is not abandoned! Just slow! Your comments and reviews always help motivate me and really make me grateful for all of the appreciation you guys have for this story.

Courtesy of the emotional rollercoaster of the previous few days, Hermione woke up the next morning with a throbbing headache. Groaning softly, she stirred to turn away from the faint light filtering into the room, but as she started to turn she stopped, breath growing shallow, with the realization—the light was coming from a different side of the room than it normally did. And the sheets were stiffer, newer, the blanket heavier. She wasn’t in her room, she didn’t know where she was, this was different, she was—she exhaled relief when she realized that she was in her guest bedroom. Still in her apartment. Or rather, the apartment that would be hers for only a month longer, until she could find a new place to stay, because she’d broken up with Ron yesterday.

She’d broken up with Ron yesterday.

She’d broken up with Ron.

The realization hit her like the proverbial ton of bricks, a swirling mess of panic, relief, joy, fear, lingering anger. She’d been dating Ron the entire time she’d been out of school; she had formed her adult identity while dating Ron the entire time. She couldn’t articulate her fears, just a nebulous panic at the thought of this giant, massive change that thudded through her veins and her bones, catching in her throat and trying to claw its way out of her skin.

She sat bolt upright in bed, pressing her hands to her head and forcing herself to take four long, deep breaths. She was Hermione Granger. She did not give in to nameless, irrational fears. Slowly, she forced herself to articulate each fear--who am I without Ron? What if I never find anyone else who will love me like him? What if everything with Lucius is a joke, or falls apart? What if everyone hates me now? What if I’ve ruined my relationship with one of my best friends by breaking up with him?

Just giving the fears form, assigning them words and order, questions that could be answered, assuaged the panic somewhat, and then she set about responding to each, as if her own subconscious were a confused child she was explaining a difficult concept to. I am Hermione Granger, I am not and never was defined by my relationship to Ron, or Harry, or anyone else. I don’t want anyone to love me like Ron did, because fundamentally Ron didn’t love me in the way we both needed, completely, for myself. I don’t need anyone to love me, because I am my own independent person. And so, even if everything I believe Lucius feels for me isn’t true, I will be
fine. Not everyone hates me—Harry and Ginny know everything, and are still my friends. I have friends at the Ministry, co-workers. Academic friends. Ron is mad now, but we have been through more than enough to weather this. I am Hermione Granger. I am the brightest witch of my age. I helped defeat Voldemort. I am Hermione Granger, and everything will be okay.

Settled somewhat, she looked at the clock and swore. She’d woken up before she usually did, but the process of putting herself back together had her running late for her committee meeting. She scrambled to her feet and into some clothes too old to be kept in the main bedroom and then hurriedly Floo’d to the Ministry without bothering to check on Ron. She dashed down the corridors at the Ministry and bolted through the door to the conference room with barely a moment to spare, dropping into her usual seat next to Andromeda with a grateful half-smile. The meeting seemed to take barely seconds—one moment she was listening to Elphias open the meeting with congratulations on their event—Merlin above had that only been days ago?—and then flushing as she remembered the events of that night, and then fighting the urge to look at Lucius—and then everyone was pushing back their chairs, murmuring about the plans for the next event, and beginning to disperse. As if in a daze, Hermione made her way to the door, noticing Lucius take up a position at her side, giving her a curious stare.

“Are you feeling up to coffee?” he asked quietly, softly enough that the other members couldn’t hear them, and she paused to give his arm a grateful squeeze, ignoring the wide-eyed stares of the committee members trickling out together with them.

“Yes, I’d like nothing more. But I appreciate you asking.”

They walked together in companionable silence until they reached the entrance, and stepped out onto the street to find Harry, bundled in a heavy Muggle coat with his hands in his pockets, frowning at the cold and dirty pavement.

“Harry? Is everything alright at home? Did Ron—?”

Harry waved a hand at her dismissively. “No, no, everything’s fine. I just… well, you mentioned coffee, and I thought I’d take you up on coffee with you and… Malfoy.” He frowned around the last word, as if it were a toad unhappily inhabiting his throat, but otherwise kept his face fairly placid, if not friendly.

Lucius, for his part, expressed his surprise solely through a slight, barely perceptible widening of his eyes, before he said, with a quick glance at Hermione, “If it’s alright with Hermione, I have no objection to your presence.”

Hermione, blinking furiously, just nodded, Harry grunted in assent, and the unlikely trio made their way to the usual coffee shop, sliding into seats at an open bistro table against the wall, Hermione pulling up a chair to station herself between the two men, casting wary glances in both of their directions, but they both seemed to be handling themselves calmly.

“So, erm, Lucius… Harry knows everything. He… I… we had a long talk yesterday. I mentioned our regular coffee dates, and that he should come some time.” She fiddled with her hands before shoving them into her lap, praying that the waitress would come by soon.

“Ah,” was all Lucius said, studying Harry intensely. For his part, Harry just shrugged, though his jaw was tense and his eyes sharp.

“I guess I was curious to see what all the fuss was about.”

“Yes, well, erm, usually we’d just be talking about the committee meeting, or maybe whatever
academic piece we’ve been discussing. You know, Harry, our next event is going to also carry on in the theme of the arts, but we’ve been thinking of music. Maybe something like Muggle music through the ages, so wizards can hear classic pieces and we can also loop in the younger crowds by playing music they’d like to dance to, and culminate in a reception with drinks and dancing. Justin Finch-Fletchley really pushed it, and I think it’s a really great idea, but—oh! Good, coffee!” She paused to take a sip of the coffee their waitress had sat in front her; apparently she and Lucius were regulars now. Harry took advantage of Hermione’s pause to order for himself, and then Lucius finally interjected.

“What did you really come to talk about, Potter?” His tone wasn’t rude, but… decidedly firm, tired but determined.

Harry gave him a measured look. “Why?”

“I’ll need you to be more specific, Mr. Potter.”

Harry frowned now. “Why you? Why Hermione? Why would you, of all people, send her that book and write her and do all of this for her?”

Lucius exhaled heavily, leaning back in his chair as he spent a few moments taking a long look at Harry. Finally, he leaned forward again, fingers steepled and pressed against his forehead. “Fine. Only because you are her dear friend. I sent her that book because, despite what you may think of me, after everything, I didn’t want to be the man who ruined things any longer. I ruined everything around me, and Miss Granger may have had some… choice words for me at the reading. As for what came after… I’ll admit I was curious about you, Hermione. You’d spoken at my hearing, in spite of all I and my family had done to you. And then it turned out that you lived up to your moniker, that you were intellectually curious and challenging and I hadn’t felt as alive as I did when I was trying to figure out the answer to a problem you posed me since before Azkaban.”

Hermione sat back, mouth a little agape, watching as Lucius fixed her with that same intense look she’d seen so many times before.

“What time are we meant to go to the Burrow?”

Harry started, roused from deep thought, and frowned. “Around noon. Early, I know, but… there was some reason, apparently, and given the circumstances… We don’t have much time here.”

At Lucius’ raised eyebrow, Hermione quickly explained, “There’s going to be quite a bit of explaining to the entire Weasley family. They don’t know about the engagement yet, and… ah, I’m not sure if you’ve heard, but Harry and Ginny are separating.”

Lucius nodded grimly. “My condolences, Mr. Potter.”
Harry’s face twisted into something ugly and angry for a moment before he leaned back with a sigh. “From what I gather from Hermione… you might actually be sincere in that. So… thanks, I guess. Besides, I suppose I’d rather have to talk the Weasleys about this than tell my son I was going to date his schoolmate. How are you planning on handling that one?”

Hermione turned bright red, and there was even a faint hint of pink on Lucius’ cheeks at that, and they both avoided looking at Harry.

“He, um, well, he might already have an inkling. There was rather some barging into closed rooms done yesterday…” Hermione trailed off uncomfortably, waiting for the earth to swallow her whole.

Harry was silent for a moment, and then slowly, started to chuckle, escalating until he was howling with laughter, wiping tears from his eyes. “Oh, bloody hell. I’m sorry, I just… I’ve spent all this time thinking about what I’m going to do when I see him next, after all this, you know, what hex would be best to hit him with, or whether I’d rather just deck him—” Hermione, feeling Lucius bristling next to her, nudged his knee with her own—“when, honestly, nothing I could come up with is as good as knowing he walked in on his own dad snagging his school nemesis. Hermione, please tell me there’s a way to make a memory un-Obliviable.”

Hermione started to mention Cassian Penhallow’s texts on the subject of memory and Obliviation when it was Lucius’ turn to nudge her knee, and she clapped her mouth shut. “Not anything that wouldn’t require a full moon, some goat’s blood, and your fingers crossed you didn’t wipe his entire mind instead. So no,” she quickly continued on a more emphatic note at Lucius’ sharp look.

“Should we be heading back, then?” Hermione said, glancing down at her watch to see it was nearly 11:30.

“Oh, you’re right,” Harry said, snapping out a reverie that Hermione was uncomfortably sure had focused on relishing imagined looks of horror and despair on Draco’s face and beginning to clean the dishes from the table.

As Harry bustled over to the counter, Lucius leaned over to where Hermione was buttoning her coat to brush his lips against her ear, soft as a breath, whispering, “While his whole protective act was darling, I’d rather hoped it would be just you and I, and that we could take our coffee somewhere a little more private today.”

Heat spread through her at the brush of his lips against her and at the promise in his words. “Oh?” she said, slightly breathily.

“And after we’d had coffee, I would have been able to take my time worshipping that body of yours and making you come all over my cock, screaming my name.”

“Oh,” was all she had to say again, this time very breathily, and she was glad that she had one hand gripping her chair because the heat in his gaze and his brazen promises had her weak in the knees. Fortunately, or unfortunately, at that moment Harry rejoined them.

“Ready to go, Hermione?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice, and followed Harry out of the shop.

* * *

The clock on the mantel above the fireplace was chiming noon. Ron was sitting on one end of the couch, long legs askew in front of him as he slumped backwards with a frown. Harry was in one of
the armchairs, head propped up on one hand even as he stared listlessly into the distance. Ginny, who had arrived a few moments before, so that they could all go to the Burrow together, was pacing the hallway, dark circles heavy under her eyes.

“We should go.” It was Hermione who finally stood up from her spot at the kitchen table and headed to the fireplace. She was met with three grim nods, and, taking a deep breath, she grabbed a handful of Floo powder and made her way to the Burrow.

Moments later, she was stepping out of the fireplace, making room for each of her friends behind her, clambering out and standing together in a lump half-circle, realizing that the rest of the Weasleys were gathered together in the living room, and had turned when they entered. Percy was the one who strode across the room to them, a bright smile lighting up his face.

“Audrey and I are getting married!”

Hermione realized with slowly dawning horror that the faces surrounding them were bright and cheerful, Audrey in the corner next to Fleur, happy and glowing and optimistic and all turned to face her. There was a heavy moment of silence, and she wondered who would be the first to break the silence, to tell them that they had news of their own, not good news, news that would ruin everything, when she heard sudden, too-sharp gasps of hysterical laughter, splitting the air around them and causing the assembled Weasleys to shift uncomfortably. It was with some shock that she realized, after a moment, that the sounds were coming from her.
Every Blade of Grass

Chapter Summary

Hermione thinks on the conversations she has at the Burrow, and Lucius provides some examples on temptation.

Chapter Notes

As always, I don't own these delightful characters, and I appreciate your kind and thoughtful comments and reviews!

I've also added, at the same time as this is going up, a separate work for the snippets and outtakes and cut scenes from this story, which is called Epistolary Outtakes (because why not?) and starts off with a bit about how Draco and Ginny began the path that got them to where they are (because I've had it floating around for a while and now seemed like the right time.

Some time later, Hermione was sitting in a corner of the garden, sipping at a cup of warm tea as she tried to focus on the cold wind whipping around her and not the murmurs of conversation she could almost hear from inside the Burrow.

Surprisingly, of all of them, it had been Ginny to step up and put things right after Hermione had dissolved into helpless, hysterical laughter upon hearing Percy’s announcement. Ginny had stepped to Hermione’s side, wrapping a strong arm around her and supporting her, telling the shocked Weasley assembly that the four of them had had a long and difficult weekend and had some things to tell the group, but that first things first Hermione should get some fresh air and some tea, and maybe she could talk to her mother privately while that was being taken care of? With that set in motion, Arthur had taken it upon himself to shuttle Hermione out to the garden with a concerned glint in his kind eyes, Molly had followed somewhat dazedly after her youngest, who’d strole confidently outside, Harry and Ron had managed to gently pull Bill away from the rest of the group to talk upstairs, and Percy and Audrey had managed to stay comfortably ensconced in a cheerful and excited, if somewhat confused, group of family members happy to discuss their impending nuptials.

Taking another long sip of tea, Hermione heard the creaking of a door opening and turned to find Arthur rejoining her, but the concern in his face had been replaced with grave solemnity. Hermione gave him a wan smile. “So I suppose you’ve talked to Ron and Harry?”

He sank down into a chair beside her, somehow looking suddenly every bit of his age, and nodded.

She hesitated, biting back the sudden sting of tears. “I’m sorry, Arthur. I… I hope you know how much I love you and Molly and the rest of you all, and how much I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, and how welcoming you’ve been, and—”

She stopped when she felt a warm hand on her shoulder. “Hermione, dear, it’s alright. We know,
and we’re not upset with you. With either of you. With… with any of you. We cared about you long before you and Ron started dating and we’re not about to stop just because you’ve broken up. You will always be a part of our family.”

Hermione gulped, suddenly thinking of Arthur brawling with Lucius Malfoy in Flourish and Blotts and wondering just how far Arthur’s ‘always’ extended. Arthur must have noticed something of the glint of guilt in her eye because he patted her shoulder awkwardly.

“I know Molly can be… difficult at times, and she probably won’t be on her best behavior for a little while, but…” He paused, looking slightly helpless, likely because Hermione could faintly hear the sounds of Molly screaming unintelligibly at what she assumed must be Ginny in the distance, before he sighed heavily. “You’re too young to understand yet, but… as parents, all we want is for our children to be safe and happy. And you and Harry are our children too, you know. So, after everything that was the war, we just wanted everything to be right, and safe, and happy. It may feel as if we pressured you kids into marriage, and children, and all of that, and we can see now that we were wrong to, but we came from a place of wanting, for all of us, to feel like the terribleness of the war was over and we could move on together, stronger, happy, together.”

He smiled softly down at the ground and Hermione reached a grateful hand up to clasp the one that had been patting her shoulder.

“Of course,” Mr. Weasley continued, brow furrowing slightly, “you’re all your own people, and you’ve grown into adults with your own personalities, who can handle yourselves and want your own kind of happiness, and still surprise us old folks.” He gave a slight smile, though it had a barely perceptible tremble. “Though imagine my surprise when finding out that, not my Ron who can barely think one step ahead of himself when he’s not playing chess, or our Harry who still keeps most of himself hidden from the rest of us, or even impulsive Ginny, but our logical, straitlaced Hermione Granger was the one who’d shock us by becoming friends with Lucius Malfoy, of all people.”

Hermione flushed deeply, averting her eyes from the older man’s focused gaze, but he squeezed her shoulder gently. “I won’t lie and say I’m happy about it, or that I understand it, or that I’ll be inviting him ‘round for Sunday supper. You know how I feel about the man. But Harry told us the broad strokes, and Bill was there to confirm some bits, and, well… after a glass of my strongest Firewhiskey and some time to think about it… I can’t imagine what I’d do if I lost Molly and almost lost all of the rest of you kids. It seems like it maybe gave Lucius Malfoy the kick in the bollocks he needed to look at his life differently, and if you’ve helped be a part of that kick then I guess I’m glad.”

Hermione smiled slightly, patting his hand. “He really is a better man now. A good man, even. And he’s been a good friend to me, better than I deserved at times.”

Arthur gave her a smile at that, even if it still contained a good deal of skepticism. “If you say so, dear.” With a heavy sigh, he moved his hands to his knees and stood. “Now, I’m going to go find my daughter before I have to take to the skies to do it.” At Hermione’s confused look, he smiled. “I saw her heading off to the broom shed a few seconds ago. She’s never been as sneaky as she thinks she is.”

After Arthur’s departure, Hermione thought that she really should go inside, instead of hiding in the garden, but her legs wouldn’t seem to move where she willed them to, and so she was still sitting in the same position Arthur had left her when she heard the door open again, and she looked to the side to see Andromeda sitting down next to her, face carefully blank.

“Hullo,” Hermione said tiredly, taking a sip of tea and letting her eyes drift back to the rolling
fields in front of her.

“Hullo Hermione. I’m not sure whether to offer condolences or congratulations.” Andromeda’s voice was light but her tone tight and controlled, and Hermione shot a curious glance in Andromeda’s direction. She’d have expected the older witch to be warm and supportive, at least more so than the Weasleys; she’d never seemed particularly invested in Hermione and Ron’s relationship before.

“I think both are probably appropriate.”

The two sat in awkward silence for a moment before Andromeda broke the tension.

“I’ll be direct.”

Hermione’s brow rose, but she stayed silent as Andromeda took a deep breath.

“I like you, Hermione. I think you’re kind, and quite mature for your age. But you’re still young, and you’ve just ended an engagement, the only serious adult relationship you’ve ever had, at that.” Hermione pressed her lips together, brow furrowing as she tried to follow Andromeda’s train of thought. “So I hope you understand that it’s not that I don’t like you, or don’t trust you, when I say this, but just that you are in a delicate state the extent of which even you probably don’t understand.”

“I know that you care for Lucius, and I know that he cares for you deeply. But, despite how difficult it may to imagine that this is true of someone like him, he is vulnerable too. He lost Narcissa in a deeply tragic way not even two years ago, and he has not cared for anyone since.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open into a slight ‘oh’ as she suddenly realized what Andromeda was getting at. “Andromeda, I would never—”

“No, no,” Andromeda said, waving a hand for Hermione to be quiet, “I know that you would never be so callous as to do something to intentionally hurt him. But you wouldn’t be the first witch to find herself suddenly free after the end of a trying relationship and take temporary solace and pleasure in the arms of a man who is in every way different from the one you just left. I wouldn’t even judge you for doing it, so long as it’s not with Lucius. Have I made my point clear, Hermione?”

Hermione swallowed heavily, feeling as if the tea that had been pleasantly warming her had turned to a lump of ice in her stomach. What if Andromeda was right? Hermione knew, intellectually, that no matter that she’d felt her feelings for Lucius were quite organic and natural, and separate from her feelings about Ron, and that her relationship with Ron had been long over, there was a risk that she was deluding herself. Hadn’t she lamented to herself that she was always comparing the two? What if she was just using Lucius? Taking solace in the fact that a mature intellectual man like Lucius was attracted to her, cared for her, when her own feelings for him, no matter how strong they felt at the time, were actually just some sort… reaction to her dissatisfaction with Ron?

She nodded, feeling vaguely queasy, and Andromeda seemed to soften slightly. Reaching out a hand to lay on Hermione’s forearm, she gave her a soft smile. “I’m not saying that’s what this is, or that’s what you’ll do. I just want you to be careful that your feelings and actions are driven by the right reasons, and not do something rash you’ll regret.”

“Thank you, Andromeda.” Hermione gave the other witch the best attempt at a smile she could, though her stomach was in angry knots as the back of her mind tried to replay every feeling she’d ever had for Lucius or Ron, pick them apart bit by bit and find the truth of it all. She was vaguely
aware of some friendly platitudes from the older witch before she moved away, back into the house, and made soft agreeable noises while she nodded, but mostly her brain was occupied with what Andromeda had said. She sat out in the garden like that, worrying and examining every moment of the past months with Lucius, until she felt someone gently shake her shoulder.

“You all right there, ‘Mione?” Harry’s voice was behind her and his arm on her shoulder, and she jumped as she looked up at him.

“Sorry, Harry, I was... lost in thought.”

He gave her a small smile. “I could tell. I think we’re all parting ways now. Ginny’s going to stay here for a little bit, and Ron’s going back to George’s for a nightcap. You ready to head back?”

Hermione nodded, and let herself be tugged back into the Burrow and through the thousand and one awkward goodbyes before she finally stepped into the Floo and collapsed, exhausted, onto the couch in her living room.

* * *

Later that night, she sat on the bed in the guest room, staring anxiously at a blank piece of parchment in front of her. She’d considered going to Malfoy Manor again, but she wasn’t certain that she could face Lucius (or even the sight of his desk) and still maintain her self control on this point. So she was back to the beginning with them—writing a letter. And she hadn’t been so nervous to write Lucius a letter since that first one, standing in the post shop trying to remember how to write thank you notes. She dropped her quill to the page, hesitating.

L,

she addressed it, out of habit, and paused. It felt too formal for something like this, and yet, it was exactly them. It would be stranger of her to change and address him as Lucius now.

I am being a terrible Gryffindor and an utter coward by writing you this letter instead of sitting down to speak with you, but you make it dreadfully hard to concentrate sometimes, and quite frankly I believe I’d lose my nerve if you just smiled at me.

This is all coming out rather worse than the truth of it. I’m sorry, I usually consider my words more carefully than this. Forgive me the mess of a letter.

I care for you deeply, more deeply than you know. But it’s been brought to my attention that people in situations like mine—that is, who have just ended significant relationships—often act rashly and develop feelings out of a reaction to the change itself. I don’t feel that that’s right here—this doesn’t feel like a reaction, or a flight of fancy, or a burst of impulse—but my mind is telling me that of course it wouldn’t feel that way to me. And so, intellectually, when I weigh the risk of trusting my own emotions right now against the very real risk of inadvertently hurting you, I would never act in a way that I thought could hurt you.

All of which is to say that, much as I have been eagerly awaiting the next moment we can be alone together, perhaps we shouldn’t jump immediately into the physical. I’d say we shouldn’t jump immediately into the romantic, but I think that ship has well and truly sailed (at least on my part), and so I’m left to try to salvage what I can. I just want to take some time to examine my feelings, to sort them out, to be well and truly away from Ron, and feel certain that what I get us into, the both of us, is something honest, and real.

Yours, always, H.

Hands trembling, she barely gave the letter a second glance before she sent it off. She couldn’t bear
She’d barely begun to try to immerse herself in a book she’d picked up about Wizarding music in anticipation of the upcoming cultural committee event when she heard a tapping on the guest room window, and looked up to see a familiar, haughty owl. Stomach swooping low, she opened the window and the letter with shaky hands on a heavy exhale.

_H,

Though I may struggle with the substance of your letter, I appreciate its sentiment. I know that you are trying to do the right thing and make the best of a difficult situation, and so I will respect your choices, much as I hate that someone or something has made you doubt your own mind and heart.

I must ask one question though: I will respect your choices, but would you permit me temptation?

Yours, always, L.

Frowning, Hermione grabbed a sheet of parchment and motioned for Daedalus to wait for her response, quickly scribbled.

I appreciate your support, but I’m not sure that I follow your question. What exactly are you asking of me?

After she’d sent Daedalus off with a treat, she was left to pace the room anxiously, all pretenses of preparing for the upcoming event with study lost as she tried to figure out what he could mean. Did he mean that he wanted to be free to see other witches while she was figuring herself out? The thought made her heart sink, but, logically, she didn’t see how she was free to refuse him. She either had a claim on him or she didn’t, and this evening she had written him decidedly asking to not have a claim. She wrung her hands furiously, waiting for what seemed like an interminably long period of time for his response, when at last she heard pecking at the sill once again. This time, she nearly flung herself at the window to open it and see his response, earning herself a near-nip from the eagle owl in the process. As she read its contents, she felt herself flush deeply.

She had, it appeared, been greatly mistaken.

_H,

Apologies, I should have been more precise. Perhaps an example would be helpful.

For example, would it be quite alright with you if, while I respected your decision and refrained from displays of the sort that occurred at the National Gallery, I were to write you and tell you that, once you’ve satisfied yourself with regard to your feelings, I am terribly eager to satisfy you and myself with regard to your body? If I were to tell you that, in fact, I’ve spent many nights with my hand around my cock, planning and imagining exactly what I will do with you once you’re mine? Just as an example of such a letter, I could tell you that just last night, still missing the taste of you, I laid in my bed and imagined tying you to it. Apologies if this is uncouth, but, after all, it is an example fantasy. I’d have you tied up, at my mercy, able to touch every part of you to my heart’s content, to lick and bite at your pretty pink nipples until you were writhing beneath me, begging, and then I’d have you suck my cock until you were gagging on it, gagging for it, and only then would I fuck you. Hard and deep but slow at first, so you could feel every inch of me, so you could just get closer and closer but never enough to come, so that when I finally touched your clit you would explode around me and drag me along with you.

Does that example make it clear enough?
Yours, always, L.

Hermione flushed deeply, squirming on the bed as she warred between touching herself or Flooing right over to Malfoy Manor, to hell with Andromeda’s warnings. Finally she let her eyes drop shut with a heavy exhale and reached for a quill, trying to steady her hand, which was now shaking for an entirely different reason than it had been earlier that evening. She scrawled her response hastily on a scrap of parchment and tucked the letter she’d received from Lucius between the pages of the Twilburg book on her bedside table.

L,

I found the use of examples very enlightening. You’ve convinced me of the potential advantages of this temptation you describe.

Tempt away.

H.
Chapter Summary

Hermione reaches a breaking point.

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the long delay, but hopefully this chapter makes up for it somewhat!

As ever, thank you so much for everyone who has read and commented and given kudos. I appreciate it so much and you have no idea how much it means to me to know that other people are really enjoying this story as much as I've enjoyed writing it.

Hermione was going to explode.

When she had assented to Lucius’ request to allow him to tempt her, she hadn’t realized the man was insatiable, with an imagination and a talent for dirty talk that would leave her breathless and nearly panting wherever she was when she happened to receive one of his letters, including, one unfortunate time, at her desk at work, when he’d added, as a postscript to their regular correspondence on Arabic approaches to arithmancy, a paragraph confessing that he had, just that morning, locked his study door and stroked himself, quick and desperate, to the sudden wish that, the morning she had come through his Floo after deciding to break off her engagement to Ron, he’d licked her until she came over and over again, until she was oversensitive and desperate and begging for him, and then flipped her over his desk and taken her from behind.

After that, she decided to wait until she was home to read all of Lucius’ letters.

It had been three weeks, and she was a jangling mass of nerves and sexual tension, between Lucius’ letters and her continued living arrangement with Ron. She’d hoped that having agreed to end things once and for all, Ron would grow to accept the change and try to move forward with dignity. Instead, if they spoke, they were at each other’s throats, so Ron’s preferred method of dealing with things had been to be absolutely silent, avoiding and ignoring her to the point of absurdity, so that even moments like taking turns in the bathroom to get ready in the morning had a charged atmosphere of passive aggressive tension. She had managed to find a flat in a Muggle part of London, not ideal but manageable; she’d been ready to move into a cardboard box if it would get her out of the war zone that her flat had become. It had been slightly better when Harry was there, but he’d returned to Grimmauld Place full time after a week. Consequently, Hermione was spending as much time as she possibly could outside of her apartment. Mostly, though, she missed Lucius. They kept up their correspondence and they of course saw each other at committee meetings and for coffee afterwards, and while of course it was enough, in the sense that Hermione enjoyed every moment, now that the tantalizing idea of more was there, floating around in her head and between them, she couldn’t seem to get enough of the man. She woke up in the morning and wished she could turn and see his face; when she got home from work she wished she could tell
him about her day, and listen to what he’d done; when she was laying in bed, reading a book, she wished he was next to her so that she could tell him about what she was reading, her thoughts, her ideas, and he could do the same.

All of which was part of the reason she found herself sitting across from Lucius at their coffee shop, sipping contentedly on her third latte, discussing the committee event scheduled for that evening.

“Do you really think it’s wise to let Finch-Fletchley do all the talking?” Lucius was saying, a small frown creasing his face.

“It was his idea, and it’s his friend who’s going to serve as DJ,” Hermione countered, biting on her lower lip as she thought about it. She noticed Lucius’ eyes darting from her eyes to her lips, gaze darkening, and she fought a visible shudder as her mind turned, entirely unbidden, to thoughts of him kissing her, unleashed, what he could to her, even on this table, coffee mugs knocked to the floor and her legs wrapped around him and—damn him and damn his letters! She blinked, flushing slightly as she came back to herself. “And besides, I promised I’d give him notes on his speech. The target audience for the last event was the older generation. This one is for the youth, and they don’t want lectures—they just want music and alcohol and dancing.”

Lucius just gave her a nod and a slow smile, still looking very much lost in his own thoughts, the direction of which Hermione felt certain she could guess. Fighting the urge to shiver again and let her mind wander back down those paths, she turned her wrist over to look at her watch, and gave a heavy sigh.

“I’m supposed to go over to the Burrow soon.” In response to Lucius’ inquiringly raised eyebrow, Hermione continued. “Ginny wants to come to the event to support, even after… well… everything. So I promised her I’d get ready with her.”

Lucius nodded, something in his gaze turning pensive. “So I suppose you’ll arrive and be attending… together, then?”

“Yes, that was the plan. Why?”

Lucius hesitated, some emotion Hermione still couldn’t quite place flickering across his face. She saw him take a deep breath, and blinked as she registered it as nervousness. Lucius was nervous about whatever it was he was going to say next. Her mind blanked briefly before it began racing as he considered his next words—was he going to ask her not to come with Ginny? Maybe to express disappointment or disapproval of her continued friendship with the girl? She knew Lucius wasn’t Ginny’s biggest fan, both because and in spite of her relationship with his son, but she didn’t think Lucius was the type of person to make this sort of request of her, and of course she’d have to say no, if only on the principle of the thing, and—were they going to fight about it?

She was startled out of her racing thoughts by the realization that Lucius had opened his mouth to speak, and she blinked, her mind jumping to catch up to words he’d started.

“I was—I had been planning—well, hoping, really, that you and I might… attend. Together.”

Hermione was momentarily speechless, her brain trying to re-orient itself around this unexpected direction the conversation had taken.

“I—er, um—that would make… quite the statement.”

She knew as soon as the words had left her mouth they were the wrong ones. Lucius’ face shut to
her, back to that unassuming, impassive mask, and he leaned back in his chair, nothing but a soft puff of an exhale to show that he’d been anxiously holding his breath in anticipation of her response.

“You’re right, of course. You should come with Ginny, as planned.”

“No, no—” Hermione started, but Lucius just waved her off.

“It’s quite alright, Hermione. You are correct—our attendance together would make a very public statement, and I’ll continue to respect your wishes to keep our private lives just that, private.”

Hermione sat silently for a moment, her mouth working as she tried to figure out the right words to say, the right apologies to make, to make him understand that she’d just been caught off guard, that she didn’t want to keep him a secret, that she wasn’t ashamed of him, of what was between them, but nothing seemed adequate in her head, and then he was standing up, laying a wad of Muggle bills on the table.

“I’m sorry, but it’s gotten quite late. I have an appointment I must take care of before the event tonight. Please tell Ginny I said hello and hope she’s doing well.” His voice was flat, his manner impeccably calm and unruffled, cool and polite, as if they were friendly acquaintances, and Hermione wanted to scream but all she could do was make a strangled noise in the back of her throat as he turned and walked out of the coffee shop.

* * *

“Oh, bloody hell,” Hermione muttered, rifling through the small clutch she’d artificially enlarged for the fifth time. “I must’ve forgotten it.”

“Do you really need it?” Ginny asked from her spot in front of the mirror, where she was putting the finishing touches on her makeup.

“It was the one thing I promised Justin that I’d do,” Hermione said, frowning down at her bag. “And besides, if I don’t give him my notes, we’ll definitely be treated to the full, thirty minute long set of remarks on the history of music.”

Ginny groaned. Justin Finch-Fletchley’s talent for bloviated, self-aggrandizing speeches was legend around the castle. Hermione could only imagine what the boy would’ve been like if he’d actually gotten to finish at Eton, instead of being shipped off to Hogwarts.

“You better go get it, then.”

“Right, I’m sure it’s on my nightstand. I was looking it over last night before bed. I’ll be back in a minute.”

With that, Hermione bounced down the stairs of the Burrow and hurried over to the Floo, eager to be in and out of her flat and back to Ginny as soon as possible. They were close to running late to the event, which started in just a half hour, and Hermione really did desperately want to get her notes to Justin before they were all subjected to his overwrought speech.

She entered green flames and exited into what looked like a disaster zone. The living room, which had, when she left for the committee meeting that morning, been, if not spotless at least tidy, was torn apart, furniture moved around and—the books. Her books were everywhere, upside down, open or closed, in a state of total disarray. She made a small noise of dismay in the back of her throat, looking out at the utter mess of her beloved books.
“YOU!”

She whirled as Ron entered the living room from the hallway, eyes wild and face flushed bright red, and her heart began to race as she realized he was clutching a bundle of sheafs of parchment.

“Ron? What’s going on here?” She hoped that her voice was stronger than she felt at the moment.

“Don’t play dumb, ‘Mione, it doesn’t suit you,” Ron snarled, shaking the papers in her direction. “You know, when I found the first note, I thought I must be mistaken, that there must be some other explanation.”

“What are you talking about, Ron?” Hermione said gingerly, as if she were talking to a wild animal she was trying to soothe. Ron just laughed and turned, running a hand through his hair.

“I know you know what I’m talking about, ‘Mione. Or do you only answer to H now?”

She flinched, and he pounced.

“I thought I’d do you a bloody favor by helping you pack up all of these bloody books I bought you—remember that, that I bought you half of these?—and then something fell out of one of them. And when I looked… there were lots of letters, hidden in all of these stupid bloody books you read. I knew it, I should have known no one could be that obsessed with ancient Sumerian runes or whatever.” Ron’s face twisted into something even uglier than before. “No, this is what you were really interested in.”

And he began to read aloud.

“Each and every one of your letters is alone more than sufficient—”

“Stop it!” Hermione cried out, cringing to hear Ron reading those words, those words that had become precious to her, had sustained her when she had been in that deep depressed fog.

“—to keep my thoughts occupied for as long as I could wish, though I of course regret not to hear more sooner. I do think—”

“Stop, stop, just—shut up! Shut up, Ron!” Those words were precious, more precious than she’d realized into she’d heard Ron flinging them at her in that accusatory tone, derogatory, sneering. She hadn’t realized until this precise moment quite how much it had meant to hear that from Lucius—the thing about her that no one liked, her incessant thoughts, her need to talk, to be right, to learn and to talk about it, to know, to know every word in Hogwarts A History, to understand every potion before Snape taught it, to know everything about the magical world, to think about how magic could be advanced, the world could be changed—and to hear from Lucius Malfoy of all people that he liked that about her, that he wanted to hear all of her thoughts.

“—I will never manage to hear all the thoughts in that inexhaustible brain of yours, much as I might try.”

She was crying now, half in fury and half in desperation. She should have just told him, she thought. She was no better than Ginny, and look where it had gotten her.

“Or maybe I should read another one,” Ron started, shuffling the pages. “Oh, this one is good. I’d have you tied up, at my mercy, able to touch every part of you to my heart’s content, to lick and bite at your pretty pink nipples until you were writhing beneath me, begging, and then I’d have you suck my cock until you were gagging on it, gagging for it, and only then would I fuck you.”
“Accio letters!” Hermione cried, but Ron twisted them in his fist and fought against the magic, panting.


“I have to say, at least now I know that you didn’t cheat on me, because if you had he’d know you were a cold fish.”

Hermione snapped. “He fingered me in the Renaissance wing of the National Gallery and gave me the best orgasm of my life.”

She knew from the look of shocked hurt on Ron’s face that she’d been cruel, unnecessarily cruel, but she was full of fury right now. First, he had invaded her privacy, read her private correspondence, and then, to hear him mocking, sullied the words between her and Lucius—that he’d thrown the ultimate compliment Lucius had paid her back in her face as if she should be ashamed of it. And then finally, when he’d called her a cold fish, it had just reminded her of their fight at the Weird Sisters concert, of every moment when he’d denigrated her, taken her for granted, tried to push her into things she wasn’t comfortable with, thought first of himself and then of her, and for once she was tired of taking the higher road. She wanted him to hurt.

“You fucked Lucius Malfoy,” Ron said, his mouth hanging open as he stared at her in a mix of confusion, anger and hurt.

She just sneered. She felt like she was someone else, someone cold and merciless, but she was done with Ron, done with apologizing and tiptoeing around and trying to spare everyone’s feelings. She had done that over and over for years and it had never gotten her anything but a half-life she barely enjoyed.

“You’re sick, Hermione. He’s a Death Eater. He’s a prejudiced sadist, a piece of filth, he should be dead.”

She was rage—pure, blinding, incandescent.

“Don’t you ever say that again,” she breathed, her wand suddenly pointed at Ron. “He is a good man. He is a man who has made mistakes and regretted them, a man who loved his dead wife and whose choices killed her, who loves his son desperately and is doing the best he can, who is clever and thoughtful and listens to me, really listens to me and cares about what I have to say and supports me. He is brilliant, and compassionate, and trying to atone for his mistakes, and I love him.”

The force of it hit her as soon as she said it, but she knew it was true.

“I love him,” she said again, more to herself than to Ron.

Ron stared at her, jaw agape, brow furrowed, but she wasn’t looking at him. Rather, she was looking in his direction but her mind couldn’t seem to focus on him. Instead, she was reeling with her sudden realization, her mind replaying disparate moments over the past year. Lucius meeting her eyes at the Twilburg lecture, his concerned face when he’d found her drunk at the French restaurant, the soft grey of his eyes when she’d accepted his Christmas gift and they’d leaned towards each other, the look of quiet adoration on his face when she’d come apart beneath his mouth.

She didn’t look back as she turned around and walked right back into the Floo, heading straight for the Ministry musical event.
The event had already begun when she arrived. She barely spared a glance at the event in full swing, even though her fight with Ron must have gone on longer than she’d thought; she was busy scanning the crowd furiously, which had already started to take to the dance floor, where a Muggle pop song she didn’t recognize had begun to play.

“Hermione? Where’ve you been? I was waiting for you but thought that you must’ve just gone ahead to the event, so I came here.” She dimly registered Ginny coming up behind her, reaching out for her, her face crinkled in confusion and concern as she took in Hermione’s appearance. “Have you been crying? Hermione, what’s happened?”

“I have something I need to do,” Hermione said, finally catching sight of the one thing she’d been looking for. She started crossing the room, heading towards a tall head of white-blonde hair standing near the front of the room, off to one side alone.

When she was nearly in front of him, she watched Lucius’ face break into a smile at seeing her, though it quickly fell when he took a close look at her face.

“Hermione? Are you alright?”

She decided to forego words in favor of action, as befitting a Gryffindor.

She closed the distance between them and, unhesitatingly, reached up to wrap her arms around his neck, pulling him down to her as she rose up on tiptoe, and kissed him.

He was surprised at first, frozen, but soon he was melting against her, his mouth claiming hers possessively as he leaned down to deepen the kiss, one hand settling on the small of her back while the other tangled in her hair. She heard gasps and murmurs from around them dimly, as if from a distance, but she couldn’t be bothered to care one whit, as she tugged Lucius closer, whimpering softly into his mouth. She was here, he was here, they were together, and nothing else mattered because she loved him, and she’d been so stupid so for so long. She loved his sharp mind and the clever way it worked at theories and texts, she loved his endless patience for unraveling a puzzle together with her, she loved the way he listened to her problems and helped her with them in his own Slytherin Malfoy way, loved the quiet desperate way he cared for Draco, for Andromeda, for Teddy, for her. He pulled away to give them both a moment to breathe, but when she pulled him close again he easily acquiesced, giving her soft, slow, drugging kisses that set her insides on fire as she clung to him. It felt like heaven, to be enveloped in his warmth and breadth again, to feel his long hair brushing against her face, to smell his familiar cologne wrapping itself around her, felt like home.

Finally he pulled just far enough apart that they could speak, though they remained forehead to forehead.

“That was quite the statement,” he said, voice low and breathless.

“I love you,” she breathed, meeting his eyes earnestly.

She felt his sharp intake of breath more than she heard it.

“That is… also quite the statement.” His voice was suddenly hoarse, but his eyes were soft and warm—favorite sweater grey, sleepy morning grey—and he was smiling at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling and the left side tugging up just slightly more than the right.

“And I want everyone to know it.”
“I think you’ve achieved that,” he murmured against her lips, grinning as he pressed another kiss against her lips, soft and chaste.

She blinked, realizing that she could hear people talking around them, whispering and pointing.

“Miss Granger?” That was the unmistakeable voice of Elphias Doge behind them, sounding confused and more than a little consternated. “Miss Granger, if I could perhaps have a few moments of your time?”

Hermione reluctantly started to detach herself from Lucius, but found instead that she was pulled to his side, where she realized with a jolt of warmth that she fitted perfectly, tucked up against him with his arm around her.

“I’m sorry Elphias, but Miss Granger and I have urgent business we simply must attend to.” Lucius’ voice was cool and polite, but she could see the smile twitching at the corner of his mouth, and couldn’t stop herself from grinning along beside him.

“Yes, I’m so sorry Mr. Doge. It’s absolutely urgent. Long overdue, really, so we really must attend to it now.”

“Erm, Miss Granger—!” Doge started, brow furrowing, but Lucius was already pulling her close to him and Hermione felt the sudden squeeze of side-along apparition.

When she opened her eyes, she had to blink to adjust to the dimmer lighting, the room lit only by a large fire in a grate to the side, but looked around to take in the fact that the room she was in was dominated by a large, four-poster bed, and then she turned to Lucius, standing next to her, arms still wrapped around her, looking at her with burning intensity in his piecing grey eyes, before he leaned down to kiss her once again.
To All the Boys I've Loved Before

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Lucius go home together.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who's read along through this point! This is the second to last chapter, and after this will come a little bit of an epilogue, parts of which have been around since literally chapter one of this story. I really appreciate everyone who's been reading and enjoying this and leaving comments and kudos. I love writing, and as a longtime reader of fanfiction got into writing it as a bit of a labor of love, and you guys have made it so worth it.

She was warm—warmed from the outside in, from the crackling flames of the nearby hearth, from Lucius’ arms wrapped around her, from his body pressed against her—warmed from the inside out, a steady, giddy sort of joyful glow radiating from the vicinity of her chest, and, as Lucius’ lips captured hers again, his hands pulled her closer to him, and she kept realizing that there was a bed here, they were in his bedroom, flames of pure desire licking at her from within. She whimpered against his mouth, tugging desperately at his infernally complicated robes, blasted purebloods, and the breath of raspy laughter she felt against her ear as he moved his hands to help her just set the fire under her skin burning higher. When his robes dropped to the ground, leaving him before her in his undershirt and trousers, she was torn between divesting him of them as quickly as possible or pulling him back against her for more of those long kisses that made her brain go fuzzy in the most pleasant of ways.

The necessity of choice was gone soon after, Lucius’ hands—god, his hands, she’d noticed them before but now she could properly appreciate them, long, thin fingers, smooth skin—skating up her body, over the curve of her hips, the small of her back, until he found the zipper of her dress and paused, tugging uselessly at the Muggle device. She would have found his low growl of frustration amusing if some more animal part of her brain weren’t so busy finding it unfairly attractive and sending a zip of arousal coiling through her body.

“Get it off,” he said lowly. She stepped back from him reluctantly, thinking about reaching for her wand but, as she made the movement, she took in Lucius’ eyes, darkened and gleaming with fierce attention, his breathing already heavy, the unmistakable bulge in his trousers, all the signs that he was just as affected by this, as much and as little as this was so far. She moved her hand away from her wand and instead reached behind her to the zip, arching her back maybe a tad more than was necessary as she slowly drew it down her body. She waited for the nervousness to come, the customary fear of making a fool of herself, or the second guessing in the back of her mind, but it never came—there was just Lucius, his desire unmistakable both in the form standing before her, breathing heavily now, and in the evidence of months and months of patient, steady care and correspondence. She felt a solid sort of warmth settle in her in that empty space where she was used to her insecurities sitting, and, zip down, she pushed the dress off of her shoulders with steady
hands, watching in satisfaction Lucius’ sharp intake of breath as it slid off of her body, the way that his hand went to the front of his trousers to press sharply against the line of his erection as she leaned forward and slid her undergarments off, meeting his gaze the entire time, until she was bare in front of him.

She let out a small sound of dismay as Lucius suddenly and wandlessly vanished his own clothing, though her disappointment at being denied the chance to peel it off of him was soothed by the sight of Lucius naked before her for the first time. He tried to pull her close to him and she held out a hand, stopping him—god but he was fit. He was maybe a little more solid for his age, not quite chiseled, but… “I want to look at you,” she said by way of explanation, and watched as his throat moved on a heavy swallow.

She moved the hand that had been holding him off to just over his heart, pressed against the muscle she found there, skated down the planes of his chest, threaded through the light dusting of blonde hair, a shade darker than the hair on his head, which thinned, just a trail down over his firm stomach and then… Her hand lingered at the planes of his hip, and she felt her eyelids grow heavy with a sudden wave of arousal as she took in the jut of his cock, heavy and flushed deep red, and, gods above, so big, and imagined how it would feel, taking in her hand, wrapping her mouth—

“You’re taking too long,” Lucius growled, reaching forward to tug her close to him and then, before she could quite process what exactly was happening, she was being scooped off the ground and found herself deposited in the center of the giant four poster bed. She spared a thought for how soft it was, surely there was some sort of a charm on this, but then Lucius was on top of her, kissing her in a frantic way that left no room for thought, for anything but trying to remember how to breathe when she could feel every point of intersection between their skin, feel his chest brushing against her nipples, their legs intertwined, his hair brushing against her collarbone. She felt a hand slip down between them, tracing reverently down the line of her bare body in a light touch that set off sparklers of sensation across her skin, leaving her gasping and her body clenching around an emptiness that was becoming unbearable. When Lucius’ hand finally found its way between her legs, fingers curling through the wetness of her folds, she keened over the sound of his swearing. Too soon and not soon enough, she felt him arranging her legs so that they were wrapped around his hips, felt the line of his cock pressed against her, just brushing her clit slightly as he leaned forward to press a shaky kiss to her lips, sweet and almost chaste compared to the sloppy, desperate way they’d been kissing moments ago.

“While normally I’d like nothing more than to spend hours making you fall apart before I fucked you,” Lucius said, voice mostly steady though there was an undercurrent of hoarseness that spoke as much to his arousal as the little twitches of his hips did, shallow little thrusts of his cock against her, “I have been waiting too—ungh—too long for this—damnit, Hermione—” He trailed off, groaning as Hermione reached between them to wrap one hand around his cock, moaning slightly as she shifted her hips to buck up against him.

“How long?” she asked breathlessly, tilting her hips so that he slid over her clit again and giving in to the fluttery sensation it evoked in her. The skin beneath her hand was so soft, so hot, and she forgave him the delay in answer when he let out a sharp exhale as she ran her thumb through the precum that was gathering on the tip. “How long have you wanted this?”

“Too long,” he gasped out, trying to lean back and adjust their position so he could thrust into her, and groaning when Hermione tightened her legs around him and her grasp on his cock. He gave in to those shallow thrusts, swearing against her neck as his head dropped down.

“Since—ah—since I saw you in Flourish and Blotts,” he confessed, hips twitching needily as Hermione paused in her stroking, surprised that it had been that long. She had been expecting him
to mention the time that they had kissed, maybe even her snafu with the sex magic book, she thought, face growing even hotter at that memory, but—she took a moment to study the man above her. Lucius eyes were dropped nearly closed, as if he was imagining the moment, his mouth slack but brow furrowed as he thrust forward again. He must have taken her silent pause as some sort of indication that she wasn’t satisfied with his answer, or maybe just once the dam was broken he wouldn’t stop talking, but his hips ground against her as he continued.

“ Noticed you were pretty at Twilburg’s—oh—Merlin, did you know you’re breathtaking when you’re angry? Hair goes a bit wild, cheeks red like I’d imagined they would be when I was fucking you—but—ungh, fuck—wasn’t until you helped me at Flourish and Blotts, once I knew you, I could imagine what it would be like to fuck you, how you’d react, your voice, and then—bloody hell—that tight little Muggle skirt—Hermione, now, need you now—”

He was thrusting faster against her now, and Hermione suddenly came to from the deliriously pleasant haze she’d been in as she imagined Lucius fucking her among the Ancient Runes stacks of Flourish and Blotts—a pleasant idea that would have to be filed for later—to realize that his cock in her hand was impossibly harder, twitching almost constantly, and Lucius’ eyes were no longer closed, staring at her with pupils blown.

“Yes, oh—now, Lucius,” she murmured, moving her hand from his cock to slide up his body and wrap around his neck, lifting her legs and widening them just slightly, and she thought she heard him swear under his breath but she couldn’t be sure because she was suddenly lost in the press of him against her, inside of her, hot and hard and, oh god full, she whined slightly as she felt her body stretch to accommodate him, and then he was buried inside of her to the hilt, panting softly against her temple.

“Bloody hell, you are—fuck,” she heard him whisper against her, his hips moving to thrust slowly and shallowly, until any hint of burn was gone and everything was pleasure, was Lucius above her, around her, inside her, and she was beginning to buck up against him, trying to get him to move faster, harder, something other than these shallow, slow movements that were driving her insane with pleasure. She heard him swear again, and he readjusted slightly, pressing up on his hands so that he could slip almost completely out of her—and she thought she heard a gasped out laugh as she whined in clear displeasure at that—but then he pressed all the way back into her, hard and fast and she moaned as white hot pleasure coursed through her body. The pleasure was dizzying, almost as dizzying as the realization that this was real, this was happening, this was Lucius inside of her, as if she could forget, with his hair, the scent of his familiar cologne, falling around her. She shifted against him, hands scrabbling desperately against his back now, tangling in his hair, as the pleasure building inside of her rose and rose, higher and higher but still not quite there, something just missing that was making her desperate for it, making her whine and clench around him, squirming as she searched for it, just out of reach.

“I’ve got you, I’ve—it’s okay, I’ve got you,” Lucius said hoarsely against her, pressing a kiss to the pounding pulse in her neck before he leaned back, ignoring her protests as left her reach, to grab her legs, pulling them from where they were locked around his hips to rest against his shoulders. When he leaned forward again, shifting up slightly on his knees, Hermione felt her muscles protest at the stretch, but the slight discomfort was quickly lost in the blinding crush of searing pleasure as his next thrust went deep, hitting something inside of her, and he let his pelvis grind against her clit, and the combination had her hands fisting in the sheets next to her as she struggled to remember how to breathe. She tried to lean up to kiss him, but the sharp tightness along the back of legs made her drop back against the pillows and settle for running a hand reverently through his long hair. Almost absently, as the heat rose inside of her again, the pressure on her clit taking the urgent edge of missingness off, she thought that, ironically since Lucius was the much older of the pair, she’d have to start some sort of exercise regimen to keep up with her new sex life, and then, as the
realization hit her—her new sex life, this was hers, this would keep being hers, Lucius was hers, it all seemed so perfectly absurd, too good to be real, and she couldn’t suppress a joyful little laugh, gasped out on a particularly deep thrust that had her shivering with the combined pleasures.

“Wh—what is it?” Lucius asked, pausing, though she noted that his breathing was heavy, his hips twitching forwards just slightly in shallow, grinding little thrusts that she wasn’t certain were intentional but that were doing magical things to her clit.

She groaned, writhing and clenching around him as she tried to get him to move again. “It’s not—I just—I’m—happy I’m so happy it’s you and you’re here and I love you and now you’re mine and—oh!” Suddenly speaking seemed like an impossibility as she felt a shudder wrack through Lucius’ body, and then he was pounding into her, fast and deep and hard, and she cried out as her orgasm washed over her in wave of pleasure that overwhelmed her, she felt like she couldn’t breathe for it, her toes curling and hands clenching, and she felt certain she’d actually blacked out momentarily from the force of it, and then when she came back to herself Lucius was there, eyes wild, breath frantic now.

“So—say it again, say it again, Hermione,” and she knew exactly what he meant, what he needed. Still shivering as she came down from her orgasm and the tingling rush of his increasingly desperate thrusts, she drew in a deep breath, hands coming up to rest on either side of his face. “I love you, I love you, Lucius, I love you.”

He groaned deeply, dropping her legs so that he could grab her and pull her up to meet him, one hand around her hips, keeping them tight together as he bucked against her and spilled inside of her, shivering as he whispered against her mouth, “yes, so good, Hermione, you’re mine, I love you, you’re mine.”

For a few moments after he came they stayed like that, Hermione’s arms wrapped around Lucius’ neck, before both of their legs grew shaky and Lucius leaned forward, letting them fall back against the bed and pulling out of her with a groan to roll to the side. She made a small noise of protest at his withdrawal, rolling over so that she could nestle against his torso and spread an arm across his chest, and a nagging voice in the back of her head was saying that they should really talk about what had happened tonight, she hadn’t even told him about the right with Ron, and shouldn’t she be worried about what Doge and the others would think, but Hermione told that voice to stuff it for the night, and drifted off into a heavy, peaceful, sated sleep.

* * *

Hermione woke up a few hours later, sticky and sore and with one of her arms asleep from where she’d laid with it twisted under her body at an odd angle, and oddly comfortable for all that. She pressed a kiss to Lucius’ shoulder, enjoying the soft noise he made as he stirred that reminded her somehow of a cat. When he woke up, she made to cast a cleaning charm on the both of them, but he stopped her and led her to the bathroom with a grin that had just the slightest hint of smugness.

She stopped short in the doorway, gaping as she took in the opulent sight in front of her.

“This is—this—” she spluttered, trying to wrap her mind around the spa-like bathroom, easily as large as the bedroom they’d just left, and—was that a sauna in the corner?

“I fail to see the point of having both magic and an unconscionable amount of money if I’m not going to enjoy it,” Lucius said from behind her, hands coming up to her shoulders to steer her towards the absolutely enormous bathtub and then, with a flick of his hand, to turn on the taps and let it begin to fill with foaming water that shortly began to fill the bathroom with lavender-scented
Hermione decided that she couldn’t really argue with his point, and let herself be guided into the bathtub, and then let Lucius settle behind her, so that she was nestled in the vee between his legs. Resting her head on his chest, she told him what had happened earlier that night—or the night before? She wasn’t entirely certain what time it even was, and found she didn’t really care—her guilt over what she’d said to Lucius at the coffee shop, her fight with Ron, her realization while he was reading the letters back to her. They talked about what had happened at the event, whether they had any regrets (the answer—none), what would happen next, the owls that needed to be sent in the morning. And when they were done talking through all of that, they talked about other things—about the book Hermione was reading, about an inquiry Lucius had gotten to help translate a newly-discovered runic text from Sweden. And then, Lucius let his hands trail down Hermione’s body, between her legs, and, with slow, sweet kisses against her neck, made come around his careful, precise fingers before pushing her up and letting her sink down onto him. The angle was good, and Hermione moaned as her fingers scrambled against the slick sides of the tub to brace herself and grind back against him, not ready to come again, but happy just to let him bury his face in her back and rock to another stuttering orgasm, water sloshing over the sides of the tub. When they got out, finally, Hermione murmured a quick drying charm on the water pooling on the floor. She’d normally have fretted a bit about the mess, but, well, Lucius was right, what was the point of having magic if you couldn’t use it to dry the floor in times like this?

She’d thought that maybe they’d have another go once they made it into the bed again, letting her hands trail down Lucius’ chest sleepily, even as her eyes started to drift close, and she heard him groan against her hair.

“While I’m flattered at your estimation of my stamina, I’m beginning to think you might actually be trying to kill me,” he murmured, voice sounding rough with sleep. She meant to laugh, because he was funny, her Lucius, in ways no one else got to see, but her eyes drifted shut and she thought she maybe just sighed as she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

She woke up, again, to sunlight so bright it was beginning to stream in around the edges of the curtains. For a moment it confused her. She wasn’t in her own bed, why was there so much light, she felt like she’d slept in massively, and there was an arm tucked around her, legs splayed between hers, and then she remembered where she was, what had happened, and made a soft sigh of contentment. She stretched slightly, trying to wake up her tired, sore muscles, and felt Lucius stir beside her. She turned her head to face him, marveling that anyone had the right to look so attractive in the morning—even if he did have a deep line from sleeping on the crease of a pillow across his left cheek. She impulsively leaned in to kiss it, and then kiss him, close-lipped at first as she thought about morning breath, and then open-mouthed, breath be damned, as his hand traced the curve of her body and slipped over to palm her breast, softly squeezing and massaging.

They were interrupted by the sound of knocking on the door.

“I don’t want to know what you’re wearing, but in five minutes it had better be clothes.” That was unmistakeably Draco’s voice on the other side of the door, sounding amused but faintly nauseated. It was followed by a soft yelp of pain, and then, murmured, clearly to someone else on his side of the door, “Well you didn’t have to walk in on them in the study. Scarred for life, honestly,” and then a snicker from someone else.

Hermione exchanged a confused glance with Lucius, who merely shrugged and reached for his wand.
“I suppose that means we’d better get dressed then,” she sighed, reluctant to leave the warmth of the bed and Lucius’ embrace.

“If you insist,” Lucius murmured, leaning over from where he was pulling on a pair of trousers to press a soft kiss against the side of her neck that had her nearly purring, leaning into his touch.

“Two minutes!” Draco’s voice called from the other side of the door again, and Hermione sighed heavily again, sliding out of the bed and pulling the soft robe that Lucius offered her, based on size clearly his own.

“Just come in already,” she called out impatiently, perching on the side of the bed with a scowl on her face, ignoring the amused smirk on Lucius’ face. She knew she was being prickly, but she’d been having a perfectly… perfect morning, really, and Draco Malfoy was ruining it.

The door swung open and her mouth dropped slightly as she was forced to amend her previous statement. Her morning was being ruined by Draco Malfoy and Ginny and Harry, who both followed Draco into the room. Draco looked deliberately away from the rumpled bedsheets with a pained sigh; Ginny had her hands behind her back and a heavy messenger bag slung over her shoulder, shifting her weight from foot to foot as she stood between the other two men, and Harry had his arms crossed, looking wildly uncomfortable in the room.

“Erm—” Hermione started, swallowing heavily, confused at the motley assembly in front of her, and not entirely sure how to finish her statement.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of such… assorted company this morning?” Lucius interjected from the other side of the bed, one brow raised archly. Draco gave a pointed cough at Lucius’ characterization of the time as morning, but didn’t press the issue at a glare from Hermione.

“We have good news and bad news,” Ginny said, taking a small step forward and frowning.

“What’s the bad news?” Hermione sat up straighter, her pulse beginning to pound.

At this, Harry cleared his throat, looking up at Hermione and immediately failing to meet her gaze. “Hermione… Ron… Well…” Hermione felt her heart leap into her throat at that, and her hand curled into the blankets beneath her to steady herself.

“Ron sold your letters to the Prophet.”

Hermione was dimly aware that the small noise of pain must have come from herself, but she was too busy clenching the blankets underneath her, all of the warmth of the morning drained out of her at the thought of all of those private letters being published in the Prophet, for the world to read, to see, all of her private thoughts and all of those special moments with Lucius… not to mention the dirty ones. The low growl of anger and frustration from across the room must have been Lucius, and she looked up to see that he’d pushed off the bed and was pacing the room, like a wild animal that had suddenly found itself caged.

“Before either of you gets too upset, part of the good news is that we bought them back.” From from her bag she pulled out a stack of parchment, tied neatly with ribbon, and walked across the room to hand them to Hermione. Hermione gasped, reaching out to untie the letters and look over them, hands trembling as she clutched them to her.

“But—how?”

Ginny grimaced slightly, and Draco chimed in with an apologetic look at his father. “A truly unconscionable amount of gold, and—” he drew in a deep breath, “—we gave them a better story.”
Hermione’s brain froze, trying to understand what Draco was saying, and as she looked around at
the three in front of her she paled, letting the letters in her hand fall to the bed as she stood up,
looking between the three of them with wild eyes.

“No—you didn’t. Please, tell me you didn’t.”

Lucius was standing directly in front of Draco, eyes wide, face suddenly settling into that familiar
calm mask, but she could see the panic in his eyes.

Draco lifted his chin imperceptibly, meeting his father’s gaze. “When Ginny found out from Luna
that Ron was selling the letters to the press, she came to me. When we went to try to buy them
back, it was clear that they weren’t biting, no matter how much gold we had. The story was too
good, too big a scandal.” He exhaled heavily. “It was a good thing we had a bigger one in mind for
them.”

“So they came to me,” Harry said, frowning as he looked at Hermione, “and we had a… a long
talk. And—I know what we got ourselves into, Hermione. But it was all going to come out at some
point anyway, and I’d rather it come out like this, when we’re expecting it and planned it, and
when it can… do some good.”

“But—what will you all do?” Hermione wrung her hands in front of her, stopping only to tug
anxiously at a loose curl. “The press will be terrible, it’ll be just like fourth year but worse, the
hate mail, the Howlers…”

Harry stepped forward to place his hands on Hermione’s shoulders, gently moving her hand away
from where she was nervously twirling a curl. “Hermione—we know. We’ve all thought about it,
talked about it, figured it all out. There’s a long-term Auror assignment in Monaco I’d been
interested in anyway, so,” he said with a half-shrug.

“I talked to Gwen, she’s got a little cabin near the practice pitch that’s basically totally isolated. I…
thought it might be good if I just… was by myself for a little while.” Ginny’s face was flushed red
and she couldn’t meet anyone’s eye, but she looked determined. Hermione gave her a small nod
and a smile, and some of the red left Ginny’s face.

“And I just thought I might visit some of the Malfoy properties in the south of France.” Draco’s
drawl was lazy and aloof, as if he were talking about a layabout vacation instead of fleeing a
scandal, but she could see the tension in his jaw—how odd, that now that she knew Lucius Draco
seemed like an open book to her. She wondered what she’d have thought of him in school, if she
could have back then been able to tell when his sharp words or casual tone was just a front to hide
his fear and nervousness. Lucius held Draco’s gaze for a moment, and then nodded softly, his head
dropping.

Hermione closed her eyes, trying not to cry. She had Lucius but… for a time, at least, she’d lose
Harry and Ginny, two of her best friends in the whole world. “But we can still… we can visit you,
right?”

Harry paused, swallowing awkwardly and trying to avoid meeting her eyes, and Hermione felt her
heart sink.

“You can visit me any time you’d like, Granger,” Draco said, “as I have the feeling you’ll have the
run of the Malfoy properties.” His voice was a little cold, slightly mocking, but she could see in the
way that he was looking between her and Harry that he was trying to break the tension, and she
suddenly felt a rush of appreciation for it, for him.
“I’ll be pretty busy, and we’re really not supposed to have guests on assignment, but I’ll have a few breaks,” Harry said, and if she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes Hermione wouldn’t have believed the grateful glance that Harry shot Draco’s way. “And it won’t be for that long, anyway, just a couple of months, let things blow over. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Well, if you can peel my body off the Quidditch pitch after Gwenog’s done beating me to a pulp in training in return for all the scandal, you’re welcome to come to Holyhead.”

Hermione ran a hand through her hair—well, started to, before she hit a tangled curl and dropped her hand to her face, rubbing at her temples.

“What’s the other good news?” Lucius asked suddenly, looking between the three of them. “You said that part of the good news was that you’d bought the letters back. What’s the rest?”

The three exchanged glances for a minute and then, as if by some silent agreement, Ginny responded. “Well, even though we bought them back, we figured it wouldn’t stay quiet for long, not between the fact that loads of people had already seen the letters and well, the event last night,”Ginny said, giving Hermione a significant look, “so we thought you might appreciate the opportunity to get ahead of the story.”

Hermione frowned, not following Ginny’s line of thought. She would have appreciated the opportunity, but wasn’t Ginny’s point that it was too late for that?

“So, if you want it to, this’ll be this evening’s Quibbler,” Ginny said, pulling yet another stack of papers out of her bag, and handing one to Hermione and another to Lucius. Hermione swallowed heavily, looking down at the roughly bound pages. It was clearly a mock up edition, with some bits of text not filled in yet, just blocked out with placeholders, but the headline was clear. There were separate pictures of she and Lucius on the front, eyeing each other from their respective frames. Hers she thought might have been the headshot she’d had to have taken upon entering the Ministry, which made her look mature and responsible, and she couldn’t immediately identify Lucius’, but it was at least flattering—not one of the photos of him from Azkaban or immediately after his wife’s death that the Prophet would have chosen. And there, splashed in large text, just above and to the right of a headline about an upcoming Snargaluff expedition was their headline: Pride, Purity and Prejudice—The Unlikely Love Story of Our Age.

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“Look, last week’s main Quibbler headline was ‘Nargle Possession: The Truth is Among Us and Inside of Us’, so it could be a lot worse, alright? Just read the article.”

So Hermione did. She flipped to the page indicated, and she read. She read a few paragraphs of background on the two of them—as if anyone would need it—but which did include references not just to Lucius’ past, but to Narcissa’s death, his retreat from society and into academia, and a quote from an anonymous source at the Auror office (whose name Hermione very much suspected rhymed with Larry Lotter) detailing the assistance that Lucius had provided after the war in tracking down Dark wizards and artifacts. She read about their run-in at Twilburg’s lecture, about how Lucius had come up to Twilburg afterward to get a copy of the book for her.

“You got a quote from Twilburg?” Lucius sounded half-incredulous, half-impressed, actually looking up from the pages in front of him to stare at Draco.

It was Ginny who answered though, a smug smile on her face. “Did you know that Phineas K. Twilburg was, when he was at Hogwarts, one of the founding members of the Gwenog Jones
Hermione’s mouth quirked into the hint of a smile, and she ignored Lucius’ snort of laughter to go back to reading.

She read about their letters, about the cultural commission, quotes from not just Ginny and Draco but Andromeda, Doge, even Justin bloody Finch-Fletchley, about how helpful Lucius had been, how the pair of them had worked together on the commission, and then about that awful winter, about the Weird Sisters’ concert, with the Patil sisters providing copious background, about Hermione’s breakdown and Lucius’ rescue of her—apparently the bartender’s discretion had only stretched so far, though Hermione couldn’t blame him in this instance—the proposal, the ball, their growing fondness for each other and Hermione’s realization she’d made a mistake, all the way through last night. It was—it was really their story, Hermione realized, putting down the papers and frowning at them. It didn’t try to hide any of the ugly bits, try to gloss over the fact that Lucius was a former Death Eater or that Hermione had been engaged to Ron in the middle of all this and ended it. But it was honest, honestly them, and… that was enough for Hermione.

It was certainly better than whatever rubbish the Prophet would print.

“I… I want it printed,” Hermione said with finality. “As long, of course, as you agree.” She shot Lucius, who had just put the paper down himself, a long look. “I agree that the story won’t stay quiet for long, and people will speculate, and I’d rather have all of it out there than let people make up whatever they want and try to do damage control afterward. And besides all that, I’m not ashamed of it. Of any of this. Of us.”

Lucius met her eyes with a small smile—but a real one. “I am in perfect agreement.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Draco make a small gagging motion as Ginny dragged him from the room.

“Well then, we’ll just owl Luna and tell her everything is good to go, she’s getting some much needed rest after we pulled an all-nighter writing this, and we’ll leave you two to it.”

Harry, seeming to realize what Ginny was getting at at the same time as he noticed that Lucius was still looking at Hermione, his smile growing into something more than warm, and nearly tripped over his feet in his haste to get out of the room.

“Disgusting,” she could hear from beyond the door, definitely Draco, followed by a heavy sigh and then, “I never thought I’d say this, ever, but… I agree with the ferret.”

Hermione laughed softly, shaking her head at the door, but Lucius didn’t spare them a glance as he moved toward the bed.

“Mipsy?” he called out, eyes never leaving Hermione even as the small elf popped into the room.

“Yes, Mister Lucius, sir?”

“Could you have lunch sent up for Miss Granger and I? And then I think we’ll need all our mail rerouted for the next couple of days, at least.”

“Of course, Mister Lucius.”

“And Mipsy? Do be careful; the post may be quite nasty. Expect a jinx or two.”

Mipsy nodded, curtsied a few times, and then popped out of the room. With Mipsy gone, Lucius
finally lowered himself onto the bed next to Hermione and leaned in to press a soft kiss to her lips.

“I may have to send the redheaded brute a thank you gift,” he murmured, one hand coming up to the tie of her robe and beginning to unknot it.

“Oh?” Hermione breathed, confused by his comment and too distracted by his lips moving against her neck and the hand slipping into her now undone robe to follow too closely.

“Yes. You see, if it weren’t for his hare-brained halfwit scheme with those letters,” he said, lips dipping lower on her neck as he nudged the side of her robe open, moving to mouth along her collarbone, “it would maybe have taken more than a day for me to let all of Wizarding England know that you, Hermione Granger, are mine,” he’d opened her robe all the way now, and had laid her back against the bed, his lips coming up to meet hers in a series of increasing heated kisses, “and I don’t intend to let you go.”

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