## Sour Grapes

**by** [Lilian_Silver](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Lilian_Silver)

### Summary

Five years after the war, Draco and Hermione meet by chance as she wanders into a French vineyard just hoping to re-live a trip she took there with her parents during her school years. Instead, she finds a shirtless, barefoot Draco Malfoy hiding out unbeknownst to the wider wizarding world. He’s ashamed of his past misdeeds, and she’s been recently humiliated by her soon to be ex-husband. Neither are aware that their lives are about to be inexorably linked, forever.

### Notes

On November 1st 2018 I wrote the first chapter of this fic, and it was my first foray, not only into fanfiction, but into fiction in general. I fell in love FAST and wrote at least one if not two
chapters every day for the following 12 days before I hit the breaks a bit. Even then, the writing was a furious love affair. I know there are some typos and things I want to clean up, and I will do that at some point.

You can follow me on tumblr here: liliansilverstuff and I also have a YouTube channel where I talk Dramione fanfics, and you can access it through my tumblr page.
Draco was sweating.

He had underestimated the power of the late afternoon sun, and ventured a bit too far out into the vineyards without first considering his schedule for the evening. He would definitely need to bathe again before making his way to meet Blaise. Not for Blaise’s sake, of course, but it wouldn’t do to gate-crash a wealthy well-known family party whilst body odor trumped the scent of his cologne. His shoulders were damp and turning red, and his fingernails were covered in dried earth from plucking stray grapes off the ground.

The Black Family Vineyards were located in the South of France, not far from the Delacour estate. Draco had spent many summers here with his Mother’s side of the family. He wasn’t well-acquainted with the Delacour’s (hence the lack of invitation the the event) …or perhaps they wanted to maintain a healthy distance from his still-sullied family name?

After all, wasn’t that what he was currently doing himself, in a manner of speaking?

He wasn’t hiding, per-se, he was just keen to allow the post-war fervor to die down before making an attempt to return to proper wizarding society. It seemed pertinent to remove himself entirely following his early release from Azkaban three years prior, and allow for his peers to acclimate to life without his face popping up to remind them of his past transgressions.

He knew his father’s thoughts on this course of action, but banished them from his mind as soon as they had appeared. His Father had garnered himself a life-sentence, and his opinion held no true weight in the matter.

After all, there was a line between being smart and being a coward, and he considered himself well on the former side of the equation, whatever his Father believed.

*It was easy for Father to talk, he mused, holed up in Azkaban for the foreseeable future.*

While the prison surely wasn’t an ideal location, it afforded his Father the ability to carry on his business affairs by post while avoiding the taunts and stares of the post-war wizarding community. Draco was certainly not jealous of his Father’s predicament, having spent nearly two years in the prison himself after the fall of the dark lord, but some days he envied the forced nature of not having to look oneself in the mirror on a day to day basis that his Father enjoyed.

…not having to stare at one’s reflection and wonder at one’s own character.

His father was afforded a modicum of freedom from his cold hollow perch in the North Sea, while Draco was trapped in a mental prison of his own creation.

Fleeing… no, vacationing, at the Black Family Vineyards for a time was a design invented so that he could clear his head, and get a break from everything. It just so happened that he was enjoying what was intended to be a brief stint here, and had become a three-year… stint.

It also just so happened that his childhood friend, Blaise Zabini, had a family home not far from the Black Family estate. Blaise had the good fortune of not having taken sides in the war. He also had a good fortune, and was determined to act out his role of international playboy and mischief maker to his hearts content, charming as many witches and drinking as much fire whiskey as he could get his hands on.
Draco feigned enthusiasm for romps such as the one planned for this evening. It was a decent veil for his overwhelming sense of…not loneliness… but out-of-place-ness. He didn’t know where he fit in the world anymore. He wasn’t sure of much.

Seeing Potter come to his aid at his ministry hearing was… surprising, but not altogether shocking, seeing as how Potter had taken it upon himself to rope Draco into his save-the-world theatrics one too many times already, despite how many times Draco had tried to thwart him. Saint Potter would forever see the best in the worst man. He had even goaded the Dark Lord himself into feeling some remorse for his vile actions. He had felt pity for the man, if you could truly call him a man, right until his last breath. No, Potter’s support was to be expected.

It was Granger who had truly thrown him for a loop. It was Granger who had marched into that courtroom without sparing him a glance, and despite all manner of reasoning to the contrary, had convinced the Wizengamot of his innocence.

And later that evening, it was Granger who had somehow made her way into the far reaches of his mind, forcing him to wonder. Could he possibly be deserving of forgiveness? If she, the “mudblood” he had tortured and tormented for years could forgive his actions, could he be deserving of such forgiveness? Or was she simply playing Saint, like Potter?

He had never let himself travel too far down this line of questioning, but any time he allowed the image of Hermione Granger standing in that courtroom arguing for his release to float into his mind, he noticed that he began to hope.

Hope, that she was right about him. Hope, that he could one day lead a life out of seclusion. Perhaps, he could even be happy…

Hoping, however, was a fools errand. Hoping got you into trouble. It was always best to resign yourself to the realities surrounding you. To the facts. To lean on what you know. To make decisions based firmly on logic.

Weren’t those his father’s words, though? If he was honest, he wasn’t sure where his father’s beliefs ended and his began. Particularly, in regard to blood status and the propriety of having relationships with blood traitors… or even mudbloods for that matter.

In any case, it was better for him here. Far from prying eyes or chance encounters with his old schoolmates.

He needed time to decide about himself before letting them decide about him.

He had already taken a number of years, yet it didn’t seem like the time to return just yet. The wizarding world was getting along just fine without him, after all.

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Hermione looked out upon the gorgeous French countryside and sighed. She thought momentarily of her Mother, and how they had come to this very spot on holiday during the summer between her second and third year at Hogwarts. How they had abandoned the normal muggle tourist routes and ventured out on their own, finding a small Inn up the road in which to stay the night.

Her Mother and Father had been home bodies, and their travels had been infrequent and generally on the “safe” side, all things considered. This trip had truly been no exception. Their summer in France, while off the beaten path, contained no more excitement than a singular night of drunkenness (mostly on her mother’s part) after sampling a few too many at the vineyard Hermione currently stood in.
front of in present day.

She and her Father had had a good laugh as her Mother attempted to play Vicar in the wedding of two fellow tourists who were newly engaged, demanding that they put wedding planning aside and do the deed on the spot. She had recently been ordained as a minister on the internet, something she had learned about from Joey on Friends, her favorite muggle tv program, and insisted to the couple that they allow her this honor.

The couple had awkwardly obliged, feeling it would be pointless to refuse, and allowed her Mother to perform a sing song ceremony that made little sense, referencing Monica and Chandler, and lamenting that someone named Gunther had never found love.

Hermione and her Father had disappeared into the rows of grape leaves in fits of hysterical laughter, her Father fairly pissed himself, and Hermione in shock from both of her parent’s impropriety and nonsensical pop culture references. It was so rare to see them this way. Once the obligatory faux-ceremony had concluded, the three had walked up the road to their inn and fallen asleep together on the front porch, having lost the keys somewhere in the vineyard dirt.

It was a story she’d never shared with her friends at Hogwarts, preferring to keep it to herself as a special treasure. Just for her.

Hermione missed her parents terribly, but especially her Mother. She’d been close with both, but there was something exceptional about losing your Mother. The life that brought you life. Of course, she knew that Wendell and Monica were still alive, yet the fact that they did not know she existed (and never would again) put a wrench in any plans she had to have her family back to the way it was before the war. Her memory charms had run too deep. Leave it to her to do a job so thoroughly that it could not be reversed.

She felt a momentary flare up of hatred for her own stubbornness and determination to do a job right, but quickly pushed it away. She knew it wouldn’t help to move down a line of thinking that could only lead to self-hatred. Whose fault it was… was inconsequential. They were gone and that was that. Yet she couldn’t help herself, upon arriving in the area, from taking a jaunt out to the vineyards just to stand in the presence of one of her most firm memories of them.

It had been five years since The Battle of Hogwarts, and most of the magical community had moved on …at least, on the surface. Regular life puttered on, even though there were so many lives lost or destroyed. Once Voldemort was gone, there was nothing much left to do but pick up the pieces and trudge onward.

To that end, Gabrielle Delacour was about to turn 17 and would be presented that evening to French Wizarding society. The Delacour Family was a well known and prestigious one, and would settle for no less than a spectacle in honor of their dear Gabrielle. Fleur was spared this embarrassment (as Gabrielle called it) due to the fact that she had come of age during the Triwizard Tournament, and being the Beaubaton’s Champion and the only girl was quite enough of a spectacle to be getting on with. Gabrielle, however, was quiet and shy, preferring her older sister’s shadow and protection from the rest of the world to the spotlight. From spending some time with her at Shell Cottage the summer prior, however, Hermione knew her to truly be a fiery upstart by her true nature. She was sure that Gabrielle would have been sorted into Gryffindor had she attended Hogwarts. Hermione had a deep affinity for the girl, and so was of course quick to accept the invitation to attend her coming out party.

It was only slightly awkward that she and Ron had split up the week prior.

Slightly? Massively?
She spun for a moment trying to decide which was more accurate and settled on her dear old friend: logic. She was not there for Ron. She was not there for the Weasley’s, though she loved them all and still considered them family, even in the presence of her imminent divorce. She was there for Gabrielle and Fleur. Despite her initial dislike of the part-Veela-Triwizard-champion whom she once deigned to call “Phlegm,” she had found a camaraderie in the woman once they were both wed to brothers of the same blood. It felt important, even necessary, for Hermione to attend the gathering, even if she were going “stag.” It wasn’t a wedding, after all, and showing up without a partner was decidedly less awkward at a coming out celebration.

Yet she felt a sense of wistful loss at the site of these vineyards… at the sensation of the late afternoon sun on her neck and shoulders, causing beads of sweat and an uncomfortable redness to begin spreading across her skin.

Without a family. Without a husband. Without a clear vision of what the future held for her.

She knew one thing, however…

She was keen to leave behind the version of herself that everyone knew her as. The best friend of the boy who lived… twice. The wife of the youngest Weasley son. The once-shunned muggle born brightest with of her age.

Boring titles. News paper headlines. Not the truth of who she was. Yet she was finding it difficult to grasp who she truly was now. How would she write her own headline, were she a nosey Daily Prophet reporter?

*Lonely Witch Gazes Wistfully Among Grapes!*

Journalism was not her forte. Nor was being clear on a sense of self when the whole of the world she knew and loved had been ripped unceremoniously from beneath her feet.

Just as she was about to retire to her vehicle, the door of which still stood ajar, she spotted someone out in the fields. Rather, she thought it was someone. At first it seemed like a trick of the light, a momentary white blonde flash.

Squinting her eyes to block out the periphery sunlight, she caught sight of a young man. He was broad shouldered, tan, and built. The shock of white light was no more than his blonde head glinting in the sunlight. He seemed to be wandering as aimlessly as she had been, picking up a stray grape here and there, and drinking in the sunlight.

Perhaps if she asked, he would allow her to come and sample some wine. This seemed preferable to retiring back to the inn alone and wiling away the hours before the ceremony that evening. Perhaps if she arrived pissed it would dispel the awkwardness of seeing Bill, Ron, and the rest of the Weasley family that evening. Or make it worse?

Merlin, she was sick of her own indecision!

It was decided, then. She shut her car door and strode gallantly out into the vineyard. The young man, hearing the slam of the car door, looked up and began to walk toward her in kind.
Wind Me Up

Thanks for all the lovely comments and kudos! Your encouragement is doing wonders for my creative drive, and it seems that I can't stop this story from pouring out of me. I was going to hold off on publishing this next bit until next week, but I fear I'll edit it to death if I keep it to myself, so here you go! I hope you enjoy reading the banter as much as I enjoyed writing it <3

If you want more chapters, leave a comment. They act on my subconscious like a too-strong love potion and I become obsessed and possessed!

Just as Draco was about to head back for a bath, a loud metallic SMACK caught his attention and he spun around in the direction of the sound.

A young muggle woman was striding towards him, having just exited her car. This happened quite frequently when passersby lost their way and spotted him on one of his walks. He moved towards her, intent on meeting her halfway and saving her the possibility of being covered in the dusty earth he so commonly had to scrub off his skin. It was oddly stubborn dirt, and muggle tourist tended to complain quite a lot.

As he did so, he mused at what his Father would say about his level of consideration for a bunch of muggles. He smirked as he imagined his Father’s sneer of disgust and disapproval, and it gave him a strange sense of comfort and relief to know that he was pissing Lucius off without even having to make the trek to Azkaban.

As he got closer, however, he began to sense that something wasn’t right. This particular muggle woman looked vaguely familiar, though admittedly the sun was a bit too harsh to see her face clearly. There was something about her poise and manner of walking that made him wonder if he knew her. Her stride was headstrong and determined, rather than tentative and unsure like most muggles who stopped in for help. Her brown hair was rebelling against the top knot she’d clearly attempted to use to tame it, sticking out in all directions. She was looking down at her feet as she walked in an effort to make her way across the rocky path safely. Consequently, he couldn’t see her entire face, even as she was closing the distance between them with speed and ease. She had smooth, sun-kissed skin, and he imagined that when she looked up he’d confirm that she was an extremely attractive woman.

Perhaps she’d like to accompany him to an event that evening, that would truly sort Father out wouldn’t it? Maybe they’d have a summer fling and send photos to Luscious in prison via muggle holiday postcard. “Wish you were here!”

He grinned at the thought of his Father’s would-be violent reaction to this, just as the woman looked up and met his eyes.

His grin vanished. His breath caught in his chest.

“Granger?” he said.

“Malfoy?” she replied.
“What are you doing here!?” they both cried in unison.

“This is my family’s land, as if you didn’t know, and I have every right to be here.” “I’m here for Gabrielle Delacour’s coming out gala this evening and fancied a wine sampling.”

Again, in unison, talking right over one other.

“You what?” they asked together... then both recoiled.

Hermione wasn’t sure whether to begin yelling or burst out laughing. She decided instead to be silent for a moment and catch her breath. As she stood there, her eyes moved down the length of his shirtless body, noting his extremely toned arms and calves, and settling on his bare feet.

What was Malfoy doing here and what was he doing walking around these fields with bare feet?! And when did he get so tan and muscular? She’d always known him to be tall, but lanky, scrawny, and pale. Admittedly, she hadn’t laid eyes on him since his trial, and he had been gaunt, malnourished, and as war-torn as the next Death Eater back then. The years on this Vineyard had presumably treated him well.

Her eyes moved to his left forearm where the dark mark had faded significantly, resembling a burn scar more than a tattoo. Realizing that she was now staring, she snapped her eyes up and saw that he was wearing that familiar smirk she had once slapped right off his pointed face. Only his face was no longer pointed. He had filled out over the years, and he had a significant 5-o-clock shadow across his well cut jawline.

“Quit gawping and close your mouth, Granger, you’re inviting the grape flies in.”

She snapped her mouth shut, embarrassed, but recovered quickly.

“Grape flies? Are those even a thing? I’ve never heard of them.”

“They are flies that land on grapes, specifically these grapes, ergo they are grape flies, I don’t need to be a muggle biologist to adequately name the things.”

She scowled, remembering all the reasons she’d loathed him in school. Always a quick retort, never unprepared for a verbal joust. And although she knew she was the more skilled player, it had always rattled her that he dared to play the game. Harry and Ron had known well to give up before they’d got started. Malfoy was always relentless, and the years seemed not to have changed that.

“This is... your family’s land?” she asked, her brow furrowing. How could that be and how could she not have realized?

“Hermione Granger is ignorant of the connection between the Malfoy and Black families? Sound the alarms, we must start a parade for this momentous day on which the girl who knew all did not know something.”

She bristled at the use of the word ignorant, but she also blushed at the use of her first name. She didn’t think he had ever called her by her given name in their entire acquaintance, and it caused her to sway on the spot for a moment. She mentally slapped herself back to her current reality.

“I know full well that your Mother’s maiden name is Black and that the families are connected, all of the pure blood families are connected. In fact I saw with my own eyes the original Black family tree tapestry at Grimaldul Place, scorch marks over Sirius and Tonks and all!”
Was she boasting now?! He was looking at her, bemused. She had to recover quickly again.

“I merely did not connect this beautiful glorious vineyard to such horrifically hateful people. Imagine that,” she spat.

Now it was his turn to bristle.

“Touched a nerve, did I, Granger? I’m sure it won’t be the last.”

He recovered quickly too, however, “Did you say you’re here for the Delacour girl’s opening night?”

“Yes, I’ve grown quite fond of Gabrielle, having spent some time with her the last few summers while she was visiting Bill and Fleur, it only felt right to travel here to be of support” she said with a bit too much defensive conviction.

Malfoy regarded her for a moment, tilting his head with curiosity and then said, “I would have thought your attendance compulsory given that you and Fleur both married a Weasel and would logically arrive on their arms.”

After a short moment of silence, he seemed to shift from confusion to wonder.

“Or are you explaining your intentions because there’s trouble in paradise? Have things not worked out with Weaselbee?”

Damn but he was quick! How did he work that out faster than she could foresee her blunder in oversharing? She did so loathe the way he got under her skin and forced her to say too much too quickly. Her head was spinning, she needed to slow down but her heart rate was off the charts.

“Paradise is fine thank you very much, not that it’s any of your business,” she lied matter of factly, regaining her faux-composure.

He looked suspicious, but moved on from the topic, clearly not that interested.

“So you were, what... looking for a tasting table? Planning to arrive at this evening’s momentous event in support of the girl you’re so fond of... thoroughly pissed?”

“I didn’t - I - that,” she sputtered. Gods, she was losing it again!

He cut her off, “Easy there, Granger, I can’t have you exerting yourself to the point of heat exhaustion and passing out in my fields, my family have enough blood on their hands and I fear I wouldn’t survive another trial, especially if my greatest champion is the one I’m accused of doing in” he said with a broad grin.

Was he just winding her up or was this some backwards way of saying thank you for all she did to have him released from prison?

“Your greatest champion?!“ she exclaimed, “is that really how you see me?”

“It’s how you see yourself, I’m sure. That many years of mutual hatred couldn’t have been stricken from my record, there had to be at least a tinge of selfish pride in there somewhere.”

She scoffed, entirely affronted that this was how he held her efforts to have him released. He was more self-important and undeservedly confident than anyone she had ever met, and she began to regret her previous open-hearted position about his post-war plight. The ungrateful coward! Sure, she
had been driven largely by pity for the boy, and it felt wrong not to use her social position to help someone innocent be brought true justice. He wasn’t her charity case, he was just an exception to the rule where Death Eaters were concerned. The fact that he was underage and clearly brain-washed and coerced from birth made him a sympathetic figure in her mind, and she simply couldn’t stand the idea of him wasting away in Azkaban, no matter how deeply she’d hated him. Not matter how he’d treated her, she wouldn’t stoop to his level. She would choose the high road.

Oh bother, perhaps there was some truth to his words. Perhaps her testimony was given from at least a small amount of martyrdom on her part.

Watching her closely, he suddenly affected a gentler tone, “Or perhaps it’s just my Pureblood upbringing tinging my ability to see anyone else as having solely noble intentions for helping another person, especially when said person has been vile to them since the first day of their acquaintance. My apologies if that is the case,” he offered, and made a small bow.

An ironic bow? A sincere bow? She truly couldn’t tell. The air was thick with a sense of manipulation and coercion she had always associated with Malfoy’s attempts to charm Hogwarts staff.

“Malfoy, what are you on about? Was that some sort of twisted apology or are you just winding me up?” she asked with a glare, so cautious about her words that she was barely drawing breath.

“Are you wound up, Granger?” he asked, slowly surveying her from head to toe as he said it, and ending on a suggestive smirk for effect.

His eyes raking over her sent chills in every direction. He'd never looked at her like that before. Had he ever really looked at her before?

“I... I... I…” was all she managed before he cut back in.

“Come on then, let’s get you that drink before my fate as a social pariah is sealed for all eternity after I turned the girl who never knew when to shut up into a mute.”

He turned and began walking toward the small cottage on the grounds adjacent to the large manor house. For a moment she just stood there, stock still, trying to work out what had just transpired between them. Thoroughly confused, she followed along in his wake.
Draco walked toward the cottage, Granger trailing along behind him. He was rather enjoying this sudden turn of events, and marveling at the fact that mere moments before she had appeared he had been thinking of her.

Then again, perhaps it wasn’t so miraculous, he’d often found himself thinking of her. Of her face at the trial, resolute and determined. Of the way she had heatedly pled the Wizengamot for his release, almost as if she’d cared for him. That familiar yet faint sense of hope and yearning began to pool in the pit of his stomach and he shook himself, remembering that he had once stood by and allowed her torture at the hands of his Aunt.

He’d never wanted any of it. As a stupid schoolboy fantasy, it had looked appealing to serve the dark lord. When the man himself took up residence in his house, however, a crashing reality had set in. He had been exposed to a hitherto unimaginable level cruelty towards himself and his family.

He often replayed the events of the night when the trio was captured, trying to work out what he could possibly have done differently to affect the outcome. He had had to smother his relief when Potter and his friends escaped just before the dark lord had returned. It took every imaginable effort on his part to close his mind and employ the occlumency that Severus had taught him.

He’d always had the sense that Severus was teaching him occlumency for more than just every day death eater’s work. His suspicion in hindsight was that his mother had asked for the lessons because she knew that he was less affected by darkness and more prone toward empathy. His Mother was always cleverer than anyone gave her credit for. From the amount that he had complained about them, she’d known he’d coveted their level of connection and spirit of adventure. She’d foreseen the day when he would have to decide which side he was truly on. She’d known he would falter, the clever woman.

And so, she had had him prepared, and prepared he was. The dark lord returned just in time to see Potter and friends disappearing into the ether, wielding a level of rage and torment not previously seen inside the walls of Malfoy Manor. Draco had played his part well, forcing himself to shut out any sense of fear or worry for the fate of his schoolmates and apparent enemies. Shut them inside a little box in his mind, safe from the prying eyes of the dark lord.

These days, without the imminent threat of an all-powerful legilimens, he was able to peruse and examine all of these thoughts to his heart’s content.

The fact that one of the subjects of these previously hidden thought boxes was now trailing behind him in a haze, seemed surreal to say the least.

He turned to look at her. She seemed to be hesitating, perhaps considering turning around and
running. Given their history, he wouldn’t fault her for it. However, he wasn’t ready to see her leave yet.

“Keep up, Granger! If I didn’t know better I’d assume you were stalling so as to bait me into scooping you up and carrying you over the threshold of this cottage.”

He grinned, knowing it had worked, as her eyes widened and her brow furrowed simultaneously. Gods, he loved winding her up. It felt like old times. He might have been walking with Crabbe and Goyle to Hogsmeade on a sunny Saturday, calling taunts back at her and her friends for sport.

But he should probably stand down a bit, she had seemed utterly rattled to stumble upon him here and contrary to popular belief, he had no interest in causing her true distress. Had she really just been looking for a wine sampling?

At first, he’d wondered if she had been coming to find him “accidentally on purpose,” as they say. He’d had a dream like that once not too long ago, and so her appearance caused a strange out of body experience where the most delicious dream he’d ever imagined seemed to actually be coming true. He’d had to rely on verbal jousting to distract himself from being far too familiar with her… as he had been in that dream. She certainly didn’t need to know how often she’d been invading his mind these past three years.

Besides, it was seriously fun to cause those facial contortions of hers. It was as though her eyebrows were acrobats performing death defying feats to thrill any audience member fortunate enough to catch the show.

He had never paid her much mind in school, she had been such an insufferable know it all. To him, she’d been no more or less than tool for manipulating Potter. Though, in their fourth year he did find himself a bit jealous of Krum, having her on his arm at the Yule Ball, not that he had ever admitted as much to any living soul.

Krum’s choice had given him whiplash. It had been like discovering that a thing you regarded as a piece of junk in your home actually yielded a high monetary value and you’d been fool enough not to notice for years. Then, you had just stood idly by as it was taken away before you could notice and cash in. He was certain he wasn’t alone in this, almost every boy at Hogwarts (and a few of the girls) had marveled at and admired Krum’s choice once they’d seen her step into the great hall. Pureblood wizards were not excluded from this, though they certainly needed to hamper their keenness, and quickly, for their own good. It simply wouldn’t do for any of them to be attracted to a mud blood, their parents would have had their wands.

But it wasn’t her looks that had Draco ruminating on the girl of late. No, it was her apparent good heart and the ferocity with which she’d argued a case he’d never asked her to. Much as he hated to admit it, he had been touched, and grateful. Of course, he’d had no idea what to do with these feelings. Retiring to his cell in Azkaban to await the verdict, he’d found himself up all night, unable to sleep but for his tortured and spinning mind. What had been her intention? What had it meant? What would it mean, going forward, were he to be released? Should he thank her? Or should he leave her alone out of respect? After all, years of bullying followed up with actually standing by as she’d been tortured did not make a fantastic foundation for friendship.

Intent on secluding himself at the vineyard, he had tried to put her out of his mind.

And yet… here she was. Seemingly unattached and looking to get knackered, alone with him on his family vineyard. She seemed to be having some trouble with her Weasel of a husband (leave it to that idiot to screw things up with the literal golden girl) and perhaps was looking to let off some steam.
Come to think of it, this did feel like the makings of a wonderful dream, and he surreptitiously pinched at the skin on his left forearm, a most sensitive spot, just to be sure.

His skin burned, and he knew it was no dream.

He had reached the door and opened it, motioning for her to go in ahead of him, and getting a whiff of her sugary perfume as she passed. He inhaled deeply, but covertly, so as not to come off like some creep who might stash a girl’s dirty knickers under his pillow.

Without a clear plan for how this would go or what he was getting himself into, he shut the door and made his way over to the family wine rack.

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Hermione stepped through the door of the cottage and was shocked to see that it was neat, tidy, and decidedly cozy. The door opened into a small foyer with a steep staircase straight ahead. To her left, there was a small sitting room with two cushy couches and a ceiling-high wall of books. To her right, a quaint kitchenette and dining room with a round rustic wooden table. Decorations were sparse, however her eye caught a Slytherin quidditch banner over one of the couches, which is when it hit her: this was where Malfoy was currently living.

She was suddenly overcome by discomfort at being in this intimate setting with him, and alone! Presumably his bedroom lie at the top of that staircase, and she had the distinct feeling of arriving home with someone after a date. Not that she’d experienced that herself, but she’d seen it in enough films.

“Malfoy do you- do you live here?” she asked, a touch too incredulous.

He crossed into the kitchen and began rifling through the wine rack, “I would think that obvious, Granger, as I’m nearly walking around in my skivvies here, I clearly wasn’t just out in the fields for a day trip” he said without looking up from his bottles, examining each label with a squint.

Hermione was surprised that Malfoy would choose these modest living quarters when there was an entire manor house on the property.

“Are you surprised, Granger?” He asked as he turned and brought three of the bottles over to the round table.

Hermione jolted and tore her eyes from her studious examination of the room to look up at him.

“It’s just- I thought you’d prefer a more spacious accommodation…” she said as she watched him expertly pouring a sampling of each bottle into each tasting glass in turn.

“Oh yes, because I’m a spoilt rich brat absolutely requiring all manner of personal comforts and luxuries, eh Granger?”

She bristled again, torn between whether to agree or apologize. He, however, seemed unaffected and saved her from further contemplation.

“I could have lived in the manor, I did for a while, I merely grew tired of the empty space and drafty corridors, not to mention the lack of company” he said easily as he completed the pours.

“I would have thought you’d be used to drafty corridors, growing up... where you did,” she muttered, shivering at the thought of Malfoy Manor, the memory of her last visit there floating in and then out of her mind. The air tensed, and she could tell Malfoy was thinking of it as well.
“Yes well, tastes change, I suppose,” he grunted as he poured himself a glass of one of the selections. Had she angered him? Should she care if she had?

Lost in contemplation again, Malfoy’s voice interrupted to snap her out of it.

“Granger are you planning to come inside or shall I make up a serving tray and bring these to you in the foyer?” he asked with a smirk.

Hermione looked around, suddenly realizing she hadn’t moved from the doorway.

“Er- right yes, of course, sorry” she said, and her cheeks flushed. What was wrong with her?! She was so torn between utter disbelief about what was happening, and the startling yet subtle realization creeping into the back of her mind that she actually wanted to be in Malfoy’s company in this moment. She was basing this mostly on the fact that she hadn’t left yet, though she’d been seriously considering it. Her actions were betraying her logic, which she hated.

_Buck up, Granger, let’s get our shit together now._

She walked tentatively over to him, staring perplexedly at the wines so as to avoid looking him in the eye…. or staring at his chest, arms, abs, whichever… best focus on the wines. She was uncomfortably aware of how good he looked, and dawned on her that it might not be a good idea to have any of this wine after all. She wasn’t sure what might happen if she allowed herself to get slightly pissed. Wait... was she actually worried about something happening between them?

_Gods, this was an utter mind fuck of a day!_

“I haven’t poisoned them, Granger. Have I not already expressed my opposition to the idea of having you die on my watch? Think of the social suicide I’d be inflicting upon myself,” he said with a smile.

Her brow furrowed for the millionth time in the last fifteen minutes and she was sure she’d have a permanent line across her face now. It seemed he was being warm, gentle, and self-deprecating, three things she’d never dream to associate with Draco Malfoy. She was trying to work out whether this was some clever manipulation or simply a shift in his personality over the years, because she had never before seen him give a genuine smile that didn’t reek of smarminess in all her days.

She wondered idly how soft his lips were, which set alarm bells off in her mind.

This was not the train of thought to be on, she must exit the train! Immediately!

She began backing away towards the door, “I uh- on second thoughts Malfoy I think I need to pass on the wine. Need to have my- my faculties about me this evening- er...” she tripped over a standing coat rack next to the stairs and stumbled but caught herself before falling, “like you said I don’t want to be arriving at such an important event already pissed especially when I need to see my ex- er-” she backed into the wall of the foyer, “need to see so many people I know this evening, you know all the usual people one might see at an event such as these- er this - this event… er- yes” she trailed off vaguely as she spun around looking for the door knob.

She grasped it and turned to bid him goodbye. He was watching her with that stupid genuine smile on his face, leaning nonchalantly back against the kitchen counter, clearly enjoying himself.

“Apparently I have wound you up, Granger, look at you. You’re a blustery mess,” he said as he slowly raised his wine to his lips without taking his eyes off her.

She looked at the floor rather than at him and said, “I’m sure I haven’t the faintest idea what you
mean, Malfoy, but thank you for the offer to sample your wines and it was er- nice… to run into you,” she spared him one last glance and said, “See you… whenever I see you.”

Without breaking eye contact or removing the grin from his face he said, “Cheers, see you later, Granger.”

Then she turned tail and ran out of the cottage as fast as she could, a cloud of dust spinning around her as she went, and did not stop running until she had reached the road. Slamming her back against the closed car door and panting from the sprint.

“Get a damn hold of yourself, Hermione!” she shouted at herself, looking back in a panic to ensure he hadn’t followed her. He was nowhere in sight.

She wrenched the car door open, and after fumbling in her pocket for the keys, fired up the engine and went skidding up the street, back to her parent’s favorite inn.
Well this day had not turned out nearly as planned. Had he been imagining it or had he just witnessed Hermione Granger coming undone by his presence? She had been stealing glances at his shirtless body, and at one point seemed to be staring at his lips with a sense of… yearning? He couldn’t recall a time when she had looked at him with anything other than hatred, so perhaps he was reading it wrong. It might be that he had been projecting memories of one of his dreams onto this real life situation and therefore reading it all wrong.

By all accounts, it made no sense that Granger could even consider him in that way for a second. This wasn’t a dream, this was a very real reality in which he had been her tormenter for the formative years of her life. He was a recluse, shunned from wizarding society, an unwelcome presence to be sure. Fear began to bubble up, as it occurred to him that she might have thought that he was trying to lure her into a trap.

The probability of that washed over him as a thick sense of dread, and he put down his wine glass, scowling. He cursed himself for being so foolish as to assume she was attracted to him, rather than scared of him. Going over the events of the last half hour in his mind, it was now clear she had been terrified the entire time. Terrified of him. She bloody ran away, how could he be so daft as to read it any other way?

He grabbed the glass and downed the rest, snatching up any bottle at random for a refill before deciding he needed something stronger and reaching for the fire whiskey instead. It was at that moment that a loud crack sounded just outside his door. Had she come back? His heart leapt for a moment with hope before realizing who it was when the sound of a male voice came resounding through his walls, “Oi! Put your pants on mate I’m coming in.”

Blaise. Of course. He poured his firewhiskey and called back, “Pants are all I have on, be forewarned mate,” just as Blaise strode through the front door. Draco mentally reminded himself that hope was a fools errand, he supposed he agreed with his Father after all.

“Well hello there Mr. Malfoy,” he said, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

“You know, when these jokes of yours come as frequently as they do, I begin to wonder whether it’s
true you only enjoy the company of witches,” Draco said, grateful to have a distraction from his morose train of thought.

Blaise shrugged, “I’m not in the business of limiting my possibilities, and nor should you be. Shall we take it upstairs and find out?”

“Tosser,” Draco said with a laugh, “Fancy a whiskey?”

“Always,” he said jovially, moving into the sitting room and plopping down on the couch with his feet on the coffee table.

Draco entered and, handing Blaise his glass, sat down on the couch opposite his oldest friend and raised his in a cheers. Blaise responded in kind, this was a regularly practiced dance.

“So what were you doing standing practically starkers in your kitchen drinking alone?” Blaise asked casually.

“It’s hot. And aren’t I always drinking alone?” Draco responded with the same casual tone.

“Fair points, mate,” Blaise said as he raised his glass again and downed it all in one.

Draco was unsure whether he was being intentionally evasive about what had just happened. Perhaps he needed to think on it more before allowing Blaise’s opinions to interfere with his own, as he knew Blaise would have many of them. He always had.

“We need to talk about the plan for this evening,” Blaise said as he removed his feet from the table, put down his glass and clapped his hands together.

“Ah yes, the plan, what were you thinking? Polyjuice into those muggle inn owners this time? I still have their hairs in the kitchen cupboard,” Draco offered.

“Actually, I had a better idea…” he said, raising his eyebrows.

Draco slammed his drink down, “No. Absolutely not. Negative, my friend, it is not the time.”

“Come on! Don’t you want to see the look on Weasley’s face as you come sauntering in? Or Potter’s? Or Granger’s, for that matter? They’re all going to be there!” he said in an effort to be enticing, not realizing the sheer panic this idea was causing Draco, and it wasn’t due to the mention of Potter or Weasley.

His jaw tight and not looking his friend in the eye he said, “I’m not ready yet.”

“Oh bollocks, Draco! It’s been three fucking years since you arrived here for your ‘brief hiatus’ from your former life,” he said wile making ironic air quotes and rolling his eyes, “you sit here reading books and eating grapes, occasionally getting smashed and tagging along halfheartedly with me on my own escapades out of sheer obligation. What the fuck good is your freedom if you don’t allow yourself to be free inside?” he tapped on his right temple on the last word.

“Wow, that’s a profound sentiment, that is. You should really take up a career in the personal transformation world, write some books and run some seminars on freeing oneself from one’s own mental prison and scam millions out of poor sods who can’t think for themselves.”

“You’re deflecting, Draco,” he said with a wink, “But I appreciate the compliment on my astute council. Perhaps I will start some seminars. Then you could come run them with me also out of obligation and call that a life as well.”
Draco laughed sardonically, his stomach secretly in knots. Blaise was in one of those moods that meant he wouldn’t stop until he got his way, and Draco was simply not ready to show his face yet, especially not after scaring the life out of Granger a mere hour ago. Merlin, she would think he was stalking her!

“I’m not going.”

“You are.”

“I’m not.”

“Look Draco, this can and will go on for hours, and we both know that I will end up dragging you there, if I need to by force, so be it.”

“I’d love to see you try.”

“I won’t have to and you know it. You want to end this social seclusion as much as I want you to if not more. What better way to rip the proverbial band-aid off than to get all the unpleasantries over in one go?!”

“Well okay let’s say I wanted to, how am I getting into this little party without an invite,” he asked smugly. It was one thing to gate-crash as would-be foreigners, it was another to come parading in as himself to a room full of wizards who would love a reason to toss him right back into Azkaban.

His face went slack with horror as Blaise snapped his fingers and produced a cream-colored invitation with periwinkle blue swirling writing.

“The Delacours afforded me a plus one, Draco, will you be my date?”

“How did you get that?! I thought you said tonight was a gate crash.”

“I lied,” he shrugged, “Mum is friend’s with Apolline Delacour, always has been, but she’s out of town this weekend and let them know I’d be taking her place. So you see, Draco, I can’t arrive without an escort.”

“Go and invest in an escort, then!”

“Alright Draco, I suppose this is the appropriate time to finally confess that I DO prefer the company of wizards over witches, and specifically you, I’ve been in love with you for centuries, will you please do me the distinct honor of accompanying me to this event?”

“You’ve loved me for centuries? You are a complete wanker, and should also consider a career in romantic fiction as that’s actually not a bad line.”

“Draco, mate, in all seriousness… when does this end? They let you out of Azkaban, but you’re the one continuing to punish yourself.”

“I like it here.”

“Bollocks.”

“It’s true. And I can’t imagine attending this event without causing a massive scene that completely detracts from the purpose of the evening.”

“Oh so you’re sparing Gabrielle Delacour the horror of having you appear at her party, is that it? I assure you, Draco, it’s a non-issue, she is dreading the event herself, I’m sure she’d love a scene! Not
that I think you’d make one. You’ve got quite a thick head, mate, you refuse to listen to me, but I keep telling you that people are not as prejudiced against you as you seem to think. I mean they’re not exactly asking after you, but I truly do not believe anyone would mind your presence, except maybe Weasley, but he’s a prat.”

“How do you know that Gabrielle Delacour is dreading the event?”

“Like I said, Mum is friends with her Mother. Mothers talk,” he said matter-of-factly, “Am I swaying you yet, Draco? Because you’re going to need to smarten yourself up and get that dirt out from under your nails pretty quickly if we’re going to be on time.”

Draco sighed. He supposed he could just keep a low profile, stay for an hour to appease Blaise and slip out unnoticed. There were sure to be quite a few people there, and it should be easy enough to blend into the background.

“Fine. I’ll go up and bathe,” Blaise stood up with an eager grin, “and you are NOT following me.”

Blaise laughed, “Mate that was not my intention, I’m just excited… though now you mention it…”


He strode up the stairs to get ready, and he expected it would take a lot longer than the length of a bath for him to feel ready for this. Then again, it had been three years with no signs of an ending any time soon. Perhaps it was time to dip his toe back in and see how the water felt.

One thing he was certain of was that even if he had to disillusion himself, he would make sure that Hermione Granger did not see him tonight.

—

Hermione arrived back at the inn, sweating and covered in vineyard dust that seemed plastered to her skin. An extremely hot shower was in order, but not before a shot of fire whiskey to ease her shattered nerves.

This was one of those times when she’d normally run to the library to do research and create a plan of action from here, but the desire to do so was mere reflex and made no logical sense. What would she research? “How to know if I’m going completely insane because I’m feeling feelings for someone who has long been considered my mortal enemy”?

Perhaps in a book on wizarding mental illness…

She poured herself the shot and downed it in one, then began coughing and gasping. She rarely drank firewhiskey but just happened to have a small bottle of Ron’s in her travel bag. She actually would have preferred wine, but under the circumstances…

Truly, what had Malfoy been on about? Inviting her in like that, and being… charming? Perhaps her standards for charm had simply been lowered after five plus years with Ron. She tried to go back through the details of their conversation, which had been more like a verbal jousting match than a dialogue, but found her brain feeling fuzzy.

Must be the wrackspurts, she thought idly, before scoffing, “oh Merlin what am I even thinking of?!?” She surely had to be losing her mind, though admittedly she could probably use a chat with a friend just now and even Luna Lovegood and her wild theories about the world would be a welcome reprieve from her current mind state.

She couldn’t write Ginny, she’d be busy with party preparation, being part of the family court
presenting Gabrielle that evening, and Harry was obviously off limits for this particular conversation. It pained her, though, as he was still her best friend. She wasn’t ready to imagine the look on his face when she admitted how she was feeling in this moment.

Then it dawned on her: Neville! He was in France as well, attending the party that evening in his Gran’s stead. He might be there with Hannah but perhaps he could get away and pop in for an old friend in need. She couldn’t owl or floo call from this muggle inn, but she could send a message by patronus.

Calling up that earlier memory of her mother at the vineyard, she cast her otter and it swam quickly away. As she waited, she remembered that Neville couldn’t cast a corporeal patronus. Just as she began to worry that he wouldn’t be able to respond, a mist of white light glided through the window and she heard Neville speak as if he were right there, “Hiya Hermione - uh, is this, is this working? I’ve never pulled this off before, so come to think of it I should probably just ap-“ CRACK - Neville appeared right at her side as the last lines of his own message played out.

“Neville!” she screamed, and threw herself into a bone crushing hug.

“Hi Mione,” he choked, “how you do- ing?” She released him and held both shoulders in her hands, grinning appreciatively.

“Neville it is so good to see you, how are you? How’s Hannah? How was your travel here?”

“All good, Hermione, yea thanks- but I should say, I don’t have a ton of time. Need to get back to finish preparing some floral arrangements for this evening. Special order from the Hogwarts grounds that Gabrielle took a liking to when she was there, you know.”

“Right of course, Neville, that’s lovely of you. I won’t keep you long and I wouldn’t have asked had it not been a dire emergency I promise and I just couldn’t face going to Harry, and of course not Ron…”

He looked awkward at the mention of Ron, but nodded and said, “of course! I’m happy to help if I can.”

Now that he was here, she had no idea where to begin, so she simply began…

“I’ve just seen Draco Malfoy.”

Neville tensed, his relaxed smile leaving his face entirely.

“Did he hurt you? What happened? Where is he?” Neville spun frantically on the spot expecting to catch Malfoy floating outside the window on a broomstick.

“He’s not here, I- I ran into him at his family vineyards when I was out- out for a bit of sight seeing.”

“Ah so that’s where he’s been hiding! My guess was that he got a post as a Professor at Durmstrang or left to work for MACUSA, but it makes more sense he’d hole up in maximum comfort and a life of leisure rather than service. I forgot his Mum’s family have land here… So what happened then? What did he do to you that’s got you all-“ he surveyed Hermione, “blustery?”

“Strange you chose that word, that’s exactly what he called me.”

“Was he calling you names? Was he rude to you? Because that prat owes you his life and while he had the decency to stay away from our eyesight the last few years, I would not put it past him to snap right back into the wanker he once was.”
Post-war Neville was always so refreshingly confident, and she smiled knowing she had made the right choice in asking him here.

“Well, see that’s the thing, Neville. He wasn’t mean to me at all,” she took a deep breath and thought back, “in fact, he was rather… kind and charming and-“ she tilted her head to the side and allowed a small smirk as her eyes wandered to the window.

“Oh bloody hell, Hermione,” he said slowly, eyes going wide.

She snapped her eyes back to meet his, “what?”

“Do you- do you have- a THING for Draco Malfoy?! Is this what you called me here to tell me?!”

“No!! No I do not have a THING how dare you suggest it?! I just-“

“Hermione, look, I know most people thought I was a daft inept fool when we were in school, but I paid attention. I had a big crush on you for years, so I paid extra close attention to you, you know this. Around the time of the Yule Ball when Krum was courting you, I saw the way you looked when you spoke about him, and it was literally that exact look and sound you just used to describe Malfoy.”

He stared at her, accusingly yet gently. She was caught, but this was probably better than her trying to pretend she had called him there for some made up reason, which she had considered doing.

“Wow, okay, I had no idea you paid THAT close attention to me.”

Neville blushed, “Yea well, I’m used to being underestimated, but don’t throw us off the subject Hermione.”

She took a deep breath, “Okay I won’t, but will you please try not to be mad at me, I’m feeling very confused and I just need a friend right now who can hear me out objectively and help make me stop feeling so damned crazy.”

He nodded slowly, “I understand, I suppose I can withhold my judgements for a brief period.”

She smiled, noticing that Neville had come a long way from being a pushover to a pure gentleman.

“Thanks Neville. So… it all happened rather quickly and it feels like a bit of a blur. I literally ran into Malfoy at this vineyard and before I knew it we were sort of arguing, but underneath there was this… energy.”

“Like dark magic?” he asked.

“No no, nothing like that - I suppose if I had to spell it out I’d say it felt… flirtatious.”

Neville took a deep breath and nodded, clearly withholding whatever it was he wanted to say about her flirting with Draco Malfoy. “And then?”

“And then he invited me in for some wine, and-“

“And you went with him?! Were you alone?!“

“Well… yes!”

“Gods, Hermione, I was under the impression that you were the brightest witch of our age and you’re telling me you were ALONE and drinking with a known death eater?!”
“He was cleared of all charges!”

“Yes because YOU spoke for him at the trial! How long as this- this- infatuation been going on?”

“Only for about the last hour!”

Oh Merlin, she’d said it.

“Ah there, you see, so I was right!” he shouted, pointing at her.

“Neville you promised you’d withhold your judgements, please I really need a friend right now!”

“You certainly need something, perhaps a trip back to St Mungos, we can take you to the wards my parents are kept in, I know the healers there well, I think they’d take bloody great care of you Hermione because you have bloody LOST it!”

Her face fell. This couldn't have been going any worse. What was she thinking, asking Neville? Of course his disdain for Malfoy had run too deep for this to be an easy conversation. Acquitted or not, Malfoy had made Neville’s life just as difficult as hers, if not more.

He took another deep breath, “Look Mione, I’m sorry. It’s just- It’s just hard.”

“It’s hard for me too! Can you imagine being in my position and having sudden feelings for an elitist, pure-blood, dark arts loving arsehole!?”

He took a moment to consider this. She was grateful that he’d stopped shouting, and she had a moment to catch her breath. Then, the look on his face shifted considerably. It almost looked like he felt guilty…

“I suppose I can,” he offered slowly.

“Really?!” she spat frantically.

He took a moment longer to think about this while she surveyed his face, wide-eyed and extremely curious.

“Yes… actually… now that I think of it I can definitely imagine it,” he closed his eyes, “I could share something with you Hermione and it might help, but I need you to all but take the unbreakable vow and promise me you will not share it with another living soul.”

She looked at him, brow furrowed. “Of course, Neville, what is it?”

“Well you see… back when I had my brief stint as an auror, before Hannah and I were together… I uh… well there’s not easy way to say this so I’ll just say it. I got pissed at a ministry event and had a fling with Pansy Parkinson. I wish I could say it was just that one night, but after that we sort of, kept seeing each other for a period of-”

“that absolute COW?!” Hermione cut him off, gaping at him.

“Hark who’s being judgmental now!?”

They stared at each other wide-eyed, and then simultaneously burst out laughing.

Hermione recovered first, “well, I suppose we both have dirt on each other for life, though I haven’t flung anything with Malfoy yet, I ran out of there the moment I began feeling anything and did not look back, so I have the upper hand in terms of blackmail here,” she motioned between the two of
them with a satisfied smirk on her face, when a devilish grin spread across Neville’s and he eyed her gleefully.

“What are you grinning at!”

“Yet.”

“What?”

“You said you hadn’t flung anything with Malfoy… yet.”

She gasped and put her hand over her mouth.

“It- it was a -a mere slip of the tongue, Neville.”

“Oh, someone’s going to be slipping some tongue-

Hermione squeaked, looking horrified at what Neville was implying, and he doubled over with laughter. “Certainly not, I have no reason to see him ever again, I was just conflicted and needed to steady my thoughts, which I now have and so I think it’s time you got back to your flower arrangements don’t you, Neville?”

Still fighting off laughter, he nodded and began to turn around.

“And Neville?”

“Yes?”

“We need to get together at The Three Broomsticks once we’re back from this holiday and I need to hear every detail about your affair with the pug-nosed princess.”

He smiled, “And by then you’ll be able to tell me all about yours with the pointy nosed ferret”

She gasped and grabbed the book from her nightstand, chucking it at him just as he disapparated.

She brushed her hair out of her face and took a deep breath, her inner resolve strengthening.

She was certain there was nothing to worry about, as she would surely never be seeing Draco Malfoy ever again.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading ;) Hope you're enjoying this as much as I am!
Draco still didn’t feel ready.

His stomach was in knots as he and Blaise shook off the discomfort of apparition and entered the front gates of the Delacour estate. The path before them was magically illuminating itself under their feet as they walked, the bright blue-white light following them and leaving the earth behind them in darkness. It was a spell that Draco hadn’t seen before, but it reminded him of his hand of glory and the uses he had once put it to.

He got lost in thought about the night of Dumbledore’s death, logically reasoning out that Dumbledore had set it up and willingly allowed it to happen. Draco had been a pawn in multiple schemes that evening, not the guilty party. And yet, the fact that Draco had been ignorant of Dumbledore’s alliance with Severus caused him to disregard that as a valid argument for his own innocence. He had brought death eaters into the school where his friends lived. He had been possessed by darkness.

He shook his head. Leave it to him to go down a dark mental path whilst walking along a beautifully lit one. Blaise looked over at his friend, cottoning on to the fact that he was mentally somewhere else. He leaned down to catch Draco’s eye with a grin.

“Isn’t this simply enchanting, darling?” he mused.

Draco snapped free of his worried mind and looked up at Blaise.

“Are you planning to call me darling all night? Is this to be YOUR ‘coming-out’ party, Blaise?” He was always quick to recover, it was one of the benefits of having studied occlumency. Shut down one thought and lock it away quickly, then pick up the next and act with bold dexterity that causes the other party to believe you were never anywhere but the present moment.

“It can be ours, lover!” he proclaimed into the night. Draco shook his head and let out a quiet laugh.

“I’m just trying to ease the tension, I know how wound up you must be. And after all, what sort of boyfriend would I be if I weren’t ready willing and able to soothe your angst?”

“I am not wound up, but I will be if you try to snog me in front of…. well, anyone really, so let’s keep the joking to a discrete minimum, yes?”

“Does that mean I can snog you in private?” he asked dryly.

“Fucking wanker.”

“Ok fine, I can be done with the homoerotic bullshit,” he drew himself up and puffed out his chest with an ironic air of haughtiness, “to be honest I don’t fancy you like that anyway. Just trying to take your mind off things.”
"Well thanks for the clarification, but my mind and my person are about to be right smack in the middle of things - quite literally - thanks to your meddling and your infuriating insistence on torturing me, so let’s please get this over with so I can get home and drink myself into a stupor."

They had reached the front doors of the estate now and were waiting in what looked like a reception line to enter the manor.

_Bollocks, so much for a covert entrance_, he thought to himself.

He let out a sharp, steadying breath, and Blaise studied him worriedly.

“You going to be all right, mate?” he asked with tentative concern.

“You’re asking me that now? Seriously? You’re the one who said I’d be alright!”

His raised voice of frustration caused a few of the witches around them to turn a stare. Thankfully, they were foreign and did not recognize him.

“Easy there, Draco, no need to create a scene merely to confirm your own prediction that your presence here would result in one. I was merely checking in with you, but I will cease all efforts from here and trust that you can handle yourself without my support.”

“I do so appreciate your vote of confidence,” Draco replied dryly.

He craned his neck to see inside, and was relieved to discover that the line was forming not so that the family could greet each guest, but merely because there were so many people in the foyer and the new guests couldn’t get in easily. He breathed much easier now. First hurdle, complete.

As they crossed the threshold, Blaise’s party invitation floated suddenly up out of his grasp to hover in front of the pair of them. It glowed bright blue-white like the entrance pathway had done, then hovered in front of them for a moment before transforming itself into two translucent, sparkling doves. They were similar to patronuses, but decidedly more... glitzy. The doves then spun in circles around each of them, leaving a magical trail of sparkly dust and emitting a faint, haunting sound of chirping in their wake. The doves shrunk down to small white badges and landed on their chests, affixing themselves to their dress robes.

“Good thing we didn’t go for polyjuice this evening, without that invite we’d not have been able to enter. Clever security, really,” Blaise said, as he admired his badge. Malfoy grimaced. He wasn’t keen on how official this was all feeling, but strode into the entrance hall through the throngs of newly arrived party-goers.

“What now?” Draco demanded, turning to his best friend and looking stern.

“Excuse me?” Blaise exclaimed in mock surprise, “Draco Malfoy, heir of Malfoy Manor and silver spoon Prince of the prestigious family line, has it been so long since you were part of proper wizarding society that you have forgotten your party etiquette?”

Draco rolled his eyes. He knew full well it was good form to seek out the host and thank them for the invitation, as well as complimenting them on the decor, providing a gift, and exchanging any other necessary pleasantries. He simply was not interested in doing so, given that he hadn’t been formally invited by the Delacours themselves and was certain they would not be amenable to his presence.

“I’m not alerting Mademoiselle or Monsieur Delacour to my presence, so if that’s your first task you better get on with it and then come and find me by the bar, wherever that is,” he looked around with surly determination.
“Roger that!” Blaise said cheerily, giving a mock salute before adding in a whisper, “lllovah!”

Draco shoved him away. “Bugger off, ya poof.”

Blaise sauntered away in search of the hosts. Draco began working his way through the crowd to a room on the right that seemed to have a line forming inside, which could only mean he’d find a firewhiskey at the end of it. Actually, make that a double.

Just as he was about to cross the threshold into the room, however, he heard a familiar tense voice from close behind him.

“Malfoy.”

He spun around and was face to face with none other than Neville Longbottom. This was an interaction he had mentally prepared for, having skimmed a piece in a French wizarding newspaper before leaving the cottage, which outlined all of the preparations for tonight’s event including a special flowering plant that needed to be transported from the Hogwarts grounds by the Herbology Professor.

Draco braced himself for civility.

“Professor Longbottom, I presume?” and he held out a hand, which Neville stared at with awe and confusion, although he did reach out and take it.

“Yes, yes I am,” Neville said, shaking Draco’s hand and clearly caught off guard by his unusual propriety, “er- how- how are you Malfoy?”

Draco put his hands in his pockets, and affected a slightly smug attitude.

“It’s alright, Longbottom, no need to make small talk with me, I’m quite sure you’ve no reason to be civil given our history.”

Neville looked extremely conflicted with this acknowledgement. He glanced around the room as if to call for backup in the halls of Hogwarts, then turned back to Draco and took a deep breath, seeming to decide something and said, “Right. Well, I appreciate you saying so Malfoy, but I think you’ll find that many of us are more interested in adopting an attitude that fosters greater peace and prosperity in future, and less enmity between sides, myself included.”

Neville paused, seemingly wanting to gauge Draco’s reaction, which was virtually non-existent as he thought of what to say in reply to this. Neville continued on, “The past is the past, we’re living in different times now. I think we must all resign ourselves to the idea of forgiveness in favor of forward momentum.”

Draco raised his eyebrows, considering this perspective. “Well you’ll pardon my cynicism, Professor, but I fear there are many who would heartily disagree with that sentiment.”

Draco paused and watched as Neville’s face fell slightly. What was that look in his eye? Pity? He simply couldn’t stand the idea of being pitied by anyone, but especially the man standing before him. He had to admit, however, that Neville had certainly come into his own since their last face to face encounter. There was a sense of calm and fortitude in his being that Draco had never before seen. Yet Draco would still always feel he had the upper hand in the power dynamic after their… colorful history.

“Regardless, I appreciate it, Longbottom. You always were a decent lad, and I hope you are on to something with this theory of yours,” he finished, throwing Neville a bone while also letting him
know subtly that he was stable and not in need of charitable attentions.

Neville gaped at this admission and said nothing for a moment.

Draco looked down at his feet, hands still in his pockets and rocked backward and forward saying, “And apparently I’m in for a night of watching people make that face.”

Neville shook himself and said, “apologies Malfoy, it’s just- it’s a bit of a shock to see you after so long, let alone to engage in a civilized conversation.”

Draco raised his eyebrows and replied, “Longbottom, you are not alone in that surreal reality.”

Neville was looking around absentely, lost in contemplation. He sighed and mumbled, almost to himself, “wow, Hermione said you changed, I just-”

Draco felt the knots in his stomach return instantly.

“Granger spoke to you... about me?”

Neville looked up, mortified. “Oh bollocks, I shouldn’t have said-“

Draco stepped towards him, which caused Neville to instinctively recoil and take three steps back as Draco asked earnestly, “Granger reckons I’ve changed?”

Neville sputtered, “S- sorry Malfoy, I see my Gran over there and she needs help carrying the drinks,” he pushed past Draco, not sparing him another glance, “on my way, Gran!” And he was gone.

As Draco spun around, watching Neville charge through the crowd, he hardly had time to process what he’d just heard before spotting Granger.

She looked stunning, and had clearly managed to get the vineyard dirt to scrub off after her romp through the fields. She wore a long black gown with a lace overlay and a low cut back, exposing her slightly reddened shoulders which he had noticed earlier in the day.

He was horrified to see that she then began moving in his direction, but with her head turned around having what looked like a heated conversation with... Weasley. In a panic, he spun around and grabbed up the handle of the door to the right. Mercifully, it was unlocked and he slipped inside.

He pressed his ear against the door and could hear a loudly whispered argument happening just outside. It was too muffled for him to discern the content, so he backed away from the door exhaling sharply, and turned to see that he was standing in a massive library. It rivaled the one at Malfoy Manor in both size and opulence. It had been so long since he’d been in his library and he dearly missed the place. Rows of endless knowledge, rare first editions, and books one could not even find in the restricted section at Hogwarts. As a child, he had wiled away many hours in the place, often during family parties like the one he was currently attending, drinking in new information. He absolutely loved learning, and it was an added benefit that hiding in the library allowed him to avoid falsely jovial interactions with people who were only interested in his family’s fortune.

Well, this evening had turned out much better than expected. He could settle down in an armchair here, reading some ancient tome or another, and be wholly undisturbed by the world ‘moving forward’ on the other side of that door.

Then he could simply slip out later on to find Blaise, acting as though he’d been mingling the entire evening, and this nightmare could finally be over.
He took a seat on a nearby couch after collecting a few French books on potions, marveling at the fact that he’d only needed to have one semi-awkward interaction with one of his old schoolmates. It must be his lucky night.

Then he remembered Neville’s comment about Granger and the stomach knots reappeared. Why had Granger been speaking to anyone about him? Had she been so scared that she’d needed to run to the arms of another man for protection?

In that moment he chuckled to himself that Neville was the man to protect any woman. Then again, perhaps things do change. Perhaps people can change. Perhaps she hadn’t been terrified after all, but had instead gone on to mention to her friend that he, Malfoy, was now a different person.

As he felt the hope creep back into his heart, he suddenly steeled himself and said, “No” out loud. He took a deep breath and began one of his occlumency practices of clearing his mind. He shoved hope tightly in a box and stored it in a back corner of a dusty attic. May it remain there, well preserved but unused, at least for now. He still wasn’t sure what he wanted to use it for.

He opened his eyes once it was safely stored away and returned to the first page of his newly acquired intellectual distraction. It wasn’t until the argument on the other side of the door grew to screaming heights that he was disturbed from his task again.

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“I said leave me alone, Ronald, and I meant it.” Hermione was leaning in close and whispering as forcefully as she could manage.

“‘Mione,” Ron whined, “my parents still have no idea what’s going on, I haven’t told them yet and I’d appreciate it if you could just- ya know- stand near me or act in some way like you don’t loathe the ground I walk on so they don’t get suspicious!”

“Yet?” she snapped, vaguely recalling the moment Neville uttered this same word to her mere hours ago and under very different circumstances.

“What?” he said, with a vague expression on his face.

“You haven’t told them YET, is that right, Ronald? And when were you planning to? And how honest were you planning on being? Because I’m fairly certain that once your Mother hears what you’ve done she will also struggle not to loathe the ground you walk on!”

He moved closer to her, motioning “keep it down” with his hands, and proceeded to whisper shout.

“Hermione it was one night! One stupid- drunken- stupid”

“Fifty more stupids and you will begin to move slightly towards an accurate description of your actions, Ronald Weasley!” she retorted.

“Hermione what do I need to do to make this up to you??”

“Ronald there is quite literally nothing you could ever possibly do to make this up to me. Even you can’t be this thick!”

He broke the whisper to speak in a normal conversational volume as he said with a forced calmness, “Oh I see, we’re back to insulting my intelligence. A wonderful old stand by, that. Meanwhile, I am here ready to beg you for forgiveness, because I may be fool enough to do what I did, but I am not stupid enough to give up on us.”
“You did it once before!” she shrieked, abandoning all pretense of civility.

Ron looked at her, amazed, and asked “Are you really still holding on to a grudge about me leaving you and Harry in that tent?”

She moved close to him, arms crossed, and leaned in challengingly, “It would certainly seem so, wouldn’t it?” her eyes were flashing dangerously now and the pair was gathering a small crowd of onlookers who had totally abandoned their previous feigned ignorance of the fight happening in front of their eyes. She stepped back and mused to the room at large, “And you know what they say, fool me once...”

“Yes yes shame on you shame on me blah de blah, hey Hermione I thought we said till death do us part!”

“We also said ‘forsaking all others’ Ronald!”

“Would you stop using my full name, you’re reminding me of my Mum.” Her eyes bulged out of her head, she was livid with fury.

“Oh, sorry I wasn’t clear. It was intentional. You see, I was just doing you a service, ickle Ronnie, by giving you a preview of what you can expect once your dear Mother finds out what you’ve done!”

“Will you lower your voice please?! I don’t want the whole world to know before Mum does.”

“Oh and it’s very important that all of this go according to YOUR plan, isn’t it? Your plan MUST be the most important, otherwise the rest of us are just insulting your intelligence and importance, that’s the narrative is it not?”

“That’s incredibly rich coming from the biggest know it all of her age! Can’t stand being wrong so she has to devour books like they are the food of life, keeping her in some impenetrable fortress of knowing what’s best for everyone else!”

“Is this really you working to make up with me as best you can? Because your performance reviews are in and as it turns out you are crap at your job!”

“I am TRYING Hermione but you are more stubborn than a skrewt about this and I am at a loss for what to do here!”

“Well that’s your sodding problem to figure out, not mine! What kind of relationship is this if every time you screw up, I have to be the one to tell you how to fix it?! Because in this case, even I don’t know the answer. So I can only logically conclude that there isn’t an answer. That you broke this beyond repair and it’s over!”

“I hardly think beyond repair is an appropriate-“

“YOU IMPREGNATED ASTORIA GREENGRASS!” she proclaimed, loud enough for the front gates to hear.

Then she clasped her hand over her mouth, eyes wide with shock at her own daring.

Everyone around them froze and stared. Ron stood stock still, eyes wide, and stayed fixated on Hermione as he stepped towards her, menacingly.

Slowly he growled, “Well now you’ve done it.”
Her eyes flew wider than should be anatomically possible, and she shoved him hard as she yelled “Oh yes, I’ve done it! That’s rich, Ronald Weasley! You have been following me around essentially begging for this to happen since the start of the evening. I told you! I told you to leave me alone! You were winding me up! I told you I wasn’t going to be near you this evening but you just had to go and push it like you always do!”

“You didn’t- I thought we- this isn’t-“ he sputtered, while glancing around at the crowd they were drawing.

She burst into tears, “please leave me alone, Ronald. Truly, I thought I could be in the same room as you. I thought I could at least be civil but I just- I can’t” and she pushed past him, hurling herself through the first door she saw and slamming it behind her.

She pressed her back against the door to brace herself, drew her wand and cast a locking spell just as Ron tried to follow her. He pounded on the door and yelled, “Hermione, please!” but with a casual flick of her wand, she cast a non-verbal silencing charm, and added a slightly more powerful door sealing charm which she had to face the door to cast, tracing the frame with her red glowing wand tip. Then she dropped her wand to the floor, covered her face with her hands, and began to sob in earnest.

She couldn’t believe that this was her life. And now everyone would know, and everyone would laugh at her. She had already had to endure years of people whispering about her choice to be with Ron when she apparently could have chosen the Chosen One himself, or literally any other wizard, but she had loved Ron. And Ron had broken her heart into exactly one thousand pieces. They now lined the floor like confetti at a party she’d never wanted to be invited to.

She slid down the wall and wrapped her arms around her knees, sobbing even harder now. It seemed as though every horrible thought she’d been keeping at bay for the last week was attacking her mind all at once. She began to think she might be violently ill, when a soft, gentle voice from inside the room spoke.

“I imagine I’m the last person you want to see in this moment, Granger, but I thought you’d at least like to know that you have an audience before continuing on with the show?”

She snapped her head up and gasped, re-grabbing her wand from where she’d discarded it.

Malfoy. He was mere feet away from her this entire time and she hadn’t noticed. He sat casually on a small sofa wearing dress robes of deep navy blue, and surrounded by ornate books. What was he doing here? And what was he doing in here in particular?!

She began furiously wiping her nose and eyes with her hands. He walked towards her, snapping his fingers and conjuring a handkerchief, then squatting down beside her to offer it.

She took it gratefully and dabbed at her face, but continued to cry. This was why she usually avoided crying, once it started it had been difficult to stop. She let out one particularly hard sob, and her face scrunched into a soundless wail. It felt like the pain of it all would break her physically. She wasn’t only thinking of Ron. This whole incident was drawing up every shred of unexpressed grief held in her body. She cried for her failed marriage. She cried for all the people lost in the war. She cried for the loss of her parents most of all.

It needed to come out, but wanted to do so wildly and with no consideration for her present circumstance. It wanted her to run around smashing and kicking things until she ached physically from the violence of it. It needed a far more dramatic expression than she was willing to allow it in order for it to feel truly heard. She inhaled sharply and choked on her own saliva, then began
coughing gasping for breath. Hiding her face behind her fist clenching the handkerchief, she turned her head and leaned it on the wall for support. She took a deep shuddering breath as she felt a steadying hand on her back, providing a sense of stability and comfort that she had been longing for desperately all week. Her mind began to calm as she kept breathing, one less shudder per breath as she came down from the height of it.

It took her a moment to notice that it was Malfoy’s hand on her bare back. She flinched the moment she realized this and he pulled his hand away with haste. She instantly regretted her movement, looking up at him with wide, teary eyes.

“Sorry, I-“ they both said in unison.

“No please, I apologize, that was-“ he started.

“No really, I apologize, you just surprised me is all. I’m- I’m a bit of a mess if you hadn’t noticed.”

She looked off into the corner of the room, staring. Breathing. Feeling suddenly abandoned all over again. She hopelessly wanted him to touch her once more, but he didn’t offer his hand.

Instead he stood and said, “I should leave you in privacy.”

She hastily wiped her face one last time with the handkerchief, not sure whether it would be ruder to keep it or give it back. Malfoy was staring at the door.

“I’d attempt to leave through here, but I’m not sure what those last two non-verbals that you cast were. Silencing I think, and...?”

Hermione sniffled and took in his puzzled expression, not entirely wanting to share what she’d done. Her lack of energy, however, overpowered her desire for tact. “I cast a charm that would make it so no Weasley’s could enter.”

He gave a slow, knowing nod and took a deep breath.

She added, “Yes, I got the idea from-“

“Me,” he said, grimly. Nodding some more, now looking down at his shoes, possibly embarrassed?

“The astronomy tower. Only those with dark marks could enter,” he grumbled to his feet.

“Yes,” she said, feeling a strange sense of guilt for bringing up the night of Dumbledore’s death, even in a roundabout way.

The silence that followed spread like ice between them. She was shocked that he wasn’t interrogating her about her argument with Ron. Perhaps he hadn’t heard? Yea, fat chance, Hermione, all of France had surely heard.

She searched her mind frantically for a change of subject but he beat her to it.

“I suppose we stole from one another evenly then?”

She looked up at him, perplexed. “What do you m- oh!” she pointed at him, mock accusingly, “The DA coins. Of course!”

“It was some truly brilliant magic, Granger, those messenger coins. I’d known you were clever, or at least you were a book worm and could memorize anything backwards, but it wasn’t until then that I truly realized your innate skill as a witch.”
She half-laughed, looking up at him incredulously. This had just took a turn far past surreal.

“It annoyed me to no end, as most of your actions did so long as you were besting me in grades. I paid very close attention to your tricks. I bet you never knew just how close I was paying attention to you,” he admitted.

“I didn’t. Not until Rosmerta-“ she broke off, not wanting to mention more of his transgressions.

“It’s alright, Granger, no need to avoid the topic of my mid-deeds, I dare say it would leave us with very little to reminisce about.”

She looked up and was shocked to see that he was smiling. That warm, gentle smile from earlier that day. His steely gray eyes were piercing her, and it acted like a warming tonic which she felt first in her heart, and radiating out from there.

“Thank you, Malfoy,” she said softly, motioning with the hand clutching the white sodden cloth, “I know you didn’t volunteer to stand sentinel in this room waiting for me with your handkerchief at the ready, but still... I’m grateful not to be alone.”

He nodded, “you’re welcome.” It was hard to read his expression. He seemed to be holding back something, but she couldn’t tell if it was a repression of angst or joy. He clearly knew how to control and even hide his emotions in plain sight, whatever they were. She must ask him for lessons in this one day.

He seemed to sense that she was trying to read him, and he broke eye contact. Her heart sank. He glanced around the room before speaking again.

“Have you realized which room you have selected as your sanctuary, Granger?”

She looked around and gasped, mostly shocked that her location had eluded her up until this point, but also because she was sitting in the most ornately beautiful library she had ever laid eyes upon.

“Wow,” she whispered, as she stood and gazed around. The floor to ceiling shelves seemed to go on for miles, and were matched by walls of glass which allowed in only moonlight currently. The full moon was large and bright, however, and lit the space substantially. Couches and arm chairs were scattered about the middle of the entryway next to heavy oak side tables, each adorned with a personal reading lamp. She could see that Malfoy had been examining multiple books on his selected couch when she had interrupted him. “This is breathtaking.”

“I know,” he said, “I’ve never seen one that could rival ours at Malfoy Manor before.”

“Not even at Hogwarts?” she asked with a slightly accusatory tone.

“Oh absolutely not, shelves of second hand schoolbooks, abused by ungrateful sticky fingered children on a daily basis?”

“Hey! Whose fingers are you calling sticky, yours, mine or ours?” she laughed.

“Oh Granger don’t be ridiculous, as if I’d lump you or I in with the masses of uncultured mongrels that manhandled that collection.”

She must be hearing things. Had Malfoy just paid her a compliment? She wanted to stop being so surprised by his change in tone and personality today, but unfortunately it was just too jarring. She shook her head and blinked.
“Well that’s- that’s very nice of you to say, Malfoy. I mean it’s nice to me, maybe not to-“

“-the mongrels?” he cut in, grinning.

She began to laugh just as hard as she’d last been crying, and he joined her. His was a wonderfully jovial laugh and it warmed her even more deeply than his piercing eyes. She caught her breath long enough to say, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you laugh, Malfoy.”

“What are you saying? I laughed at you all constantly.”

“Right, and while your evil schoolboy cackle was simply dripping with charm, that’s shockingly not what I meant. You were laughing WITH me just now.” Their eyes met, still quelling a last bit of laughter on both parts. She realized that they were mere feet from each other now.

A long moment stretched in which neither said anything. They simply stared. A small grin played at the corner of his mouth.

Then it vanished as he tilted his head to the side quizzically and took a tentative step towards her. She took a slow, deep breath but maintained eye contact, chills shooting through her whole body, her stomach in sudden knots at the implication of his movement. She stole a glance at his lips, which looked extremely soft in the moonlight emanating through the tall windows.

Just then, the back of her head was hit by the door suddenly being wrenched open from the other side, and she was flung painfully into Malfoy’s arms.

He caught her as she grasped her head in pain, wondering how Ron had broken through. The din of the party burst into the room as the spell cast between them broke, along with those cast upon the room itself.

Arms wrapped tightly around Hermione, Malfoy took a deep breath and said, “Evening, Potter.”
Dear Malfoy

Chapter Summary

And now, we get to find out how Harry feels about finding his friend in the arms of Draco Malfoy... after a brief jaunt through time. Enjoy ;)

*Three Years Earlier*

Draco stepped out into blinding sunlight in the streets of Muggle London, having just collected the remainder of his belongings from his cell at Azkaban, and bidding the Ministry officials a fine farewell. There had been so many dull logistical steps to take in order for his release to be official. Those mundane moments had stretched mockingly, prolonging his sense of entrapment just a bit longer. But that was over and he was a free man now.

Just shy of his 20th birthday, he was relieved not to be rounding out his teen years behind bars. Relieved… and grateful.

He scowled at the thought. The gratitude had been eating him up as he awaited the verdict. He'd needed a proper outlet for it and was determined to get it. Today.

He reached into his bag and grabbed a stack of letters tied together with white string and began to unravel the bow as he strode toward a pub on the corner. He’d made a special request for muggle clothes to replace his Azkaban rags, and in what he assumed had been a move of merciful pity, the guards had obliged. They must have known what he could expect from entering wizarding London, and were allowing him this one kindness of a t-shirt, jeans, and sweatshirt hoodie, his first co-conspirators in what looked like would be a lifetime of hiding.

He entered the pub and walked to a booth in the far corner and slid down into the seat, placing the now open stack of letters in front of him. If a waitress came over, he would order a muggle whisky, but he wasn’t interested in flagging her down. He hadn’t come here to drink, well not yet anyway.

He rifled through the stack trying to discern what order they were in, which was a simple task really, considering he had re-read ad-nauseam and consequently worn out the first 10 or so pretty badly. He located the very first of the letters and opened it gingerly, taking care not to rip it. He breathed deeply and began to read.

—

22 May 1998

Dear Malfoy,

I honestly haven’t the faintest idea why I am writing to you, you evil prat, but here we are. I’m quite certain that by now you have seen my signature at the bottom of this paper and have either crumpled this note into a heap and chucked it out the window of your cell, OR you’ve not opened it at all in which case I am just talking to myself at this point. But I’m a stubborn and hopeful sort, so I will trod on...
You’re still reading this, so that’s a decent sign. That’s why I’m writing, actually, I’ve figured it out now just by getting my thoughts out on paper... it’s been coming on for a while now, but I’m quite sure I’m right, so here it is: I think you’re actually a decent bloke, Malfoy. Now before you get all wound up, save your scoffs because I can’t hear them and furthermore don’t care what sort of scornful display of disgust you emit upon reading my words. I shall continue to press on...

Don’t take this the wrong way, but I can’t get you out of my head. The image of you lowering your wand on top of the astronomy tower when Dumbledore was wandless. The image of you gazing into my spell-stung yet still recognizable eyes at your home and saying you weren’t sure it was me. And then! If that wasn’t enough, you wouldn’t even LOOK at Ron and Hermione because you obviously knew it was them and you feigned doubt and ignorance, for what?!

You looked for any reason not to fight in the actual battle at Hogwarts, and sure many would call it cowardice but I think differently now. I think you have a decent heart, Malfoy, and perhaps you don’t even know it, but I am telling you. I saw and learned a great number of things about how human beings work on the night of the battle, and I think it snapped something straight about you in my head that’s only getting clearer as I write this out, so this was definitely a good idea to write this to you.

I don’t know if you know this, but I walked to my death that night. I walked to my death knowingly and with choice on my side, Malfoy. I let Voldemort strike me with the killing curse, and I lived. Again. And when I awoke it was your Mother who was sent to check my pulse. And even though it was selfish and she was just trying to get to her son, she lied for me. Turns out she’s got a decent heart as well, even if its only job is to love you.

I wish I had any good words for your Father. He’s where I’ll draw the line.

But this is about you, not your parents. Malfoy, you have been wrapped up in this war from the day you were born, as have I. In a lot of ways, we are like a mirrored image of one another, only it’s a mirror that projects opposites. Our lives have been touched in the same yet different ways and we have been forced to act and be involved in things we would much rather run screaming from. So to be quite frank, and hopefully brief, as this is beginning to look the length of a love letter, I cannot STAND the injustice of the fact that you are in there and I am out here. I am a hero, beloved by all. You are apparently a criminal, whose imprisonment is currently being celebrated by hundreds of raised glasses as I write.

It simply is not right, and I want you to know that despite everything, how you’ve treated me and my friends, what you have participated in, and who you have been... I am determined to get you out of that hell hole if I have to come and break you out myself.

Of course this may all be post-war reverie or the firewhiskey talking, but I couldn’t go on and enjoy myself with this on my mind, so I’m leaving it here on this page.

I would like to visit you in person to discuss further, but you’ll need to add me to your list of approved visitors and I already know I am not on that list because I checked before writing this novel to you, hoping to avoid giving you physical evidence of my convictions should I end up waking tomorrow only to realize this was a horrible idea.

I’d appreciate a note back, even if just to let me know I’m added to the list.

Hoping to see you soon,

Potter
Draco smirked and shook his head as he finished the letter. It was his favorite one, but probably only because of the novelty. It had been the first of so many.

He reached for the second, opened it carefully as well, and read.

5 June 1998

Dear Malfoy,

Given that it has been a fortnight and I have not heard back from you, nor put on the visitors list at Azkaban (which, apparently not even my status as saver of the free world can override) I am forced to conclude that you either:

1. Are an evil prat, as I’ve said previously, and have thrown my first note out the window without reading it
2. You have read it and are ignoring it, which doesn’t make you evil necessarily, but certainly makes you less intelligent than I previously believed

You can’t simply ignore me forever, Malfoy. Since you’re about as stubborn as I am, I can imagine that you will hold out as long as you can before letting my letters in, but I warn you... this is going to get very bleak for you very quickly if you do. I know you can’t receive The Daily Prophet in there. I know that everyone you know and love is also in there and can’t communicate with you. And I know that you DON’T know how horrible that will be for you.

I spent the entire last year in virtual seclusion with no news of the outside world. I always had Hermione for company, and Ron as well for the majority of the time, and we occasionally caught a radio program that gave us news, but otherwise it was just us and our heads and I have to tell you, mate, I thought I would go mad from it.

Dementors might not be sweeping through that prison any longer, but I’m sure it’s still not pleasant being in a stone cold cell in the middle of the sea. I can’t imagine they’ve given you interesting reading materials or anything to keep your mind sharp.

So whether you like it or not, I will be writing to you.

This will be mutually beneficial because for me, it eases my conscience, and for you it will keep you feeling somewhat like you’re still a person in this world who matters. I’ll do whatever I need to do to get you to a full pardon so you can experience that again. And I don’t need you to thank me, I feel I owe you something at this point so don’t get your knickers in a twist over it, okay?

Oh I can see that ridiculous evil scowl on your face right now, Malfoy. How dare I imply you wear knickers, eh? Makes you want to hex me, doesn’t it? Which hex will you use first? Tell me in your return letter. I dare you.

Talk soon,

Potter

PS - Happy Birthday
Potter had continued to write to him every two weeks for the entirety of his imprisonment. At first it was a lot of chiding about whether he would write back and trying to goad him into responding. After a few months of that, however, the letters had become more of a recital of news about what was happening in the world. It was different from reading the paper, though, because it was all from Potter’s perspective, and Potter had included a lot of his personal thoughts on the subjects he spoke of, rather than merely reporting facts. He had also, seemingly, begun to regard Draco... as a friend. He had shared intimate details, fears, wants, regrets, you name it.

And Draco, had never written him back.

He grit his teeth now, thinking about it. Kicking himself. The letters had helped him. So much. Though, he hated to admit this, and so had spent most of his time pretending the letters annoyed him, but he had no audience to perform for, so eventually, and slowly, he had dropped the facade. The letters from Potter had been his life line, keeping him sane and grounded. Thinking back, he was sure he would have gone mad without them, just as Potter had predicted.

But he couldn’t have written back. If he had, it would have shown that he had some hope for getting out of there, and he just refused point blank to have that sort of nonsense going on in his brain. He was a death eater. He was responsible for the murder of Albus Dumbledore. He had almost been responsible for the death of Harry Potter on multiple occasions, and consequently could have plunged the entire world into an eternity of darkness.

He deserved this fate.

He didn’t deserve hope.

Furthermore, he didn’t deserve friendship. And certainly not from Harry Potter.

But he did want to apologize. Now that he was out, Potter deserved an explanation.

He supposed he was reading the letters to get up the nerve to request the meeting with Potter. He considered sending the message now, but dug back into the stack of letters.

“One more,” he breathed.

—

11 September 1998

Dear Malfoy,

I’m officially an Auror now! Ron is too. Though, I haven’t yet gained the ability to edit Azkaban visitor lists (hint hint, that should be coming soon) I still kind of can’t believe we were able to simply step into these positions without finishing our last year of school.

Hermione went back, of course, she loves school too much to pass it up and she’s being all high and mighty about doing things the “proper way” rather than buying into everyone fawning all over us and thinking everything we do is perfect. She wants to feel like she earned it. I’m sure that’s a trait you can appreciate, Malfoy.

You know, sometimes I think if it weren’t for your horrible prejudice around blood status, and your general personality, that you and Hermione would have gotten on. You’re both ridiculously competitive and brainy, you care about school more than most, and you’re stubborn and proud beyond reason.
Alas, you were an incredible arse, so we shall never know if you would have been friends.

You know what though? You always got on my case about how perfect and amazing everyone thought I was. The Chosen One, and all that. And the thing was... I bloody well agreed with you! It was utter nonsense from the word go. I mean truly, can you imagine what it was like for me to be told on my 11th birthday that not only was I a wizard but that I was one of the most famous wizards in the world? Nonsense. A fever dream, at best. I thought it was just as bloody ridiculous as you did.

It took seven years for me to understand it fully and even now I think the part where people fall all over themselves and want my autograph is rubbish.

When they talk to me, it’s like they’re talking through me, as if I’m not really there. They are having their own personal experience of the IDEA of me, and they think they know everything about me, but they know next to nothing.

I’m just a concept to them, and they want to be as close to this concept as possible, so as to increase their own sense of being an interesting concept to others. Isn’t that depressing? I think so.

I know I’m being too candid and will regret saying this, Malfoy, but I’m finding life to be fairly lonely these days. There are so few people around me who aren’t blowing smoke up my arse every third sentence that it makes me think if you were out of that hole we could actually be friends and I could get some semblance of normalcy from you. You of all people would never blow anything anywhere near my... ok I’m regretting this sentence, you know what I mean. All I’m saying is, I think I’d find your brutal honesty refreshing given the load of tosh I’m putting up with from most people most of the time.

You could write me back one of these days you know. Perhaps provide me with some insulting jab or another? I could really use it out here.

Or, you can continue your stubborn streak. Suit yourself, I’m not bothered. Like I said, this is mutually beneficial. I’m having the time of my life having a one sided conversation with you to be honest!

Perhaps I’ll save and compile all these notes into some publishable work. “Letters to Malfoy” - Imagine the cover art! You all sudden and sulking in your cell, but then you open one of my letters and the sun shines through your tiny cell window.

Do they even give you windows? I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been to visit you, seeing as I’m NOT ON THE VISITOR’S LIST.

In case you’re wondering, I am never letting that go. Today I’m going to see about breaking in to Gawain Robard’s desk and finding out where those lists are kept.

Until next time...

Potter

Potter never managed to make the list and Draco never really considered adding him. It was strange, he did want Potter to come, especially as the letters went on and got more and more personal. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to allow for the visitation. It had been incredibly odd to him, but he’d actually begun to like Potter. The fact that it was a one-sided conversation had made it easier for him to listen, to understand. Though, understanding Harry Potter had never been high on his personal priorities list, he had to admit. Still, it was a welcome reprieve from the dark inner-workings of his mind.
No, he simply could not want Potter to come and visit. He was trying to accept his fate and do his penance in peace, not get his hopes up that he could have some new life outside of the hell he’d been living inside of for years. He just, refused to see that light. Once you saw light, it could be snuffed away in an instant. Light made a person vulnerable to loss, and Draco had had enough loss. He was done with it.

A month before his trial, Potter had written what he said would be his final letter, as he’d received word that "the prisoner was not allowed correspondence in the month leading up to his court date." Some ridiculous rule probably put forth to make sure that he’d arrive at his trial sullen, resigned, and unwilling to put up a fight, and yet HE was supposed to be the evil one.

That had been a grim month. Draco had grown accustomed to hearing from Potter every two weeks, and somehow just knowing he wouldn’t be getting the letters made every day feel exponentially more lonely. It was during this time that he had re-read the first ten or so letters over and over again, trying to re-live that initial feeling of… making a friend.

It hadn’t been the same as looking forward to a new letter, however.

One the day of the trial itself, Potter had entered the court room stony faced, and hadn’t looked over at Draco beyond one glance as he entered the room. Draco wondered whether he was cross with him for not answering the letters and not allowing him to visit. ... Or perhaps he just didn’t want the Wizengamot to know how close they’d become.

“They?” he’d thought to himself as he sat in his iron cage in the middle of the court room. Was there a “they” if he’d never answered one blasted letter? He had felt an extreme surge of guilt and self-loathing as Potter had completed his testimony and walked out to the court room without looking at him.

And now here he sat, post-release and free to do as he pleased, but not until he’d got this guilt off his chest. He steeled himself and took out his wand… it was time to do it.

The dingy pub was mostly empty but for a few balmy old men at the bar and a couple in a booth across the way. Still, he couldn’t chance it.

He closed his eyes and murmured an incantation. Instantly, every person in the pub turned their heads away from him so that his path was clear. It wasn’t dark magic, just old magic, like a useful remedy long forgotten. While their eyes were averted, he cast a patronus which zoomed through the door of the pub, and then with a casual flick of his wand he released the pub-goers.

It was over an hour before Potter appeared, and Draco wondered if he was receiving payback for not answering the letters, though it was feeble payback if so. _He ought to have just stood me up altogether_, he thought.

Draco remembered, however, that Potter was too decent to pull a stunt like that. So, in he walked.

He looked the same, but older and more... solid. It seemed that taking up the role of Auror had stricken him of his last vestiges of schoolboy innocence. Or perhaps the war itself had already taken care of that.

Draco stood and Potter spotted him at the back of the room. They walked toward each other and met in the middle of the room, both faces impassive and not giving anything away. Draco stuck out his hand and said in solemn greeting, “Potter.”

Potter looked down at the hand and back up at Draco and cried, “Two years of letters and all I get is
‘Potter’?!’ He looked cross for a moment but then his face broke into a wide grin. He shoved Draco's hand aside and then did something that almost made Draco shout out, he hugged him and said, “how are you ya bastard?”

Draco awkwardly patted his back, truly befuddled.

“Oh are you a back patter, then?” He asked as he pulled back out of the hug, “I should have known. Just a bit of love-etiquette, Malfoy, people prefer a steady hand to a prissy pat, it lets them know you actually care.”

“Love-etiquette?”

“Yea. You know, that ability that some humans have. I mean, not you of course but some. I think your Mum possesses it somewhere beneath that scowling face.”

“Watch it, Potter, that’s my Mum y-“

Potter put his hand on Draco’s shoulder and said, “yeah yeah your Mum is a special goddess woman and how dare I say whatever against her I’m an uncultured swine, I know the spiel Malfoy, can we skip the vitriol and enjoy a pint or something?” Potter looked around, and spotting the bartender said, “Ah!” and walked off to look at the beer selection.

Draco followed him, in a state of utter shock at the reality of the scene before him, so counter to anything he had been expecting. He joined Potter at the bar and ordered a muggle whiskey, while Potter selected a local brew. Together, they ventured back to Draco’s booth.

Potter spotted the letters on the table and cried, “journeying down memory lane I see!”

They both slid into the booth. “What’s the plan, are we going to go one by one so that you can properly respond to me directly or?”

“Potter, stop.”

“Stop...?”

“Stop being so bloody jovial with me.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because I bloody well deserve none of it after ignoring you for nearly two years, that’s what I asked you here to tell you and then you walk in and give me a hug and act like nothing has happened.”

“Nothing HAS happened, Malfoy.”

They stared at each other, but Draco broke first.

“Okay but how is it that you’ve gone all this time writing to me, requesting to visit, being ignored, yet writing still, as well as showing up at my trial? I know you consider yourself some Saint but this is a lot even for you.”

Potter regarded him concernedly for a long moment, then said incredulously, “Wow. You really don’t get it do you, Malfoy?”

“Get what.” He spat, with unintended force.

“You really don’t,” he said, and he looked sad.
“Potter if you keep looking at me like that I’m going to-“

“You are forgiven, Malfoy.”

“I’m- what?”

“For-giv-en. It means, you’re okay, I’m not holding things against you, the past is just that, the past. It’s not wrong or bad, it just is. Forgiven,” he finished, and took a sip of his beer.

Draco stared, incredulous as Potter had just been.

“But how-“ he began, with a pained expression.

“Easy! I made a choice,” Potter stated eagerly, as though he had been waiting for a chance to answer this question.

When Draco looked confused, Potter looked around, took a deep breath, and began to explain.

“I decided that forgiveness was preferable to anything else. I realized that being mad at you and hating you never did me any good, it was a childish error that I wish I could take back. In the wake of losing so many people I cared about. In losing my life as I knew it -quite literally- yea, I came to the not so sudden realization that time is short in this world and you can’t spend the entire time being pissed off, that’s all Tom Riddle ever did and I have spent my magical life up until this point proving that I am not like him, so why stop now that he’s dead?”

Draco considered this for a while, playing with a drip of whiskey that had pooled on the table.

“Well okay, I can understand that that’s what had you reach out but... you’re not mad I ignored you?”

Potter looked Draco in the eye and held his gaze steadily, “You never ignored me.”

Draco blinked.

Potter motioned down to the letters. “Does this look like ignoring?”

Draco stared at the letters, “but, I never answered them...”

“You also never threw them away or wrote to tell me to bugger off. In fact, it looks as if some of them are worn over from re-use, so truly, you did the opposite of ignoring me.”

“But you couldn’t have known that.”

“I didn’t know, but I hoped.”

Draco rolled his eyes.

“I trusted,” Potter added.

“Oh since when did I give you any reason to trust me, Potter?”

“You gave me plenty but that’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying I trusted myself.”

Draco scowled, and slowly said, “Ok I’ll bite. What are you on about?”

Potter took a deep breath, looking down at his drink with a sigh before looking back up at Draco.
“I had a sense somewhere inside me that you were actually a decent person, so I simply acted as such. I decided that you deserved company in that horrible place. I chose to reach out and be there for you because I knew in MY gut that it was the best course of action. From there, whatever you chose to do with it was up to you, but I was going to do what I saw fit regardless.”

Draco nodded. “I suppose I can understand that, though I still think you’re barking,” and he took a sip of his whiskey and began coughing and retching.

“I wouldn’t expect you to think any differently,” Potter said with a smirk, as he watched Draco struggle to assimilate to muggle whiskey over firewhiskey, “so, can we see about this whole being friends business?”

—

*Present Day*

Hermione was gripping the back of her head where the heavy wooden door of the Delacour library had just made swift contact, pain radiating down her spine. She’d been shoved forward right into Malfoy’s arms, as though that had been her intended destination in the first place and fate just wanted to hurry things along. Had it not been her intended destination, though?

She wished fate would have had more patience so she could’ve had some hope of savoring the moment. As she breathed sharply into his chest, her senses flooded with the smell of him. She couldn’t place the name of the scent itself, but could feel the intoxicating effect of it going in through her nose and swirling around inside her, landing in spirals around her collarbones and causing her to shudder and let out a small, yearning sigh before her focus was back on the room. A sudden jerk of panic convulsed through her entire body, and she shot straight up when she heard Malfoy calmly say, “Evening, Potter.”

She spun around and saw her best friend standing there, lower half still outside the room, upper half leaning haphazardly inside, having just wrenched the door open and then been frozen still by the sight that met his eyes.

“Herm-Malfoy!” he sputtered, looking aghast.

“Gesundheit,” replied Malfoy coolly, arms still wrapped around Hermione.

Realizing how this must look, Hermione searched for any number of explanations to throw at Harry, but instead she just opened her mouth and emitted a few strangled squeaks.

Releasing his arms from their wrapped position and using them to steady Hermione where she stood, Malfoy looked at her and said, “Oh dear, I think you’ve broken her Potter.”

Harry stepped fully into the room, the din of the party growing louder momentarily until he clicked the door shut behind him.

“Hermione I am so sorry! Someone told me they’d seen you run in here, but I didn't think you’d be right there, are you okay?” he asked with rushed concern.

“I suspect I will live,” she said with a sheepish smirk. He grinned back at her, then turned his attention to the man standing next to her, his smile disappearing.

“As for you,” he said in a low grumble, taking a step toward Malfoy.

Panic shot through Hermione, as she’d seen that look in Harry’s eye before. The last time he’d
looked at Malfoy that way, it had ended with Malfoy’s blood all over a Hogwarts bathroom floor. She intended to stand between them, but as she opened her mouth to force Harry to halt, she was astounded to see that both men were suddenly grinning at one another.

They charged forward and embraced like brothers returning home from war. It sharply reminded her of the hug shared by Sirius and Lupin in the Shrieking Shack during her third year. She bristled with the utter shock of what was happening before her eyes.

Without releasing Malfoy, Harry shouted into his shoulder, “And just where the bloody hell have you been?!”

They broke apart, and Malfoy put his hands in his pockets and looked down at his feet sheepishly. “I know. It’s been years. I’m sorry, mate, I just couldn’t do it. I had to get out of Britain.”

“And you just conveniently forgot to write me to let me know?” Harry demanded.

“I never was great at writing you, now was I?” Malfoy drawled.

Hermione looked between them, flabbergasted. This was all too much for her to take in. Were Harry and Malfoy friends?! Had they been in regular contact? What in the name of Merlin’s PANTS was going on here?

“Um, excuse me,” she said shakily, mock-waving at the pair of them, “one of you needs to start explaining how in the hell this,” she gestured frantically between them, “has come to be!”

“Long story,” they said in unison, then looked at each other, grinning.

“But what were you two doing in here?” Harry asked, suddenly suspicious, “you looked rather… cozy when I walked in.”

“When you charged in, which forced me to fall into Malfoy’s arms in a dizzy daze from my momentary head trauma!” Hermione said, sounding a bit hysterical.

“Yes but what-“ Harry started before Malfoy interrupted him.

“We were hiding from the party, Potter. Not intentionally together, but by happenstance we each individually chose this room to duck into for reprieve and we were just making conversation when you so gracefully entered,” Malfoy explained calmly.

He was extremely good with words under pressure, she noted. He didn’t seem shaken in the least. He didn’t seem to be having a hard time concealing the fact that just before Harry had burst through the door, he’d been about to kiss her. She was sure of it.

Or was she? Maybe she’d mis-read that, because he couldn’t be this unaffected after being caught the way they had been. Could he? Her head throbbed as Harry examined the room and spoke again.

“Right. Well. Leave it to both of you to select a library, I suppose.”

Malfoy chuckled cooly, but Hermione just stared, transfixed by the sight of the two of them getting along. It was simply too much to take in.

“Hermione, have you been crying?” he asked, stepping closer to her and scrutinizing her face.

“Yes a- a bit,” she said, nervously wiping her face where the tears had largely gone dry, leaving puffy redness behind.
Harry stared at her for a long moment.

“Was it Ron?” he asked solemnly.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Harry, I’ll just get all worked up again and I already feel like I’ve been run over by an emotional truck this evening so if you would, please don’t ask me to explain.”

“Very well,” Harry said gently, turning to Malfoy, “and you were, what? A shoulder to cry on?”

“More like in front of rather than on, but I did provide a handkerchief.”

“That’s good form, Malfoy, seems you did glean something from my love-etiquette lessons after all.” Malfoy scoffed and looked away, but playfully.

“You and your bloody lessons, why did I ever agree to that?”

“Because you were a poor lonesome sod with no friends and a huge guilt complex and I was willing to enjoy your company regardless.”

“Fair point, Potter, but-” Malfoy began, but Hermione moved to stand between them.

“Okay WHAT in the blazes is going on here, you two aren’t allowed to speak to one another again tonight until you explain to me how you have apparently become friends, and- and- why?! No but start with how! In particular, how did I not know?!?” she directed this mainly at Harry. Harry whom she had been close with since forever and who she scarcely believed had time or energy to maintain some secret friendship with Draco Malfoy for five years without her, or anyone else for that matter, noticing.

Harry looked at Malfoy with a mischievous grin playing at the corners of his mouth and said, “Do you want to tell it or shall I?”
The Whole Scoop

Chapter Summary

Hermione learns how Malfoy and Harry came to be friends, and we receive a visit from a not so welcome party guest to spice things up!

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the wonderful comments! I love hearing your thoughts, they always spark new ideas for me so thank you and keep them coming!

“You tell it Potter, I enjoy hearing things from a bright-eyed perspective, and I must confess the view from where I’ve been sitting lately has been rather gray,” Draco said, as he walked over to his selected couch and plopped down lazily. Potter followed and he and Granger took seats in opposite armchairs, their small personal reading lamps shone instantly, alight from their presence.

Potter began, “After the war was over and the Malfoy’s had been carted off to Azkaban, do you remember, I spent a fair amount of time writing letters?”

Granger’s eyes brightened, “The extra parchment and quills you asked for when we were just back at the burrow after cleaning up Hogwarts! Yes of course, and you told us that you were writing to various families of the fallen to thank them for their loved one’s services and express your condolences.”

Potter turned scarlet, “Yea I didn’t actually do that, I mean, I did some but after a while it grew tiresome writing the same messages over and over again, and I had something else on my mind.”

“Go on,” she said, a touch of judgement in her voice.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about Malfoy-“

“Not… in the romantic sense of course,” Draco interjected.

“Yes right, I think Hermione is aware that I am not telling her our love story, Malfoy. Are you sure you want me to tell it or shall I let you?”

Draco shook his head and waved his hand for Potter to continue.

“Right then. As I was saying, I couldn’t get him out of my head. Something just wasn’t sitting right with me about him being in Azkaban. The circumstances are different, but it felt to me like Stan Shunpike all over again.”

Draco interrupted, “That pimple faced simpleton who worked on that ridiculous night bus? How on earth are you lumping me in with that git?”

Harry didn’t stop, but rose his voice in order to indicate that Draco should be quiet, and to great
effect. “Stan had been imperioused to do Voldemort’s bidding, and while I knew Malfoy had not been imperioused, I knew he’d been forced in other ways, and in much more calculated, manipulative and deep rooting ways, which I believed could do a great deal of harm to his psyche in the long run. And in the meantime, him being locked up was messing with mine.”

“But Harry, I don’t understand,” Hermione said gently, “of all people to have sympathy for at that time, why,” she paused and looked over at Draco before finishing with, “why?”

“Honestly Hermione I can’t give you a logical answer, it was just my overwhelming intuitive response to the situation and I had to follow it. I’d just spent the last few years along side you trying to get straight my own... convictions. I spose the year we spent hunting horcruxes changed the way I listen to myself, which made the choice easy.”

“But you were always fast to act on your instincts Harry, that’s not new.”

“It was just... different. That’s all I can say.”

Hermione thought for a moment, hand on her chin.

“But if you were so sure about it, then why didn’t you tell us?”

“I dunno, at first I guess I was worried you would try to stop me. Then after it had gone on for a while, it seemed natural to let it go on some more. Just became a habit I suppose.”

“Fair enough, go on, how did this Frienassance begin?”

Potter stared at her confusedly for a beat, before Draco cut in.

“That’s clever, Granger, what you did with the words there. Smoshing them together like that to form one larger word with a new meaning, I enjoy that.”

Now Potter stared at him with the same confused expression.

Draco turned to him and explained, “Friend and Renaissance. A frienassance!” he said jovially.

She looked at Draco, bemused, “I stole that from a TV show, I can’t take credit.”

“From a what?” Draco inquired.

“Nothing, I’ll tell you later, or probably never. You were saying, Harry?”

Potter looked back and forth between the two of them before his eyes settled on Hermione. “Actually you were saying, but I’ll go on.”

Granger rolled her eyes and lounged back in her chair.

“I wrote to Malfoy in Azkaban and let him know that I wanted to visit him. That I thought it was unjust that he was in there, and that I was trying to work out a way of having him released.”

Granger sat forward, alert.

“So you’d been going to visit him all that time? Before the trial? I suppose I was busy with school that first year so I easily could have missed it, but the second year...”

Potter was shaking his head, “I never went to visit.”
She looked back and forth between the two of them, confused.

“Never? But then how-“

“He wouldn’t put me on his approved visitors list, the stubborn git, so I just kept writing to him. Once a fortnight.”

“Once a Fortnight. That’s the title of mine and Potter’s love story, Granger, in case you were wondering.”

She looked over at Draco and he raised his eyebrows a few times, grinning. Potter threw him a disgusted glare.

“What?! You wanted to call it ‘Letters to Malfoy.’ That’s rubbish, mine is much better” Draco said with a mock pout. Granger giggled, but then put her fingers to her lips and whispered, “sorry,” eyeing Potter warily.

“Actually Malfoy, I’m going to call it ‘Harry Potter and the Stubborn Git’ I think that’s more accurate than either of the others.”

Malfoy grimaced at him un-menacingly. Harry turned his attention back to Hermione.

“Right. So anyway... I wrote him every two weeks for the entirety of his imprisonment.”

“So you two became pen friends. Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter, pen friends! Now that’s a phrase I truly never thought I’d hear,” she said in a satisfied, cheery tone.

“Well, it was more like pen friend, you see he never wrote me back,” Harry confessed.

The smirk Draco had been wearing since the start of this retelling vanished, and he avoided looking at Hermione.

“Wait, WHAT?” Hermione demanded, “you are telling me that you wrote him once every fortnight for nearly two years and never once heard back?”

Potter shook his head, “never once.”

He glanced over and saw that Draco had gone into thought, so he added, “I think that similarly to my habit of not telling anyone I was in touch with him, he formed a habit of not answering me and then stuck to it. We’re actually both stubborn and stupid in quite the same way.”

Draco’s expression softened, and he changed a glance at the two of them.

”Actually Potter that’s exactly it, now that you mention it. Still feel stupid for never answering you.”

”Like I told you, it grew -rather quickly- to a point where I wasn’t expecting anything in return.”

”And yet you kept writing?!” she asked incredulously. Harry turned to her and nodded.

”Why?!“ she nearly screamed.

”Honestly Hermione, it helped me. I could say I was doing it because I knew Malfoy needed a friend and I suspected he was reading all of my letters and couldn’t let go of his stubborn pride enough to admit it.”

“Hey, watch it, Potter. I gave you leave to tell the story, I didn’t give permission for personal attacks
on my character.”

"Oh relax Malfoy, would you look at the company you’re in currently, I think we’ve all but exclusively waged personal attacks on one another as our main form of conversation for nearly our entire acquaintance, what does it matter?"

Draco slumped back onto his couch and mumbled incoherently to himself, but did not argue.

"As I was saying, it helped me to write to him. There was a big part of me that needed a friend too.”

When Hermione opened her mouth to protest, he raised a hand, “I know what you’re going to say, but think about this. You, me and Ron were war heroes. We hardly had any time alone like we used to. We were constantly moving around, helping relief efforts, comforting loved ones, dealing with our own grief over Remus and Fred and Tonks... we weren’t the same as before. And then you went back to Hogwarts and Ron and I got ministry jobs at a moment’s notice and it was like... it was like suddenly we’d grown up and lost something. Do you know what I mean?"

There was a long pause. Hermione’s voice was shaky when she finally spoke, “Yes. I do.”

Harry nodded, indicating that he understood whatever she was thinking.

Draco was glad he’d asked Potter to tell the story because this was a bit he’d not heard before, despite the volume of letters Potter had sent him in which he divulged all manner of personal detail.

"And so, Hermione, I took up a new habit of writing letters to this git, and I don’t know... I guess feeling some connection with that version of us that had just arrived at Hogwarts with nothing but wonder and possibility ahead. Schoolyard bully or not, he had been a part of that for me, and I needed that connection.”

Hermione nodded again, and a small tear left her eye. She tried to wipe it away unnotice by the other two, but to no avail.

“So the rest of the story is less eventful. Malfoy got out, we met for a drink, and then, for a while we... well we saw each other fairly regularly for a time. That is, until he ran away and didn’t tell me when or where he’d be going,” he eyed Malfoy warily, “Still hasn’t told me where he went, actually. And that’s where you came in, Hermione.”

“Well actually, no. Granger and I were together earlier today,” Draco muttered automatically, and apparently accidentally because his face flushed.

“You- What?” Potter sputtered.

“Well I wouldn’t quite put it that way, Malfoy, you make it sound as though we were... that it was significant,” she blushed and turned to Potter, “we merely ran into each other.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Potter said with a slightly raised voice.

She glared back at him, shoulders tense, breath held.

“Right. I’ve no room to talk, none whatsoever.”

She released her breath.

“So was all of this why you were so insistent upon speaking at his trial, Harry?” she asked, still trying to grasp the full scope of what had transpired between them.
“Me? Insistent? I’d have characterized you that way, personally, I was merely decided.”

Granger blushed again and glanced at Draco, then at the floor. She spoke with rapid pace.

“I just thought that the same testimony you could give would hold a bit more weight coming from a-
coming from me. I thought I would make your efforts more effective.”

Harry stared at her, a vacant expression on his face, and then let his eyes drift momentarily over to
Draco, who was wearing a sheepish smile and was suddenly very interested in the book open next to
him on the couch.

“Okaaaay, is there someth-“ Harry began, but just at that moment, the library door sprang open, and
there stood Ron Weasley.

—

Hermione was torn between rage and relief. On the one hand, how dare he barge in here, on the
other, thank Merlin he had or this conversation may have gotten uncomfortable.

She hadn’t realized that Harry’s entrance had broken all the charms on the room, most likely due to
the enormous shock she’d been processing of finding out that she wasn’t the only one who’d had a
change of heart about Draco Malfoy.

Ron stumbled into the room mumbling a strangled, “Mione?” and allowing the door to swing wide
open until it hit the wall with a dull thunk and rebounded slowly back toward him. His silhouette in
the doorway swayed on the spot.

Malfoy and Harry rose from their seats as if being acted upon by a spell. Ron didn’t seem to see
them, he turned to stare at the door he’d just pushed open and said, “Mione ahm suhree,” followed
by a gasping squeaking sob.

Hermione let out a small gasp. She hadn’t actually heard Ron break down over their situation before,
apart from being whiney and indignant. The fact that he was barging in here filled her with anger,
but the tone of his voice activated something inside of her. Was it compassion? Or perhaps pity.

“Ron you’re drunk,” Harry stated firmly.

Ron dragged his head around toward Harry and stared with a grimace. “Whoosat? Whoosere?” he
slurred in Harry’s general direction.

“Oh just two blokes you’re not likely to get past, and certainly not if your aim is to further injure and
humiliate a woman worth ten of you, Weasley.”

Hermione turned to look at Malfoy, shock and gratitude flooding through every cell of her body in a
sweeping whoosh. Malfoy’s eyes were set, however, on Ron, whose sudden appearance seemed to
have activated a side of him that she had only ever been on the receiving end of before.

Ron’s swaying stilled. He’d seemed to go rigid, the sound of Malfoy’s voice acting on him like an
incantation. He squinted through the darkness and said in a would-be threatening tone, “Mayfoo
Dralcoy.”

Malfoy and Harry turned to look at one another briefly. Then, having come quickly to a silent
decision, they walked forward in unison, each grabbing Ron by an arm and escorting him out of the
room. Hermione followed.
They led him toward the entrance to get him some air, breezing past crowds of greedily gawping onlookers. Hermione supposed that the site of the “Golden Trio” now joined by Draco Malfoy must be a startling and difficult one to process. She didn’t think she’d processed it yet herself, come to think of it.

They approached the entryway, and Hermione felt a familiar stab of shock and anger flood her system as she heard the sound of a photographer’s bulb flash somewhere off to her right.

“Now just what do we have here, Bozo?” the dulcet tones of Rita Skeeter rang unceremoniously through the crowded foyer. Hermione turned, now shaking with rage, to see Rita standing there with a simpering smile on her impossibly smug face, short bumbling -yet somehow nimble and quick-photographer in tow, as ever.

Malfoy and Harry paused just as they were reaching the exit and turned to look back, Ron mostly slumped down onto the floor, clearly not having maintained any semblance of the bravado that his voice had attempted to insinuate.

“What delectable goodies have my prized Golden Trio brought to the party for me this evening?” she cooed, and then something, or someone, rather, caught her eye.

Her eyes fixed on Malfoy, a familiar greedy glint flashed in them and she said, “Well if that isn’t... upon my word, is that you my sneaky little Slytherin?”

Malfoy, still holding Ron’s right arm, nodded solemnly and muttered an exhausted, “Ms. Skeeter.”

“But we haven’t seen you for just AGES, darling Draco, and right in the prime eligible bachelor time for you! Is this where you’ve been hiding or is this simply the place you’ve chosen for your redemption and re-entry into society? My rabid readers want to know and I dare say you have kept them waiting quite long enough! That handsome face is simply begging to be on the front cover of Witch Weekly, and we should canvas your rise and fall and rise again story in the Prophet straight away! Once you’ve discarded that drunken Weasley would you honor me with an interview dear Draco? For old times sake?” Her eyelashes fluttered ominously.

Malfoy had been staring at the floor, enduring this speech from Rita with what looked like a barely containable rage. Hermione noticed that his breathing had become ragged, and there was something else mingling with his anger that looked oddly (for him) like fear. Hermione could not stand to see that look in his eyes, she had to do something.

“Oh Rita!” she called in a falsely pleasant tone, “I believe the story you are looking for is right over here.”

Rita snapped her head around to glare at Hermione. “That’s a nice try, Princess, but I hardly think your husband getting drunk at a high society party rates higher than a Malfoy newly in our midst, especially given the fact that it’s...” she glanced over at Ron’s limp form, “quite a common occurrence,” she finished with condescending warmth.

Hermione’s blood boiled, but she took a deep, shuddering breath and continued on.

“Well, what if this time his drunken stupor was due to the fact that he not only cheated on his wife but was also expecting a child with the cheating party?”

Malfoy and Harry’s jaws dropped in unison, and the lingering crowd who were close enough to hear Hermione’s offering gasped. Rita seemed to have gone into shock, but recovered herself quickly. “What’s the catch?”
Hermione steeled herself, getting close enough to Rita so that no one else could hear.

”You do not breathe a word about Draco Malfoy being here this evening. Or anywhere for that matter until he tells you that you may. Understood?”

Rita’s disdainful expression said all there was to say. Hermione stepped closer, not sure what was coming over her. She was now whispering directly into Rita’s ear.

”And if you break that promise, you and I both know the damage I can inflict upon your life, and that I will not hesitate to do so.”

Hermione pulled away and gave Rita a broad false smile.

Rita regarded her with a mixture of loathing and respect.

“Well Princess, I’d say you’ve got yourself a deal. Know somewhere quiet we can speak?”

Hermione nodded and began leading Rita to the library she’d just vacated. She chanced a glance back at Malfoy, whose jaw still hung open, fear gone from his expression and replaced with something she had never seen on his countenance before. Not having time to think on it, she closed the door of the library and sat down for her first personally agreed upon interview with Rita Skeeter.
Harry let out a low whistle and shifted his grip on Ron’s arm to make it more secure. They stood in the grand entrance hall having just watched Rita Skeeter vanish into the library, surely ready to grill Hermione to within an inch of her life.

“I… don’t have words for what I just witnessed,” Draco said, still staring at the library door, aghast.

“She just offered herself up as a sacrifice, mate,” Harry said, turning to look at Draco, “for you.”

Draco nodded slowly, “that does seem to be the case, doesn’t it?”

He swallowed. His stomach was suddenly in knots again. To say he was flabbergasted by that utterly undeserved gesture of kindness on the part of Hermione Granger would be the understatement of many centuries to come.

“Why’d she do that, Malfoy? Is- is there... er- something going on between the two of you?”

“Honestly Potter, if you had asked me that mere hours ago I would have laughed in your face, but now I’m not sure I know anything at all.”

Ron grunted and flung his right leg out, aiming at nothing in particular and moaned something incoherent. They both looked down, suddenly reminded of the fact that they were meant to be escorting an incredibly drunk Ron out of this very civilized party.

At that moment, a shock of fiery red hair came flying around the corner.

“Oh have we come to this point, then?” Ginny shouted in her brother’s general direction. She had her hands on her hips and approached them with determination, though not taking her eyes off Ron.

Glancing up at her husband briefly, she muttered, “Hello my love.”

“Darling,” he responded with a routine nod, as if this thing with Ron were a regular occurrence. Rita had implied as much.

“How are you Malfoy?” Ginny asked, looking up at him. Draco started.
“Been better, you?” Draco replied with a note of confusion in his voice at being addressed kindly by Ginny. He couldn’t remember ever being addressed by her at all. Then again, when you got to know one half of a couple, you tended to be known by both, even if unbeknownst to you.

She cocked her head to the side smirking and said, “same.”

They all looked down at the mess of a man at their feet.

“What d’you reckon? Aparate him up to his room and seal him in?” Harry asked mildly.

“Hardly a plan!” Ginny exclaimed, “What if he needs the loo and decides to ruin Appoline’s silk sheets instead?”

Harry grimaced, “Fair point, wife.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Must you have settled on that pet name? I feel you can be more creative, Harry Potter. Please don’t give me reason to feel I’ve made the wrong choice of husband.”

“I’ll work on it, Ginnybeans,” he grinned.

She turned to Draco, conspiratorially, “You know, I didn’t think it could actually get worse.”

“Ah, he’s not all bad, Weaslette. Give him some time, he’ll mature like a fine wine,” Draco said, looking proudly over at his friend.

“Weaselette, eh? Are you playing now too, Malfoy? I don’t think you really want to get into any games with me,” she was smiling but her eyes looked severe. Ginny seemed to have the ability to look angry but glad in the same moment, it must have been why people often called her “fierce” by way of compliment.

“You’re right, actually. I am quite terrified of your hexing skills. I shall henceforth abstain from all pet name games.”

Harry looked between the two of them, grinning.

“That reminds me! I owe you a nice bat bogey, Malfoy.”

“For?” he asked incredulously.

“For leaving the country without so much as a farewell owl to this poor sod,” she motioned to Harry, “he wouldn’t eat for weeks! Where on earth have you been?”

“Is that true, Potter? You love me that much?” Malfoy asked with a tone of ironic longing.

“Desperately, as I’m sure you know,” he replied, as a different voice sounded from within the foyer.

“Couldn’t possibly love him like I do, though.”

Blaise had just appeared behind Draco, his tie un-loosened and a half-drunk fire whiskey in his hand.

“Blaise Zabini, as I live and breathe,” Ginny said with disdain.

“Mrs. Potter,” he inclined his head, “Mr. Potter,” he said, repeating the motion. “And what do we have here?” he asked, looking down at Ron. “The aftermath of that raucous display earlier, no doubt?”
“Yes and Harry and I were still helping the Delacours upstairs when the fight began. We weren’t there to run interference, so now we’re a bit stuck with him I’m afraid.”

Blaise cleared his throat. “Well look,” he said, un-loosening his tie further and taking the last swig of firewhiskey, “why don’t Draco and I escort him back to my estate. We can set him up in a guest room and have my elves take care of him should he wake up. That way you all don’t need to miss your party, and we can duck out early. I’m quite sure Draco here was planning to slip away soonish anyway, not keen to be noticed by anyone of consequence, are you Draco?”

Draco made no reply or reaction to this. He was not interested in being dressed down by Blaise in public.

Ginny eyed Blaise warily. “I don’t know if I can look my mother in the eye later on tonight when her youngest son has disappeared and I’ve willingly handed him over to two former enemies, whom he no doubt regards as current enemies.”

“Enemy is a strong word, I hardly knew Weasley well enough to be called such a name,” Blaise replied easily, ”Besides, Draco was cleared of all charges, you all bloody testified for him, and I’ve been charged with nothing but being a pure blood elitist arse, which was the smallest crime on his list and I happen to be well past it by now with many regrets for my words and actions. I would imagine it took a lot more to forgive my friend here than it would take to forgive me,” he said, motioning to Draco. “It seems you have indeed forgiven him, and I reckon that that was a pretty big chasm to leap. I’m like a... a brook or a small shallow river compared him!”

Draco shook his head, looking tired. “This is my favorite conversation so far this evening,” he drawled.

“Really?!” Blaise asked, surprised.

“No,” Malfoy retorted.

Ginny was still looking unsure. Draco thought her skepticism was likely due to the casual manner in which Blaise delivered his argument vs the content of what he was saying. Blaise spoke of his regrets without an ounce of it in his voice. It seemed a well-rehearsed political speech versus an authentic sentiment.

“Tell you what, gorgeous,” Blaise said, “allow me to take care of this poor sod as a penance for my many misgivings. Draco can help too, since you seem to trust him at least. I’m sure he could always use a bit more penance.”

“Two years in Azkaban followed by a self-induced three year seclusion in some unidentified country isn’t enough?” Ginny asked.

“Unidentified? You're standing in it! His family vineyard is just a stones throw from here. Didn’t he tell you, Potter?” He turned to Harry. “I assume you still,” he made air quotes, “’correspond?’”

Harry shot an irritated glare over at Draco, while Draco shot a similar look toward Blaise.

“How,” Draco asked, “how do you turn literally everything into some sort of innuendo, truly your mind must be a veritable Wonderland of filth.”

Re-alerting everyone to his presence, Ron shouted, “two bacon sandwiches, Mum!” and slumped back against Harry’s leg. Blaise looked over at Ginny and raised his eyebrows imploringly.

“Oh alright,” she said, “but this doesn’t absolve all of your sins in one go.”
“Darling, if I have to spend my lifetime making it up to you, I will,” and he kissed her hand before turning to Harry, patting him on the cheek and saying, “farewell precious Potty.” Harry scowled at him.

Draco turned to Harry, “I’ll owl you in the morning Potter, we have things to discuss.”

“I will believe the owl when I see the owl, Malfoy.” Harry stated, and gave a small grin.

Then Draco and Blaise scooped Ron up by the arms and turned on the spot.

—

After levitating a slobbering Ron into a guest bed and briefing the elves on his need for hangover potions as well as containment, should he awaken, Draco and Blaise retired to the sitting room for a drink.

“Single or double? How many have you had already? I don’t need two slobbering men in my house.”

“Double. I’ve had none,” Draco replied.

“None?! What’ve you been doing this whole time? I didn’t see you anywhere when I was doing the rounds.”

“Yea, I was in the library.”

Blaise put down the firewhiskey bottle mid-pour and turned to his friend, incredulous. “THE LIBRARY?! THE LIBRARY, DRACO? Okay I am literally speechless. You are the biggest nerd in the known Universe. Open bar party with high-class French witches everywhere, and you retire to the library for some... what? French potions reading?”

“How did you know?” Draco asked.

Blaise gave him a look as if to say “come on now.”

“Really though, why did you go into the library?”

Draco put his hands over his eyes, “I went in there to avoid someone and then realized I was standing in one of the largest most opulent and impressive libraries in Europe. It made me a bit homesick for the library at Malfoy Manor, so I chose to linger for a bit, is that a crime?”

Blaise would not be distracted from the first part of Draco’s comment. “Who were you avoiding?”

Draco scoffed and looked away, “I went there expecting to avoid nearly everyone, remember? What does it matter...”

Blaise finished pouring the drinks and handed one to Draco, furrowing his brow and said, “Why won’t you tell me?”

Draco fussed with a lose thread on his robes, thinking it probably got pulled carrying Weasley away. He was determined not to answer, but for once in his life couldn’t think of a snappy retort, so he took a sip of firewhiskey instead. When he was around Blaise he might as well be translucent, Blaise never missed a thing.

Well, he had missed something earlier today, he thought. A small smirk appeared on Draco’s face as
he remembered the blustery mess Granger had been, backing away and out of his door. *Scared of him, or scared of herself?* he wondered.

Blaise was watching him closely, when suddenly his face lit up. “Who is she Draco?”

Draco still fussing with his thread said lazily, “What are you on about?”

“What? Are you in love?”

“Draco... are you in love?”

“What? What are you saying?” He really couldn’t think of anything biting to attack with, and nothing much to defend.

Blaise smacked his hand on the armchair, shouting “Draco Malfoy in love! I truly never thought I’d see the day, finally!” he put down his glass and cheered, throwing his fists in the air, “Thank Slytherin! AND his monster!”

Draco sat forward forcefully and a barrage of words left his mouth at rapid speed, "Will you calm down? I'm not in love, you have to actually know and be with a person in order to fall in love, and you know full well you’re the only person I’ve been hanging round with so you can therefore logically conclude that I am not in love nor do I intend to be any time soon,” he finished and took a deep breath.

Without missing a beat, Blaise asked, “What were you doing earlier today?”

“What?” he looked over at Blaise and saw that he had an eerie sense of forced calm in his eyes.

“Earlier today, Draco, what were you doing besides drinking wine in your skivies?”

“Why are you-“

“Well see because when I aparated to your place earlier, just as I appeared I caught sight of a muggle car on the road speeding away. I thought nothing of it but now I wonder…” he said, drawing out the last word and looking up in thought.

“Look mate, I know you’re utterly relentless when you decide to be, but I’d appreciate it if you would just drop it right now and have this not be a time you choose to be a dog with his damn bone.”

Blaise turned to him slowly and asked, “Have you been practicing your occlumency Draco?”

Draco froze. “You wouldn’t. But yes I have.”

“You know, I’ve become quite the accomplished legilimens,” he said as he stood and moved towards Draco.

“Blaise how many firewhiskeys have YOU had?”

“Just enough to do this,” and with a menacing grin, he aimed his wand right at Draco’s face and cried, “Legilimens!”

A flash of yellow light - A woman walking silhouetted in the sun - she’s suddenly close and her face is revealed - the same girl backing into a coat rack in Draco’s foyer - walking through the party arguing with Weasley in a stunning black gown - weeping on the floor of the library with Draco’s hand on her back - facing him, looking down at his lips as he takes a step toward her - falling into his arms, breathing in his scent deeply and sighing - subtly giggling at his joke to Potter - stepping closer to threaten Rita Skeeter - leaving to have an interview in the library - the door closing -
“Aaaah!” Draco was shoving Zabini across the room. Zabini collapsed onto the floor, while Draco spun around wildly, staring daggers at his friend.

“You absolute arsehole I cannot believe you did that, I should cruciate you!!”

As he got slowly up from the floor, Blaise said calmly, “you never could work that spell, mate.”

Draco scoffed and forcefully shouted, “unbelievable!” and turned away, pacing the room with his hands on his hips, simply livid.

“Remember you told me, the one time you allowed me to come visit you in Azkaban? The Dark Lord commanded you to use it on a muggle and you couldn’t work it. Makes more sense to me now I know you’re in love with Granger.”

Draco threw his glass of firewhiskey across the room and it shattered across the wall. Blaise didn’t flinch.

“I am not in love, stop fucking saying that!” He resembled a teenager having a tantrum.

“Ok but I won’t stop fucking thinkin it, you can’t control my mind Draco, I’m obviously the more proficient Legilimens.” He sat back proudly in his chair and grinned.

Draco stopped pacing and sighed, eyeing his oldest friend. If it had been anyone else in the world he would have hexed them.

Instead he asked, “So what do you know about love anyway? You’ve never been in it, to my knowledge, and you’ve not seen it in your home. Your Mum ‘mysteriously loses’ every man she marries-“

“That’s just local folklore,” Blaise said cooly. That same forced calm still enveloped him.

“Yea sure, and my mother’s a muggle born,” Draco retorted.

Blaise didn’t look at him but smiled at the joke.

“I admit I know very little about love, Draco. But I’ll tell you what I do know about…”

“What’s that?”

“Lust. Obsession. Infatuation. I can smell it from a mile away, I can always tell who’s shagging or who wants to be.”

Draco stared at him, brow furrowed, “That’s a really strange fascination, Blaise. You sound a bit mad, do you know that?”

He shrugged, “I can’t help it, it’s just a perception I’ve always had. It’s like an energy I can lock on to, especially, yet not exclusively... when I read thoughts,” he smirked up at Draco. Draco sat down in a black leather armchair, leaned his elbow on the arm rest and held the bridge of his nose in his fingers.

Speaking low, Draco asked, “What do you want me to say?”

Blaise just stared at him. Draco looked up.
“How do I reach the end of this conversation with you, Bla-”

“Have you caught some feelings for the Granger girl, Draco?” Blaise asked swiftly, then after a moment he added, “I truly wouldn’t judge you if so, she is well fit. I personally wouldn’t mind grasping handfuls of that wavy brown hair as I-”

“Don’t talk about her like that!” Draco snapped instantly.

Blaise stood and pointed down at Draco, “Ah-hah! It’s more than I suspected, it’s not some weird good girl/bad boy fantasy, you actually care for her otherwise you wouldn’t have gotten snappy over me fancying her! When did this begin? Was it back in third year when she slapped you? I knew you must like it rough, given your upbringing.”

“Wow, seriously when did you become some bloody guru, dissecting all my words and actions? You know, you and Potter would actually get on very well. You’ll both drive each other mad with the personality analysis, I’d love to watch,” Draco retorted with a faux sense of composure.

“Alright Draco, I’m dropping it,” he announced, and then theatrically mimed dropping something on the floor.

“How about you let me know when you want us to pick it back up again, alright? I’ll be here for you when you need me.” He sat back down and picked up his drink.

“Oh yes, next time I want my bloody mind invaded I’ll be sure to come right over and request an inquisition,” then he looked away and mumbled, “tosser.”

Draco sat in contemplation. He was acting a bit angrier than he was. There was a small part of him that felt relieved Blaise had read his thoughts so that he’d been able to avoid putting words to what he’d been thinking, however horribly invasive it had been. Blaise knew him uncommonly well, often better than he knew himself.

Though he thought that Blaise had picked a funny moment to give in. He had actually been about to open his mouth and concede the point Blaise had been making.

He supposed he did care about her, otherwise he wouldn’t be so worked up. When HAD it began? Draco hadn’t considered that question yet, and filed it away in his mind for the moment, more distracted by the swelling feeling in his chest at present.

He just wasn’t used to feeling this way about a person, any person, and it unnerved him. The thought that she was probably still in that library, spilling all of her personal secrets for front page news, just to save him from the same fate, it made his heart ache. He wasn’t used to feeling his heart ache. He was very interested in understanding how to make it stop.

Draco stood from his chair, downed his glass in one, put the empty on the table and said, “I’m off, then.”

Blaise watched Draco cross the room and said, “Are you at least going to tell me where you’re going?”

“Something I need to handle…” Draco mumbled as he grabbed a handful of flu powder. He faced the mantle and checked that his badge was still on, then he turned the flames green and whispered the address so Blaise couldn’t hear it.

“Be safe then, darling,” Blaise called after him, just as Draco disappeared into the hearth.
Chapter Summary

In our first Hermione-centric chapter, we get the scoop on that whole scoop she gave Rita, and get to see her open the Prophet up the next morning :) Enjoy!

Chapter Notes

There's another chapter coming directly after this that's already written. It's my day off so I'm getting extra done :) The next one is a doozy so get to this one as soon as you can!!!

Gabrielle Delacour was a vision in periwinkle blue with a sheen of magical light cascading behind her as she stepped out onto the balcony at the top of the large staircase. The high-ceilinged ornate room was beautiful on its own, yet its beauty had been magically amplified somehow. Hermione had heard of witches with Veela blood being able to transfer their magical allure to physical objects and locations for a period of time, and she wondered if that was the case here. It was a desperately enchanting scene.

Having just wrenched herself away from Rita Skeeter for what had been a most painfully intrusive interview, she now joined the throng that had been awaiting Gabrielle’s entrance. Mademoiselle and Monsieur Delacour were standing at the foot of the stairs, beaming up at their beautiful daughter. Next to them stood Bill and Fleur with looks of equal admiration on their faces, three year old Victoire at their side.

A portly man in a French army uniform stood on the opposite side of the room and announced, “Ladies and gentleman! It is my distinct pleasure to present to you, Miss Gabrielle Apolline Delacour!” The crowd cheered adoringly. Hermione glanced around, smiling at the level of joy in the room, then looked up at Gabrielle. For all that she had complained about the hassle of having this party, Gabrielle truly looked to be enjoying this moment as she descended the stairs, a pair of blue-white magical doves holding up the back of her ball gown as she walked. She would be dancing first with her father, who would then proceed to pass her hand to the first eligible young man in the room who offered. It was an old tradition, participated in mostly out of loyalty and nostalgia. Hermione knew the Delacours fairly well, and while they enjoyed a spectacle, they truly didn’t mind who their daughters chose to marry, so long as they were fantastically in love. Hermione smiled to herself as she watched Gabrielle begin to dance with her Father. Her heart sank a bit, as she began missing her own.

She was snapped out of her reverie by the sound of camera flashes off to her left. Bozo was lifting his camera high into the air, working to get all the right angles. Rita, however, was nowhere to be found. Hermione was extremely puzzled by this absence. Had she gone back to her office to immediately put her story to print? The horrible hag! Not even staying to cover Gabrielle’s special evening? Hermione found herself longing for the days when her life was nothing that anyone could remotely relate to as a “scoop.”
She glanced around the rest of the room and spotted Harry and Ginny standing together and also gazing wistfully at the dancing pair. She looked to their right and left, but her eyes did not fall upon who they were searching for. Had he gone? He must have done, after that scene with Skeeter.

Hermione hadn’t known what had come over her. She had noticed a glimmer of fear in Malfoy’s eyes which she had only ever seen before on the day when Katie Bell came back from St Mungos. He had been responsible for the cursed necklace that she had touched, and rather than being proud of it, he had turned ashen and run from the room. Harry had caught him in the bathroom, splashing water on his face and… sobbing. It was a difficult thing to imagine, though she knew Harry wouldn’t have made it up. That day, he’d been fearing for his life. He’d looked that same way tonight, and it had acted upon her like a spell.

He had surprised her by standing up to Ron on her behalf. The way he’d stood up alongside Harry and protected her… grateful didn’t begin to describe her feeling. It was also quite surreal, given that he, Malfoy, had been the one attacking her for most of her magical life. The change in his persona was giving her whiplash.

Scanning the room once more to see if Malfoy had perhaps stayed and was just blending into the background, her eyes fell upon Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. They still looked blissfully unaware of their youngest son’s plight, or else were hiding it well. Hermione didn’t think she could handle an interaction with them, lest she fall again into a puddle of tears. She wanted to prolong the time before having that conversation as long as possible. Looking around for someone else to talk to, her gaze fell immediately upon…

“Neville!”

He spun around, Hannah Abbott on his arm looking lovely in an elegant silver a-line gown. Hannah’s eye’s lit up, “Hermione!” She flew forward and gave her a hug.

“How are you feeling?!” she gasped, holding Hermione by the shoulders.

Hermione furrowed her brow, though she still had a friendly smile on her face. “Sorry, what do you-oh! Did you see that horrid display earlier with Ron?”

“No! Did Ron find out?!”

Her eyes switched focus over to Neville, who was holding his left elbow in his right hand, left hand over his face. Hermione’s eyes went a bit wide and she said, “did Ron find out what exactly Hannah?” She said each word without taking her eyes off Neville.

Hannah moved in closer, clearly missing all of Hermione’s social cues.

“I just have to tell you, Hermione, I had the biggest crush on him as well for so many years, and it was so confusing! I mean, he was vile! Yet I couldn’t help harboring this hope that somewhere underneath that surly demeanor he was actually just hurt and in need of love and comfort, you know?”

“Hannah will you excuse us for a moment?” She didn’t even wait for a reply as she turned sharply and grabbed Neville by the ear, dragging him out of the ballroom and into an adjacent corridor.

“Aaah aah owwww Hermione! Let me go, I’ll come quietly!” She spun him around and let go of his ear.

“I’m sorry Hermione, I didn’t tell anyone but Hannah I swear! She was there when I got back and I’m total crap at lying so I just blurted everything out as soon as she asked!”
“Oh I see, so you won’t be mad at me when I go back in there and just accidentally blurt out that you had a steamy affair with Pansy Pug Face Parkinson, then?”

Neville’s eyes went wide. “Hermione,” his voice was a squeak. Suddenly the confident post-war Neville faded away and she might have been speaking to him in the Gryffindor common room as he attempted to stop her, Ron and Harry from going out after hours.

“Please don’t do that,” he said without breathing.

“I’m not going to Neville! I would take no pleasure in that interaction whatsoever.” She folder her arms and paced away from him a few steps, and then back.

Then, glaring at him, she asked, “and you’re sure Hannah is the only one you went blurtting things out to?”

“Ye-“ Neville began, but then looked like he’d been hit with the very same petrificus totalus that Hermione had sent his way that night in first year. For a moment they both just stood there, as he was locked in thought.

“Neville you’re scaring me,” she said with a quaver to her voice. “Whatever that is, you need to spit it out this instant!”

“May have mentioned to Malfoy-“

“WHAT?!” She was shriek-screaming now, and her eyes were about to fall out of her head for the second, third? Fourth time this evening?

“I didn’t tell him you fancy him!”

“Well what DID you say then, Neville Longbottom?!”

“I only mentioned that you had mentioned that he seemed to have changed, that’s all!”

Hermione wasn’t sure if she needed to cry or vomit.

“It wasn’t bad Hermione, I promise!”

“How did he respond to that?!”

“Uh- respond to?”

“To hearing that I had spoken to you about him, what was his reaction Neville, I need you to tell me everything as if I had been there and witnessed it myself or I will not be able to contain whatever hex occurs to my wand when I direct it at your face in about five seconds.”

Neville panicked and looked around as if the answers were in the air surrounding him. “Right yes, so I said ‘wow Hermione said you changed but I guess I had to see it for myself’ or something to that effect, and he said ‘Granger spoke to you about me?’ And I said yes and he said ‘she reckons I’ve changed?’ and that’s when it dawned on me I should have never mentioned you and so I pretended to see my Gran in need of assistance and I tore out of there!”

“Neville, your Gran isn’t even in the country!!!”

“I know!!!”

He covered his mouth, while she began pacing again and let out a strangled scream.
Hermione covered her face with her hands, “oh this is so bad.”

Neville began hyperventilating.

“Are you ok?” Hermione said, continuing to pace, only half caring to hear the answer.

Neville nodded and reached into his dress robes, pulling out a small blue bottle, uncorking it, and taking it down in one.

“Calming draft. My third one tonight.”

“You know, they lose their efficacy if you take them too often.”

Neville nodded, “I know. Better than nothing though.” He stashed the empty bottle in an inner pocket and looked up at Hermione.

“I feel horrible, Hermione. You came to me for support and the very last thing in the world I wanted to do was cause you more distress.”

She wasn’t looking at him, but had her arms casually folded and was focused at a spot on the floor to avoid his gaze.

“If it helps... I got the sense from Malfoy that he was pleased to hear your opinion of him!” he said with a hopeful cheeriness.

Hermione’s wand, now clutched in her right hand, emitted sparks, and Neville stepped back until he hit the wall.

“Of course that doesn’t help, Neville! I don’t even know if I want him to be pleased or not, this is all so confusing.”

Hermione squatted down on the floor with her head in her hands. Her thoughts weren’t even making sense anymore. Shouldn’t think straight. She needed air.

“Well then, I think I’ve done enough damage to be getting on with. I will remove myself from your company. And I’ll make sure Hannah never mentions it to you again, she already swore secrecy I think she just thought it didn’t apply to you, so I’ll make the situation perfectly clear to her.”

“Thank you.” She replied stoically, head still in her hands.

She heard his footsteps as he left the corridor at a brisk pace, and as soon as he’d gone she burst into tears. She hadn’t wanted him to leave, really. What she needed was a good strong hug. Someone to hold her in their arms and tell her this whole mess would be over soon... but it wouldn’t. In fact, it was about to get so much worse tomorrow morning when the papers would announce Ron’s exploits, and her interview with Rita would be there for everyone to see. She had shared so much of her honest hurt and pain with Rita, wanting to make the story truly worth her leaving Malfoy out of it.

That was the only redeeming part of this whole affair, that she had done him that kindness. She held that fact close to her, knowing in her gut that it was the right thing to do, similar to the way Harry had described his intuitive pull to get Malfoy out of Azkaban. There was something about it all that felt healing. It was as if they were getting to re-write a very dark history by bringing light to the present.

Of course, light and darkness needed each other in order to exist. For now, Hermione would have to
endure some more darkness just to give Malfoy a bit of her light. That was just the way it was going to be.

Deciding that she couldn’t bear another moment at the party, she cast a disillusionment charm over herself and made her way carefully out of the estate. It was easily done, most guests were in the ballroom and only the odd couple here and there threatened to cross her invisible path. Once she was outside she breathed in the cool night air deeply and removed the charm before disapparating back to her little inn. All she could think about was a long, hot bath.

Hermione woke the next morning from a fantastic dream. She couldn’t recall the details, but she felt a sense of contentment all over her body, as though she’d been held all night long by a warm, masculine presence, with an unidentifiable yet intoxicating scent that made her feel…

She turned scarlet. Some of the dream began flooding back into her memory in flashes. She dreamt that Malfoy had somehow been waiting for her when she arrived home. They’d gone to her room and he had just held her until she fell asleep, and then stayed all night long to keep her safe from her own thoughts.

She took deep breath and sighed, “wow,” her unfocused eyes staring at nothing as she idly played with the small silver heart necklace she’d forgotten to take off before falling asleep, a holiday gift from Gabrielle.

Gabrielle! She had left without even getting to see her. Her dream euphoria wore off quickly as guilt took its place. She had let her twisted love life get in the way of the reason she was in France in the first place. She would have to go back today and apologize. Perhaps the family would be getting together for a brunch today for out of town guests. She thought she remembered seeing something about that on the invitation.

She looked around the room to the stacks of papers on her desk. Ministry work, mostly, but she spotted the invitation right next to yesterday’s Prophet.

The Prophet.

Her euphoria was a long forgotten memory now, and the guilt was replaced by pure dread. Just as it washed over her there was a talon tap on her window. She padded across the room to let the owl in, offering him some treats and water for making the long journey to her here.

She wasn’t sure she wanted to unroll the paper. Carrying it back to her bed, she crawled safely under the covers as if they could shield her from embarrassment and untied the white twine bow.

She unfurled the paper and her jaw dropped to the floor.

Her face was not on the front cover.

Instead, a distinguished and extremely handsome looking Draco Malfoy in deep blue dress robes peered back at her. She placed the paper down on her lap and began to read.

“A Malfoy in Our Midst!”

*Defamed ex-death eater and acquitted former Azkaban resident Draco Malfoy has re-entered wizarding society, appearing seemingly out of the ether yesterday evening at Gabrielle Delacour’s coming out gala at the family estate in the South of France. The shockingly handsome white blond heir to the Malfoy fortune sought yours truly out personally and requested this expose in order to*
alert the general public that he is now back from a self-inflicted social seclusion in France and finally ready to move forward with his life.

We spoke about his father, Lucius Malfoy, who as we all know has garnered himself a life sentence in Azkaban, and good riddance!

“Father and I haven’t been on speaking terms since before the fall of the dark lord. What many people may not know is that my Father essentially sold me to you-know-who to do his bidding.”

Daddy issues doesn’t even begin to cover it, my rabid readers! Turn to page 3 for an in depth look at the extremely abusive Lucius/Draco relationship, the poor lad!

We also spoke about his unexpected new friendship, and this, my lovelies, is the bit that will shock your robes right off!

“It will surprise absolutely everyone to know that I now count Harry Potter as one of my very best friends, and I believe that’s a mutual sentiment. Potter was there for me when I was in Azkaban, against all of his better judgement he refused to let me rot alone. He was a constant comforting presence and I am in his debt for life as a result of what he’s done for me, not least of which was the work he did to grant me early release.”

We all know that Potter testified at Draco’s hearing, but for the full scintillating story of this unlikely duo, including an exclusive copy of an actual letter Potter sent him in Azkaban, turn to pages 4 and 5!

The juiciest topic as far as this reporter is concerned, however, is young Mr. Malfoy’s love life. He was so tight lipped about it that I will unfortunately not be directing you to a longer missive on the topic today. Rest assured, however, if there is anything to tell, this reporter will find out. As it stands, Mr. Malfoy made no indication either way that he is taken or on the prowl. My advice to witches intent on scooping up this hot prospect? Move fast. I imagine it won’t be long before we are running his wedding expose now that the cat’s out of the bag that Mr. Malfoy is back among us, and redeemed by the Boy Who Lived Twice himself!

Hermione turned the page idly, glancing at the additional article on Malfoy’s relationship with his father, as well as his friendship with Harry. The former included a photo of Draco as a small child in the what was presumably the library at Malfoy Manor. It was juxtaposed with a much more recent photo of Lucius, looking down in disdain. Their proximity made it seem like they were taken in the same moment, and indeed anyone just breezing past would view it that way. It was a well-done manipulation, even if what it depicted was accurate to the reality of the relationship.

On the following page, it seemed Bozo got a photo of Malfoy and Harry last night that mercilessly exclude Ron. Although, Hermione knew that just below the cut, both men were holding on to a drunken arm each. She wondered how Malfoy had gotten Rita to leave Ron out of the piece, but she had a suspicion that he’d made a similar deal to the one she had brokered with Rita.

Another flood of dread washed over her as she wondered why Malfoy had done this.

Had he not appreciated the gesture she’d made? Had she made him feel like some sort of charity case? Did he think she pitied him?

Because she didn’t! She was surprised even to think it, but in the last 24 hours she had grown a level of respect for Draco Malfoy that she never would have thought possible. She didn’t give Rita an article because she saw him as weak. Quite the contrary, in fact.

She had to talk to him.

She shot out of bed and began getting dressed, her stomach instantly turning to knots. What would she say?

All she knew was that it felt better to be moving than to be sitting still.
She would apparate there, her car was here and if anyone asked she could just say she was going for a walk.

She dressed quickly and met no one as she exited the inn. The people who owned the inn now were not the same ones that had been there ten years ago. They didn’t make the extra effort to wake early and provide coffee and breakfast to the guests. The place itself had lost some of the magic it held previously, as so many nostalgic places did.

Taking care to walk well past the view of any inn guests who might be looking out their windows, she ducked behind a tree and turned on the spot.
Welcome to the Carnival

Chapter Summary

You've been waiting for this. That's all I'll say.

Chapter Notes

My heart was pounding into my throat once I finished writing this, and it made me late to dinner, so pardon any typos and enjoy!

Draco opened his eyes, feeling as though he had never gone to sleep. And yet, the sun was up and cascading in through the peaked bedroom windows of his small upper-floor bedroom. Typically, after a night at a party he would have had to re-remember who he was in the morning. In this case, it felt like his brain had never turned off, and the hours had simply moved by as he watched. He hadn’t even had a chance to dread the oncoming day before it was simply… there.

He didn’t regret the Skeeter article, as he refused to gather any more regrets after he left Azkaban. When he made decisions these days, they were always from a place of pure and steady conviction. Allowing Skeeter to print his exposé would open him up to all manner of personal attack and degradation of character. He’d gone from being a ghost to being the poster child of reformed death eaters. He was grateful that the majority of wizards who would take issue with this new image he was sporting so casually were mostly behind bars, and expected to remain so. However, there were the odd few who had managed to escape capture, not to mention the hundreds on the other side who would not be so easily convinced of his belonging in their post-Voldemort world.

Honestly, he feared the latter more. Death eaters, he could handle, and especially if he kept himself close to Potter and the ministry for protection. Inside him, the true fear resided in the fact that he had just removed his mask. He would be entering this world for the first time as himself, no veil of foreboding evil to rely on. The thought made him shiver. It wasn’t that he didn’t want this, it was in fact, all he had ever wanted.

The day that he had met Harry Potter, now that was a day he regretted. He’d meant to impress Potter that day, and he’d endeavored to do so with humor, but he chose the absolutely wrong joke. Potter had been soured on him from that moment on, and just seeing the way Potter had looked back at him had caused a pain in his heart and in his stomach that Draco could feel in his body even as he lay there merely recalling the memory of it. He and Potter spoke of this during one of their post-Azkaban meetings. They had even done this incredibly cheesy thing -Potter’s idea, not Draco’s- where they re-enacted the first meeting and had it end with them as friends.

Draco rolled his eyes at the mere thought of it. Potter loved cornball stuff like that. After the war, he’d participated in a number of programs around healing and recovery from trauma. Of anyone involved, Potter certainly needed it. And apart from helping him to move forward, he’d also found it a welcome new hobby and began running seminars for families of the fallen to support in re-building wizarding society from an entirely new culture and vantage point, one person at a time. He’d had a
knack for it, and unfortunately -or fortunately- for Draco, he insisted on bringing these little activities and exercises into their meetings at the pub.

Much as he’d resisted it, Draco had benefitted greatly from those meetings. After a few months, however, the fear had begun to set in. Living in muggle London, donning muggle clothes, and generally staying away from the world he knew… it was too much longing to bear. It was like that children’s story about the brothers who meet death and are given three magical objects: the unbeatable wand, the cloak of invisibility and the resurrection stone. The one with the stone brings back his dead lover’s ghost, and then they both fall into a deep depression over not being able to fully be with one another. Eventually, the man kills himself so as to relieve the pain.

Draco wasn’t fool enough to end his life, especially after how hard he had fought to keep it, and yet he did kill a part of himself when he ran off into hiding. Staying in Britain would have been like staying with a ghost.

He wanted to tell Potter, but he was sure that if he did, Potter would find a way to change his mind. If he had told Potter, he would have regretted it.

Potter had a streak of optimism that Draco both loathed and admired. While he wanted to learn from Potter, he was also acutely aware that there were so many things the man simply did not, and could not understand about Draco’s life.

Even being with Potter at the pub that first day, Draco had felt this sense of being like a poison. Here was Potter who had just walked into death to save the world, befriending someone who did not deserve it, and Draco was supposed to just allow this? Was supposed to inflict his company upon the man and risk dragging him back into a past he had left well behind?

Draco supposed that Potter would never be fully rid of his past, whether he was in his life or not, and yet… it just felt wrong to impose his presence on Potter, or the wizarding world at large. So he had decided that it was best to disappear. He thought that perhaps there would come a day when it would make sense to return.

He certainly did not think it would be today.

He didn’t take the Prophet here, so he wouldn’t have to see the final printing this morning. It then occurred to him that he needed to owl Potter so that they could meet and he could explain all of this to him properly.

The slightly annoying thing was that Potter had already seemed to have forgiven him for it, even without the explanation. So had his “wife” - Draco chuckled to himself about Potter’s abysmal pet names, and felt comforted by the memory of Ginny speaking to him like a close companion of hers. She was actually wonderful. If he was honest, he’d always suspected as much. She had a lot of fight in her, and she had never cared who knew it. He’d often thought, back in their school days, that she would have done well in Slytherin.

Then his thoughts shifted idly to Granger. He wondered what her reaction would be this morning when she opened The Daily Prophet, and instead of her own face, saw his. He wished he could be a beetle on the wall for it, and grinned stupidly at the thought.

Blaise’s adventure into his thoughts last night had rattled him at the time, yet what seemed to have come over him since then was a sense of resolute calmness and assuredness. The ache in his heart had merely been guilt. There he was, hiding out for years like a coward. There she was, living a brave and daring life. Which one of them truly deserved to be dragged publicly through the mud? He would get it eventually, no matter what. She had fought at his trial, and fought hard. He owed her,
and what more wonderful way to repay her than to keep her scandal out of the papers permanently.

He’d struck a deal with Rita that involved no only the promise of multiple future articles, but also a large sum of gold fed to her regularly to keep the Weasley/Granger divorce cleanly out of the papers. He wasn’t sure exactly how Rita would manage that on her end, but that wasn’t his concern. She had assured him that when there was enough gold, anything could be kept from the papers. What use was his fortune anyway if he couldn’t use it for good? Not charities and things that mask inauthentic social ladder climbing and elbow rubbing, but actually helping good people.

Hermione Granger was one of those good people, and he suddenly found that he had a keen interest in making her happy.

This had the effect of also deciding something definitively for Draco: he was not like his father, in almost every possible way. He didn’t give a damn about blood status. He never truly had, it was merely a recital of his father’s words. They’d been recited so often that he’d begun to believe them. If he looked back, however, he could see moments in which he knew he wasn’t a true believer. Perhaps the most poignant was that day when Voldemort brought the muggle studies teacher, Charity Burbage, into their home and murdered her before his eyes. He knew then, he was a sheep in wolf’s clothing. And he was scared.

Then there was the incident Blaise had mentioned. He’d been taken on a mission to extricate a muggle-born witch from her parents home where she’d been hiding out. The command had been to torture the parents for no reason other than to torment the witch, but Draco had failed to perform the spell. His Aunt had always said that you have to mean the unforgivables, but when he’d arrived there and had seen the witch with muggle parents, all he’d been able to think of was Granger.

Blaise had been on to something when he’d asked how long this had been going on. Draco now wondered whether it had ever NOT been going on. From their first day in classes, he’d been fascinated with Hermione Granger. Specifically, with her intellect. All of the girls he’d grown up with had been idiots. Perfectly nice idiots, of course, but there was no intelligent conversation or talk of interesting books to be hoped for there. He found it ironic that Weasley’s little escapade had been with Astoria. Draco and Astoria had been promised to one another since birth. It was a marriage pact that she and her family made absolutely clear was null and void the moment he was placed in Azkaban.

Draco didn’t mind, it was actually wonderful news. Still, what a funny turn of events that Weasley would somehow find his way into her bed. She must truly be THAT desperate to find a pure blood, and apparently she couldn’t even go for one of the single ones. It didn’t surprise him all that much, but he had to say, he thought Astoria had more to her character than that. Then again, people change.

At that moment, a large tawny owl tapped on his bedroom window. He rose out of bed to retrieve the letter, and saw unfamiliar handwriting on the note.

Draco,

I know this is incredibly untoward, but I would like to come and speak with you.

I am in a terrible mess and in dire need of some help. I know that you must not be very happy with me, but we’ve known each other our entire lives and I have no one else to turn to. Please let me know if it would be alright to come by this morning. I am in France and can be there in a moment.

Astoria

“Huh.” he said aloud, then grabbed a quill and scribbled down a reply, reattaching it to her owl and
sending it off into the sunlight.

—

Hermione appeared with a CRACK at the edge of the vineyard. She wanted to give him somewhat of a chance to see her coming, and apparating to his front door just seemed oddly, intimate. She walked gingerly through the field, grateful that the morning chill had caused the ground to be hard and crunchy rather than soft and dust-filled. Reaching his door rather more quickly than she would in her mind’s eye, she made a polite knock. Just after she had, it occurred to her that it was quite early and he may not even be awake. She took a step back and turned around just as the front door swung open.

He was fully dressed in jeans and a white t-shirt, so obviously not still sleeping when she’d knocked. He looked spectacular in muggle clothes. He also looked shocked to see her.

“G- Granger, what are you doing here?”

_Oh bollocks this was such a mistake!_

“I apologize for the early hour and for dropping in without notice,” she said, “I wanted to come by and thank you."

He looked around distractedly. Had she interrupted something?

“Thank me?”

“Yes, I assume you had something to do with the fact that my face is not currently littered across The Daily Prophet?” she asked.

His eyes snapped to hers and he seemed to come out of the stupor he’d been in.

“Yes! Yes, of course, and of course you’re here that does make sense,” he said, almost like he was trying to convince himself.

“Can I- come in?” she asked tentatively, “Only it’s a bit chilly out here and-

“Of course!” and he backed up to let her in. As she came through the door she noticed that he had the kettle on for tea.

“This is a charming cottage, by the way, I don’t think I said so last time,” she offered as she stepped inside.

“Thanks, I think so too,” he said as he began puttering around the kitchen preparing for the tea, “though now that I’m the poster child of reformed death eaters and venturing back into society, I suppose I can leave this place fairly soon.”

“Do you want to leave this place?”

Malfoy thought for a moment, as he stared into the cabinet of mugs. He turned to face her and said, “Not really, but it’s time.”

She nodded, looking into his piercing gray eyes. “I understand.”

They stared at each other for a long moment before he shook himself, seeming to remember something urgent. He began puttering around again.
“Would you like some tea?”

“S- sure Malfoy I’d love some tea, but if I may, is there something wrong? You seem a bit… frenetic.”

He spun around and looked everywhere but at her. He seemed to be trying to decide something.

Finally he let out a deep sigh and said, “Yea I can’t do this, this is madness.”

“Oh. Oh, I. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come!”

“No no!” he said, both hands flying up towards her, “it’s not you, you’ve done absolutely nothing wrong, you’re perfect - I mean,” he put a hand to his forehead and steadied himself, “it’s just… the thing is… Astoria Greengrass is likely on her way here right now.”

Hermione’s jaw fell to the floor. She felt as though the world had been flipped on its head.

Holding back a sudden surge of rage, she managed to say, “And… and why may I ask-“

“She’s a family friend, we actually- our parents arranged for us to be married, but it was broken off when I went to prison, but that doesn’t matter, she wrote me this morning to tell me what a mess she’s in and requested an audience with me this morning so that she may ask for help. I assume money, it’s always about money, but anyway I thought it couldn’t hurt to help her and so I said yes and then you arrived at the door just after I sent my reply owl to her and that about brings you up to speed.”

Hermione was breathing very deeply, intending to steady herself.

“You allowed me to stay here for even a moment when the woman responsible for the destruction of my life as I know it is about to pop in for tea and sympathy?!”

“I know! I’m sorry, I just panicked and I hoped maybe she’d be delayed getting here and I could rush you out- no that sounds bad. Look please, go if you must, she will probably be here within minutes, I am truly sorry.”

He really looked it. Hermione was having trouble separating the number of feelings she was having in this moment. On the one hand, Malfoy who was always cool, calm and collected, was behaving like a raving lunatic, which was simply fascinating to her and she didn’t want to leave before finding out why. On the other, she absolutely, positively refused to be brought face to face with Astoria Greengrass, not today, not ever if she could help it. No, she wouldn’t be staying here another moment.

“Very well then,” she said stiffly, “enjoy your tea.”

She rose from her seat and began making her way toward the door, but could sense that Malfoy was following her.

“Hermione,” he said, at the same moment that he took her hand in his and spun her around to face him. Their faces were inches away, and he brought his other hand up to rest on her cheek. “I am really… and truly… so sorry.” His eyes bore into hers and in a wild rush she had the sensation that he wasn’t just apologizing for the present circumstance, but for everything. Everything there was in the whole wide world for him to apologize for. He’d put it all into one “sorry” - and she took a deep breath as she felt it radiate through her entire being.

Her heartbeat shot to extreme heights as he looked down at and traced his thumb across her lower
lip. She threw caution to the wind and pressed her lips against his, and it was a carnival of electricity. The hand he was holding hers with squeezed more tightly, while his other hand raked through and grasped onto her hair. She slid both of her hands up to the back of his head, and grasped his in turn. They kissed hungrily and urgently, as though they’d both found the oasis in the desert and couldn’t drink each other in fast enough.

A loud CRACK outside the cottage caused them both to separate immediately, panting. They stared at each other, eyes wide.

“What just happened?” they both breathed in unison. Then they burst out laughing, as quietly as they could.

“Draco, are you in there? Why are you in this hovel when there’s a perfectly good manor house just yards away?”

“Oh bollocks!” Hermione cried, grinning at him, “I need to go.”

“Apparate out of the upstairs bedroom so she won’t hear you go,” he said, directing her towards the staircase.

She grabbed his hand as her foot hit the first step, “Draco,” she said as she pulled him towards her, and she kissed him again. Just as she felt the carnival rides kicking in, he pulled away quickly and said, “go!” She grinned back at him as he made a small wave goodbye before turning to answer the door for Astoria Greengrass.
Not Sure What To Say

Chapter Summary

Astoria comes for a visit, in desperate need for Draco's help... apparently.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Draco put his hand on the door knob and took a deep, steadying breath. He waited for the characteristic CRACK to sound from his upper floor before twisting the knob and pulling the door towards him to reveal Astoria standing a few feet back, looking up quizzically at the little house. Her dark hair was perfectly coiffed, as usual, in a neat chignon. She wore a traditional witches dress, managing to look as though she was from a different century, white gloves and all, while still seeming “in” with today’s fashion. She was a trendsetter, never a follower. She could also be a judgmental, supercilious twat, and her comments a few minutes ago about his “hovel” were obviously no exception.

She regarded him with a confused grimace as she took him in from head to toe. Then, seeming to remember herself and the precarious circumstances under which she was there, she wiped the look of disdain from her face and said, “Hello Draco,” with a curt nod.

“Hello Astoria, you’re looking well,” he drawled, and stood back to allow her entry.

“Thank you,” she said as she walked forward. It wasn’t lost on Draco that she hadn’t returned the compliment, and he smiled to himself as she passed. He pulled the door shut as Astoria rotated her gaze from the kitchen to the sitting room in an exaggerated manner as if to say, “oh, is this all?” Then she spun around to face him while taking a deep breath as she plastered a false grin of contentment on her perfectly powdered face. “Thank you as well for agreeing to see me.”

Her letter had read as desperate and humble, yet her manner here and now was everything but. He wondered if she was simply so used to putting on airs that she was unable to embody her true feelings in anything other than writing. He certainly was no stranger to that particular affliction.

“My pleasure,” he said, only half lying. It actually was good to see her, in the way that seeing any old friend is pleasant, even if it’s at a funeral or some other such unpleasant reason for meeting. They had grown up together, and as kids he had chased her around the gardens at Malfoy Manor and gotten into all manner of trouble with her, for which their parents had scolded them harshly. They shared the experience of having cruel and unusual “caretakers” in their lives, and had both been held to a level of maturity unbefitting a typical child. They had each learned early on to play a part relentlessly, and he could only assume that she was well in character in this moment.

“Please, come sit. I’ve made tea,” he said, gesturing to the couches. She nodded and strode into his sitting room, placing herself right on the edge of one of the sofas, as if she was worried it would bite her were she to lounge into its cushions. He stifled a laugh and thought to himself that if Hermione were there she’d have rolled her eyes up and out of her own head. He had to take a deep breath at the thought of her, and he used the moments he needed to spend in the kitchen preparing the tea to think back on what had just occurred in his foyer only minutes ago.
He felt a bit dizzy at the thought of her… of re-living the electric sensation of their lips connecting. The way she’d emphatically run her fingers over the back of his head and grasped his hair in her hands.

She was heaven, there was nothing else to it.

He needed to get Astoria out of there as quickly as possible so that he could owl her and let her know his thoughts about what had just transpired. Perhaps he could go see her, and they could finish what they’d started. Or perhaps they could talk, it seemed that they had things to talk about. But also, they could finish what they’d started. He didn’t care which happened first, honestly, he just desperately wanted to be near her. To hear her, to see her, to smell her, to feel her pressed against him again-

“Draco have you gotten lost in that tiny kitchen of yours or is this some exceptionally strong tea you’re preparing?” Astoria called from the sitting room, snapping him out of his reverie.

Rather than responding, as he’d have nothing of consequence to say in reply, he grabbed up the tea tray he’d finished preparing moments ago and made his way into the sitting room. He placed the tray down on the coffee table and sat opposite her. She stared down at the tray as if waiting for something to happen.

“Please feel free to prepare it as you see fit, I’ve already had some this morning,” he said, lounging back on his sofa. Her eyes went wide for a split second before she leaned forward and began preparing her tea. He wasn’t interested in playing propriety games with her, he was doing her a courtesy today and she had no idea just how inconvenient her visit truly was.

As she took her first sip and replaced the cup on its saucer, she looked Draco straight in the eyes and said, “I’m pregnant.”

Without flinching, Draco replied, “So I hear.”

Astoria’s entire being shifted as though she’d been a marionette whose strings had been clipped. Her body, once stiff, became liquid as she gawped at him in desperation.

“What?! Where did you hear? No one is supposed to know!” her gloved hands rushed up to her cheeks and she looked about the room as if expecting to find a savior there. Draco lounged more deeply into his sofa, enjoying the sight of his stuffy friend coming undone.

“Calm down,” he said, “I overheard an argument yesterday evening between… the father, and his current wife, as it were.”

Astoria had covered her entire face in her hands and slumped forward, elbows balancing on knees. “Where did this event occur?” she asked.

“At the Delacour girl’s coming out gala,” he responded.

Still covering her face with her hands, she took a deep breath and then screamed, with considerable force. Draco couldn’t help feeling amused, even though he certainly had sympathy for her plight.

She removed her hands from her face and stared at him, as she began to sob in earnest. He rose from his seat and walked around the small table to sit beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. She leaned her head against his chest and continued to cry. It was earnest indeed, but there was still an element of withholding. It was almost as if this was as true to her own feelings she had the ability to be. Had she been alone, this was how far she would allow herself to fall apart too. He thought idly of Hermione, and how she had fully allowed herself to deconstruct before his eyes. How
unapologetically human she’d allowed herself to be. He realized that he admired that about her. He even subtly wished that he could be that transparent by choice.

“It’s all so horrible, I just can’t believe this is my current reality,” she sobbed, “I mean… he’s a cretin! A blundering moron! I can’t have his child, I shall be disgraced!” she shouted, crying even harder into his chest now. He rubbed his thumb over her shoulder by way of comforting her.

“I honestly can’t believe I’m saying this, but… he can’t be all bad Astoria,” he said stifly. She pulled away from him quickly and looked up at him wide-eyed, brow furrowed.

“But you hate him! He hates you! Everyone knows you were never friends, and you were certainly enemies, so how could you even suggest-“

“It’s just… I’ve become friends with Potter of late, and… again, I truly cannot believe the words that are about to leave my mouth, but I think that if Potter has been friends with Weasley this long, he has to be at least halfway decent.”

Astoria’s eyes went wide as possible. She threw her head back, flung both arms out in front of her and let loose an ear-splitting wail. He was violently reminded of this behavior exhibited from her 9-year-old self. Astoria could throw a tantrum in her day, and her parents had quite a time taming her. It seemed in this moment that the restraints had been released.

“Draco Malfoy I cannot believe what I am hearing, there is no way that you are in any way insinuating that I could actually BE WITH that blood traitor, are you?! Is that what you’re trying to say?!“

Draco tried to disguise his bemused expression, but to no avail. To his horror, he actually started laughing, and couldn’t stop himself. Astoria watched him, nose scrounging up in a scowl, lip quivering. The whole situation suddenly seemed so ridiculous to him that he couldn’t quite get a hold of himself. “Well apparently you WERE with him already, that part isn’t in question,” he said as he worked to quell his laughter.

“I was intoxicated! OBVIOUSLY! So was he!” she proclaimed as she stood from the couch, took a few steps forward and spun around to glare down at him, “there could be no other circumstance under which I would have accepted that horrid excuse for a man into my bed, and you should know that, Draco!”

He had managed to get his laughter under control and replied, “No, obviously, that was my first thought,” a small smile still playing at the corners of his mouth, “so, what are you planning to do about it? It’s not like you can end the pregnancy. The post-war child bearing laws are in effect now with our numbers dwindling. We’re all just lucky they haven’t instituted a marriage law.”

“Oh I wish they had! Then I wouldn’t be in this mess!” she yelled. She was pacing the room now, her gloved hand resting over her mouth, her other hand on her hip.

“My question remains, what are you planning to do about it? Or is that what you came here to ask me? You want my opinion on next steps?”

She glanced at him surreptitiously and then continued pacing. Something about the way she’d looked at him made his stomach turn.

“Astoria, what is it?” his bemused feeling fading and concern mixed with confusion rolling in.

After a moment, she stopped pacing and turned to face him, placing her hands by her sides.
“Draco, I came here today to tell you something.”

He eyed her warily, “Well as you can see, I’m all ears.”

She took a deep breath, walked forward and sat back down next to him, looking him steadily in the eyes.

“I came here today to tell you that our parents have re-instituted our marriage promise. We are to be married within the month. We are to raise this baby as if it were ours.”

He stared at her as if waiting for her to tell him she was just joking.

“My Father visited yours in Azkaban this morning and they sorted it all out. We need to have a fast wedding so that people don’t realize the baby is… well…” she trailed off as Draco’s head began spinning. This simply couldn’t be happening.

“I know this isn’t ideal, Draco… but it’s not as though you have any prospects, holed up here these last three years. People have no idea what you’ve been up to. For all they know we’ve been together happily this entire time!”

Draco was paralyzed, his body cemented to the sofa, his eyes fixed at a point on the floor across the room. He felt as though he was up above himself, floating somewhere near the ceiling. He knew that the marriage promise was magically bonding. He knew that his Father would have gladly created a new binding agreement with Mr. Greengrass. He knew that there was no way out of it. His heart was in his throat.

“Draco say something!” she demanded, but he didn’t move or speak. “Honestly Draco, I thought you’d be happy about this. I expected that perhaps you’d be a bit offended that the initial promise had been called off, and maybe a touch annoyed that now that its convenient my parents changed their tune… but overall, we were always good friends weren’t we? And I saw your article this morning, that’s actually what sparked this whole idea!”

He turned to look at her now, a renewed shock on his face.

“The article is what sparked this development?” he asked, horrified.

“Yes of course! Now that your character is being re-written, Father was instantly turned around. It just made sense for us to re-enter into the original agreement, and fast, before too many people heard rumors about my condition and the… conditions under which it occurred.”

Draco nodded, still in utter shock.

“Now Draco, you’re going to have to tell us who else overheard that argument so that we can seek them out and ensure that they don’t tell tales on us from here. My Father can be very generous, as you know.”

Draco was only vaguely listening to her now, as his thoughts had moved to Hermione. A burning rage began to build inside him. This was hideous. This was impossibly unfair. This was perhaps the worst thing that could have come of him seeing Astoria Greengrass this morning. He supposed that her visit was more of a courtesy than anything else. She hadn’t needed to ask him for anything, she’d needed to tell him something.

And that something was about to ruin the first chance he’d ever had at being truly happy in his entire lifetime.
Astoria stood suddenly, though Draco was mostly unaware of her movements. “As I’m sure you can imagine, Draco, our parents are eager to get moving on preparations for the wedding. Your Father seemed certain that he would be allowed a day’s release from Azkaban so that he could be present for the ceremony. You mother as well. All other planning he can conduct from where he is.”

His Father. He was truly to blame for this from the start. That’s who he needed to direct his anger at, not Astoria. She was just another pawn in the game, and pregnant… and fragile. He finally looked up at her.

“Alright,” he said, “Please pardon my behavior, I need a moment to wrap my head around this.”

“I’ll leave you,” she said, turning to walk towards the door. He got up to follow her, feeling like he wasn’t truly there, but merely watching the scene like it were a memory in a penseive. She grasped the door knob and pulled briskly. Before exiting, she turned to him and said, “thank you for doing this Draco, you are literally saving my life.”

Draco stood there in utter disbelief. For the second, third, maybe fourth time in the last 24 hours, he was not sure what to say. All he could manage was a slow nod.

It was good enough for her, apparently, since she turned and left, apparating away with a loud CRACK before the door had even clicked shut.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, not sorry :)
Wanna do brunch? Because Hermione does...

Hermione was positively walking on air as she strode up the front path of the Delacour estate. She could see remnants of the spell that had caused the ground to light up beneath her feet the night before and tried to make it appear stronger by skipping a bit. For a moment, the lights did seem to respond to her, though they were difficult to see in the stark sunlight. A giggle escaped her mouth at the sensation of being able to goad the magic into surging stronger. She felt one with the Universe.

Hours had passed since her kiss with Draco, and while she’d been incredibly regretful that they had been interrupted, she marveled at how much it had increased the intensity of her feelings for him. She was positively besotted with him, while also having this new sense of watchful energy about her. It felt as though he might appear at any moment, grab her up, and kiss her again. Seemingly enjoying this intrigue, she had decided not to send him a message or seek him out, but to wait for him to make the next move. It was all very exciting and she congratulated herself on exercising this level of self-control, especially after her erratic and overemotional behavior over the last 24 hours.

She felt as though she were master of the chaos now, content to allow it to act on her as it may, but giving it a sly, conspiratory wink at the same time. So far, she’d truly been enjoying the suspense of not hearing from him right away, and she felt content in the idea that that enjoyment would remain.

Brunch at the Delacour’s was, in fact, taking place this morning, and while Hermione was dreading seeing the Weasleys, she truly needed to apologize to Gabrielle in person, and this was the best time to do it. She would be traveling back to London later that same day, and had already packed her things up at the muggle inn, returned her rental car, and magic’d her belongings back home ahead of her, save the essentials of course.

Given the way she was feeling, she thought that she could see a hundred Weasleys and not be shaken. Ron had his secret, but she had her own secret now. A secret that she was bloody well entitled to have, too, not one like his that would make him the villain in any story told about their relationship henceforth. Hers was instead a sweet story of forgiveness, of changing times and possibilities for hitherto unimagined futures in which she and Draco Malfoy were a thing! She couldn’t help her giddy school-girl from erupting out of her, and thought bemusedly of Lavender Brown and her ridiculous infatuation with Ron in their 6th year. She thought she quite understood the girl’s behavior now, though she couldn’t remember ever feeling this besotted by Ron.

Ron. He would likely be there, and she had made a deal with herself to be civil, even kind. He was absolutely a complete and utter imbecile, yet the part of her that always had a soft spot for Ron’s stupidity now purred in her chest, telling her that she was safe. She had someone else in her life that could care for her, and she didn’t need to be careful with Ron. It was absolutely over between them and she was in no danger of being swept back in now. Her loneliness, her fear, her desperation at needing her marriage to work… it had gone, and been replaced with a glowing orb of warm white light, which resided right over her heart and was filled with a renewed sense of belonging… and hope for the future.

As she arrived at the front entrance, she placed her hand over her chest, closed her eyes, and took a
deep breath, allowing the sense of calm to wash over her fully.

She lifted her hand to the front door, meaning to knock, when it swung open before she could even make contact. The house seemed to have been… expecting her. She felt chills wash over her body, and smiled as she stepped inside. This old estate contained various forms of magic she had never witnessed before, yet for the Delacours it all seemed commonplace. She supposed that everyone had things like that in their homes, things they took for granted because they were so used to them, and it took an outside visitor’s delight to remind them of their good fortune. She must remember to mention it to them.

The house was immaculate, and any visitor that had not known about the party yesterday evening would have been completely ignorant of its existence. Hermione grimaced at the thought of the Delacour’s house elves working tirelessly all night to undo the level of damage typically caused by wizarding revelries. The laws she had passed regarding house elf payment and protections had not yet extended to France, and so she’d assumed that the cleaning as well as the meal she was about to enjoy were all prepared via slave work. Though she would never be comfortable with this, she was used to enduring it. It was part of being at the helm of a shifting culture… you had to accept the current culture completely in order to have any hope of seeing it go differently, and the change took a long time, so you needed an extreme amount of patience as well as clarity of overall intention in order to stay focused. Hermione breathed deeply and muttered her mantra, “One life at a time.”

Almost as soon as she stepped into the next room, a pixie-like presence had dashed around the corner and enveloped her in a bone crushing hug, her arms pinned to her sides. She laughed, “Oh ho! Someone has a lot of energy this morning!”

Gabrielle stood back and gazed at Hermione lovingly and said, “Wasn’t eet perfect!? Did you see my gown? Ugh!” she threw her head back in ecstasy as she uttered that last, guttural exclamation. Hermione regarded her with amused fascination. Up until this point, Gabrielle had been dreading her party. She had begged Hermione to be in attendance for moral support as she suffered through the thing, and now it seemed that contrary to Gabrielle’s insistence, she had had an incredible time. Hermione was pleased beyond reason, and her guilt at not being by Gabrielle’s side last night evaporated like the doves that had held the ball gown in question.

“I did! It was beyond incredible, I don’t have words to describe how proud I was seeing you standing up there.” She gestured to the ballroom. “But Gabrielle, I came to apologize. I let my tangled up love life get in the way and I was not there for you as I said I would be.”

Gabrielle was shaking her head as Hermione spoke, “No no no, you mustn’t feel sad, Ermione. I did not realize it before, but I would have been er- quite, how do you say? Put out, if you ‘ad been by my side all evening,” she said grinning.

Hermione scoffed, “pardon me?!” she said with a laugh.

“Yes! You see… I danced with zee most wonderful boy, and…” she looked off into the ballroom wistfully. Cottoning on, Hermione said, “Oh Gabrielle! You had a night of romance after all?”

Gabrielle turned back to her, smirking, and gave a few fast, excited nods.

“I am desperately happy for you, then,” she said grinning, “you must tell me all about him.”

“But you can meet ‘im! E is ere!” she squeaked, and grabbed Hermione’s hand to lead her into the dinning room where everyone was gathering for brunch. The room was set up in a buffet style, rather than requiring everyone to sit around a formal table, and Hermione was thankful for that, given the awkwardness that was sure to ensue either way, this made things a bit less uncomfortable.
There were a fair number of people here, certainly a few more than Hermione had expected. It was mainly those she knew: the entire Weasley family smattered about, Neville and Hannah, Harry Of course, with Ginny, and a variety of their schoolmates who were apparently connected with the Delacours, including Theodore Nott and Tracy Davis. Hermione had a new fascination with Slytherins after her recent experience with one such snake who was turning out to be anything but. She resolved herself to speak with them in the course of the morning, even if only to exchange brief pleasantries. She was feeling as though she could accept anyone at the moment.

Gabrielle pulled Hermione through the crowd in a rush. A few people shouted out greetings to her as she whizzed by, Hermione only dimly aware of who was shouting what at her as Gabrielle tugged on her wrist with abandon. Finally she slowed and with one final tug, and Hermione found herself face to face with Blaise Zabini. She started at this unexpected turn.

“Ermione, I would like you to meet-“

He reached out a hand, “I have actually already had the pleasure, Gabi,” he said without breaking eye contact with Hermione. He took her hand and pressed it lightly to his lips before saying, “Ms Granger and I were at Hogwarts together.”

“Oh but of course! I should ‘have known!” she cried, grinning at them.

“Yes,” Hermione said, having trouble keeping the disdain out of her voice, “that is accurate, we were there at the same time, though I think the use of the word ‘together’ is a bit liberal, don’t you Blaise?” She did not want to open hostilities, especially given all her resolve to be totally civil (even kind) to all this morning, however, a protective, maternal instinct flared up in her at the sight of him next to Gabrielle. Her past interactions with Blaise Zabini had never led her to believe him to be wonderful, or a gentleman, or anyone befitting the company of one of the sweetest girls she had ever known.

He chuckled in reply, and she was surprised to hear it.

“Yes, that’s true Granger, we were something more like enemies, and certainly not friends. I blame the sorting hat,” he said with a wink and a grin.

Had he just winked at her?! What was it with the Slytherins and the charm these days. Perhaps she’d steer clear of Tracy and Theo on second thoughts, she was quickly reaching maximum Slytherin capacity.

“Oh but zat iz ‘orrible!” Gabrielle cried, looking between them, panic stricken.

Seeing her confusion and upset, Hermione said lovingly, “It’s just a Hogwarts thing, Gabrielle, the houses were intended to compete and be at odds with one another, and there is a long history of Slytherins and Gryffindors not getting along. A historical rivalry, if you will, which began with the founders themselves. It was mine and Blaise’s job to dislike one another, and I daresay we carried out the task well, though without much personal interaction in all our years,” she turned to face him, “actually Blaise I think this is the first time I’ve looked you in the eye and spoken to you.”

He cocked his head to the side, and seemed to be enjoying himself.

“And how is it going so far, Granger? Am I meeting or exceeding all of your expectations.”

“Given that you may not know what my expectations are, that is a dangerous question to ask, Zabini,” she said his surname in a teasing manner.

He bowed his head, “Apologies for the use of your surname, Hermione,” he said, and made a small bow, “old habit, I suppose.”
Gabrielle squealed at this and leaned toward Hermione to whisper loudly, “eesn’t ee enchanting?!”

Just then, the addition of a gruff voice into their midst saved Hermione from having to reply.

“Morning,” said the voice, and Hermione spun around. Her heart sank as she laid eyes on Ron. He looked awful. While she suspected he had taken several potions to ward off the hangover, he still had reddened eyes which suggested a fair amount of crying, whether last night or this morning, she could not tell.

“Ron,” she said, endeavoring for civility, and kindness, she told herself, “How- how are you?” she asked with a concerned glare.

“Not my finest hour, but I expect I will survive, mostly thanks to this prat,” and he gestured towards Zabini. Hermione snapped her focus over to him, questioningly.

“Yes, you see Weasley here was pretty badly off last night and I offered to bring him to my estate and have him all fixed up so that he’d be well taken care of and not disturb the party,” Blaise said.

“His elves have everything, they do!” Ron said excitedly, “Anything I asked for, they could get it, just like in the kitchens at Hogwarts. It was incredible, only I wished I could have experienced it under less, critical circumstances,” he finished, and Hermione glared at him.

“Ronald, are you aware of who you’re speaking to as you gush about this impeccable slave labor you experienced?” she said, throwing a side-glare towards Zabini.

“’Mione it is far too early for my full name, and yes I am extremely aware of my current company, thank you very much. It would surprise you to become aware that Zabini’s elves are not slaves, they a free and paid and protected just as you prefer them to be.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide and she turned to Zabini for conformation.

“That’s right Gran- er- Hermione, I am full of surprises,” he said with another wink. Oh blast all the winks! She hated how much she enjoyed them. Such a cheesy gesture, they were, and yet they seemed to melt her inside every time. It was infuriating.

“But my legislation doesn’t extend yet to France,” she said.

“Yea well, Mum heard about it and thought it sounded like the right idea, and I quite agreed,” he grinned at Gabrielle and she simpered in response.

Hermione was touched, and confused. She looked over to Ron, “When did you get back here?”

“Just about an hour ago, Blaise got me up and made me come back. Mum was apparently livid when she realized I had disappeared last night,” he looked around surreptitiously for his Mother, but she was well across the room and out of earshot, drinking orange juice out of a champagne flute and laughing with Monsieur Delacour.

“Obviously, I wasn’t keen to return. You know how she gets,” and as he made eye contact with Hermione, they both exchanged a number of unsaid things in a matter of moments. Their fight was brought sharply back to both of their minds, especially the comment he had made about her sounding like his Mother. Her comments had been equally vile, however deserved, and while she hadn’t even come close to forgiving him, it did feel nice to be in a civil conversation with Ron, and so she brushed away the memory at once and simply nodded in reply.

“Yea mate, I saw her and I believe you made the right decision, however unconscious you were, to
stay at mine while the party continued on here,” said Zabini.

“Eet is true!” added Gabrielle, “she was in a towering temper, I av not seen er zat upset since zee day we came to zee burrow for Bill and Fleur’s wedding!”

Hermione laughed, remembering the time. They had been forced to perform all manner of wedding preparation. Truly, Mrs. Weasley had just been trying to keep Harry, Ron and Hermione from meeting in secret to discuss their plans for vanquishing Lord Voldemort, but the fact that party plans going awry made her extra agitated had just added fuel to the flames. Hermione sighed at the memory of it, nostalgia turning like a little knife in her heart. A good kind of pain. Then, becoming curious, she turned to Zabini.

“So Blaise, you dropped Ron off and into the care of your elves and then actually returned to the party? I would think after the effort of getting him there, one would simply call it a night.”

“Well I would have stayed except I was too nosy about what Draco was up to,” he explained, “he helped me get Weasley to mine and then tried to floo back here without my noticing where he was headed, but,” he leaned closer to Hermione and half-whispered, “he’s crap at hiding things from me,” he said, grinning, and there was something extra held behind his gaze that instantly unnerved Hermione. Did Zabini know already?

Ron put one hand on his forehead and held the other out in front of him, “Wait. You’re telling me that last night, Draco Malfoy actually helped me escape not only public embarrassment but physical illness as well? What the hell’s gotten into him?” He directed this at Zabini, but it was Gabrielle who responded.

“All zees Slytherin boys ah turning out not to be az zey seem, eh?” Gabrielle said through a grin. Hermione grabbed a flute of orange juice from a passing waiter and murmured, “Quite,” to Gabrielle before taking a sip to hide her stupid grin. Ron stared at her, raising a quizzical brow, but said nothing. Then, Gabrielle took Zabini by the arm and said, “Well, eef you’ll excuse uz, I av many people to introduce zees charming man to. A bientot!” she called as she dragged Blaise off through the crowd.

Hermione was surprised to notice that Zabini truly seemed to be enjoying this. From what she knew of him, it was out of character to attend a family gathering with a female partner. Most of them were typically a one time experience. As she gazed at them, she noticed that he was being extremely attentive to her, and gracious with the guests. Perhaps there was more to Blaise Zabini than met the eye, or ear, for that matter. She wondered why Draco had come back to the party and she hadn’t seem him, before slapping herself on the head right in front of Ron and saying, “Of course!”

He looked at her, utterly startled, “Of course what?”

“Of course Malfoy came back here last night, he wanted to intercept Rita Skeeter!” she almost yelled.

Ron looked vaguely into the distance, “Rita Sk-“ he said before affecting a look of shock and turning to Hermione. “She was there! She got a photo of me! She-“

Hermione put her hand up and shook her head. “That’s what I mean, Ron. Rita Skeeter was all ready to do an expose on our- impending divorce- and, well, Malfoy came back and enticed her to write a story on his return instead.”

“And she agreed to that?!?” he said, sounding a little offended.
Hermione rolled her eyes. “You can hardly complain, Ronald, he single handedly kept us from being splashed all over the front page of the prophet this morning, also with news of your little, problem.”

His eyes went wide, “But how did Rita Skeeter know-“

“Oh Ron, I suspect everyone knows now, as I didn’t exactly keep my voice low toward the end of our argument.”

This wasn’t the whole truth, of course, she wasn’t about to tell him that she had offered them up as bait in order to save Malfoy from the very fate he’d ended up choosing for himself. (A dance that occurred solely because they had feelings for one another and each was more concerned for the well being of the other than for their own.)

Still, she expected that a fair number of people HAD heard about Astoria, but without it being front page news, they could at least enjoy some privacy.

“Yea, thanks for that,” he said sadly, looking down at the ground.

She inhaled sharply, ready to retort angrily, but let the breath out on a long, deep sigh instead.

Just then, Ron looked up, confused, “Wait, why did Malfoy do that? That’s another in a now growing list of things that git has apparently done to help me in the last 24 hours and it doesn’t add up. And he’s been exactly where for the last three years since you and Harry got him out of Azkaban? Then he just shows up here last night and starts doing us all bloody favors? Is he touched in the head? Did prison addle his brains? I thought the dementors were gone now.”

Talk of being touched in the head and/or surrounded by dementors snapped Hermione out of the longing trance she had just sunk into at the mention of Draco and all the ways he’d been helping her. Ron hadn’t noticed her reverie.

“People do change, Ron. It’s possible he’s simply seen the error of his ways and is working to turn over a new leaf,” she offered casually.

Ron looked around distractedly, mumbling, “it doesn’t add up. I wonder what he’s really up to.”

“Oh Ron, Please! We are not 12 and this is not Hogwarts. Next you’ll be asking me to go and take some polyjuice so we can interrogate him in the Slytherin common room.”

“Wouldn’t be a bad idea, now you men-“

“Stop, you’re being ridiculous!” She had raised her voice again.

“What’s gotten into you, Hermione? You’re different today. Yesterday you couldn’t even stand to look at me and today you’re being massively civil in what seems like an act of great restraint.”

“Thank you for the analysis of my behavior, Ronald. Had it occurred to you that I may merely be trying to maintain propriety, especially after the multiple scenes we caused last night?”

Ron looked down at his feet again, “Yea I ‘spose. Sorry ‘Mione.”

She looked at him and felt pity creeping into her stomach, mingled with something that felt like guilt. His life was, and would continue to be, in tatters. Hers was just beginning to hold some new promise. She found herself wishing she could do something to help him.

“Ron,” she began, “has it occurred to you that perhaps you could make things work with Astoria?”
She didn’t know why she was saying it, the words hadn’t even occurred to her until the were already leaving her mouth and she hadn’t had a chance to filter them or allow them to remain an idle thought instead of an actual suggestion!

Ron stared at her, utterly befuddled. “Ok, who are you and how did you get my wife’s hair for your potion?”

“Ex-wife,” she correctly him.

“Soon to be ex-wife, not official ex-wife, Hermione, I can still call you my wife.”

“Yes well, don’t. Please.” She said, and looked sadly down at the ground. This was all so painful.

“I’m just saying, if you two had a- a thing…”

“We did not have a thing, we had a fling and they are very different! The former would indicate that some shared feelings were involved, and I can assure you that neither of us felt anything close to a feeling that night. We were too smashed to even remember it had happened!”

Hermione gaped at him. She hadn’t actually heard him discuss the details of the affair, she’d only heard of its occurrence by way of stumbling admission over dinner, a week before they were to travel to France.

“What do you-“

“Ok, I’ve been dreading telling this story, but I think you need to hear it if you can stomach a few of the details. I’ll do my best to leave out anything that would cause agitation in me were the tables reversed.”

She took a deep breath and nodded her agreement.

He began, “It was a little over a month ago, I was at that ministry event for Magical Law Enforcement, you remember the one Neville, Seamus and Dean were all in town for?”

“Right, the one that I refused to attend because of how smashed you all insist on getting whenever you see one another?”

“Right that’s the one,” he said matter of factly, “well Astoria and some of her schoolmates were in attendance as well, including pug face Parkinson. We all got into conversation because apparently, and you won’t believe this, but she and Neville seem to be on friendly terms!”

Hermione didn’t flinch, and Ron was staring at her, waiting.

“Oh right yes! Wow, what? I mean that’s crazy!” blimey, she wasn’t much better at this than Neville, after all. She must find him and apologize for yelling last night.

He furrowed his brow, “Why are you acting weird? Do you know something I don’t, Hermione?” he demanded.

“Well why don’t you finish telling me the story of your adultery and then if I feel compelled to share as well, I will.”

Ron flushed and nodded, “Right then, as I was saying, Parkinson and crew were suddenly among us like old chums, but we could tell her friends were just having a laugh. They kept whispering something about ’slumming it with a Gryffindor’ and were all fits of giggles. It would have been
annoying had I not been inordinately pissed already when they’d come over, but as it were…”

“And then? How did you end up sleeping with Astoria?”

“Well that’s the thing ‘Mione, I don’t remember. The next thing I knew I was waking up next to her in my office. I’d conjured a bed that took up the whole room, apparently. You know how I’m better at magic when my inhibitions are down. And then she wakes up all harassed at the fact that we’re together and looks at me like it was my plan all along when I bloody hell remember none of it! I don’t even recall being attracted to her, honestly. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Hermione bristled at this news. It didn’t really change things, the circumstances were still as they were, but there was more nuance to the situation than she had previously allowed herself to see.

“So, it logically follows that you didn’t use a contraceptive charm?”

He shrugged, “I wish I could tell you either way.”

“Wow Ron, I’m, I’m sorry this happened,” was all she could manage. She was still so angry with him for not telling her immediately. They were supposed to be partners. If he was truly so innocent, then why hadn’t he come to her straight away to tell her what had happened? He bloody well could have and she would have listened, after some time and likely some yelling and misunderstandings, but they would have got there in the end.

Instead, he’d hid it, like a coward. If not for the baby, he would have kept it a secret until his dying day or until he’d blurted it out drunkenly, whichever came first. She thought back to earlier that morning. To the way that Draco had not been able to keep something from her for longer than a few minutes. For someone who could lie very well, he had certainly been nothing but honest with her recently. She shook herself, intent on not letting Draco cloud her thoughts in this moment, and Ron spoke.

“Hermione, I am a total disaster. One stupid night and I’ve singlehandedly ruined my life, and Astoria’s. And I’m to have my first child with someone I don’t even like, let alone love, and I doubt she’ll even allow me to see it.”

Hermione looked aghast, “You think she’ll keep you from your own child?”

Ron nodded. “She has already made as much clear to me. Her plan is to find a worthy partner to marry within the month and to raise the child like it was their own. Of course, if it pops out with a shock of red hair, I think they’ll have a hard time holding up the facade.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide as many things began to click into place in her mind.

“Then again, I suppose there are permanent charms for transfiguring hair. I can’t imagine ours is the first occurrence of this particular circumstance.”

Hermione wasn’t listening anymore. The orb of white light in her chest was slowly fading away, and she felt faint.

Astoria Greengrass went to Draco this morning to ask him to marry her.

But he would never agree to it, Hermione knew that. There was just no way.

Unless…

Ron was still speaking about hair transfiguration when Hermione interrupted him, “Ron how do
“Pureblood marriage promises work?”

Ron looked startled and a bit affronted, “Marriage promises? Why?”

“Just… tell me, how do they work? When a baby born into a pureblood family is promised to another, it forms a magical bond, correct?”

He hesitated for a moment and then, seeming like he was game to disseminate information to Hermione for once rather than the other way around, he spoke.

“Right, it’s a binding magical contract, similar to the one formed when a name leaves the Goblet of Fire. It was used to ensure the purity of the line, so teenage witches and wizards wouldn’t go getting ideas and straying outside their station. It depends on who casts it what the consequences are, but I’d heard of horrible things happening to wizards in the past who tried to marry someone other than their promise partner. Pretty barbaric, really, they aren’t used anymore,” he finished, and then his brow furrowed again,”Why do you ask?”

Hermione breathed deeply. “Do you… do you suppose the Malfoy’s used one? With Draco?”

Ron thought about this. “Actually, of all the pure blood families still around, I wouldn’t put it past them. Especially considering their allegiance to you-know-who, they wouldn’t want to risk it. If they did it, I bet it was with Parkinson.”

“And… what if the contract was severed? Like when he was thrown into Azkaban? What then? Could it be re-instated?”

“Hermione why are you asking me about marriage promises and Draco Malfoy? And why do you look as though you’re in a trance? What is going on?”

She looked up at him, “Because I think that perhaps Astoria is planning to marry him and have him raise your child as his own.”

He looked at her, befuddled, “well you always were faster than me at putting the pieces together Hermione, but wow…”

“I happen to know that they were promised to other another at birth, and consequently severed the promise due to his being imprisoned, it seems to be a loophole.”

“How do you know that?”

“Oh Ronald, are you really questioning where I’ve received a piece of knowledge, how do you think?”

“You mean to tell me you learned all that in a book?” he asked skeptically.

“Some,” she lied, “the history of the pureblood families is well documented and I had a lot of time to read… in the tent,” she said with a bite of anger in the last word.

She felt kind of guilty for all the ways she was manipulating him in this conversation. Had she always operated this way with him? It certainly felt familiar and natural to do so, which made her feel uneasy.

Her jab had had its intended effect of throwing Ron off the plot, and he recoiled. “Well, if that is the case then I don’t think I need to worry about Malfoy being my baby’s daddy. I don’t think you can re-instate a promise once it’s severed. Then again, perhaps you can, I’m really not sure how it
works,” he said lightly.

She let out a frustrated sigh.

“Bloody hell Hermione, you are taking way more of an interest in the life of my unborn bastard than I expected you too.”

“Come now, Ron, you know my penchant for the weak and needy,” she said, going along with his presumption rather than correcting him for the millionth time.

“Hey,” he said accusingly, “was that a jab at me?”

“Not an intentional one, but I can’t help the way you took it,” she smiled, her mood brightening as she realized in the back of her mind that she had a plan. Well, at least the start of one.

“And now,” she said, “it won’t shock you to hear this Ron, but… I’m off to the library!”

She leaned over and gave him a light kiss on the cheek, grabbing his hand, “Let me see if I can’t find a way to ensure Malfoy won’t be your child’s Father.”

He looked at her in surprise, “Blimey Hermione… thanks.”

“I’ll let you know what I find,” she said, as she turned and walked quickly toward the most impressive and ornate library in all of Europe, sure she could find some answers, and thrilled to be going back to the one thing that brought her calm.
Draco shivered as he entered the cold hollow prison in the middle of the North Sea. Memories of his time here flooded back into his very soul as he walked down the narrow corridor to the visitor cells. It had always felt like this. The guard accompanying him was familiar only by voice. Draco had avoided eye contact with any of them for the majority of his stay there, never wanting to view their hatred OR their pity, blissfully ignorant of whichever they were offering each day.

“Who would you like to see first?” asked the guard.

“My Mother.”

The guard nodded and motioned for him to enter the door on his right.

“You have 20 minutes with each, or 40 minutes total, wherever you choose to spend the time.”

Draco nodded, thinking he would probably spend the majority of that time with his mother. He entered the visitor cell and saw her sitting upright in a metal chair behind a metal table, the room itself completely bare except for these pieces of furniture and a seat for the visitor.

“I will knock to alert you when 20 minutes has passed,” the guard said before slamming the door shut behind him.

Draco stared at his mother. She was more pale and sunken than she had been at his last visit and he wondered if she had been flat out refusing food again. She had taken to doing so last Christmas and had been hospitalized as a result. Seeing him, however, caused her to light up like nothing else could.

“Draco,” she said with a desperate hunger in her voice as she stood from her chair. He rushed to her side, “Mother please remain seated, you look so frail.” She consented to hug him and sit back down in her cold, hard chair.

“I’m fine Draco, now that you’re here. How are you my love? Please tell me everything.”

This was Narcissa’s constant refrain when he’d visited her, which was about once a month. His father, on the other hand, only received a visit during the Christmas Holidays. It was always a stoic reunion, filled with shallow questions and a distinct lack of eye contact. His Mother, however, he shared everything with.
“I’m not sure if you’re aware given your limited contact with Father, but- I have quite a problem, Mother, and I-”

His breath caught in his chest and he looked away, taking a deep breath and steeling himself for this conversation he’d rehearsed in his head all morning.

“Draco, what is it? You know that you can tell me anything,” her eyes held a sense of fear that only a mother could show when looking into her child’s distressed face. Draco took a deep breath and began, “Father has re-arranged for me to wed Astoria Greengrass… within the month.”

Narcissa breathed in deeply and nodded, sitting back in her chair. It was clearly new information, yet she was unsurprised.

“I had wondered if her parents would come round after your release. It seems they took their time, no?”

“Well, given that I gave an interview for The Prophet officially announcing not only my return to society but also my friendship with Harry Potter, I expect they’re suddenly quite keen to be re-connected with our family.”

“You gave an interview?” she looked at him, puzzled.

“Yes, it’s a long story,” he said, keen not to bring Hermione into this conversation if he could help it, “but the bottom line is that it caught their attention and they have jumped at the chance to use the circumstance of my… ‘social redemption’ for their own ends.”

Narcissa looked even more puzzled at this last statement, “for what ends, exactly?”

He took a deep breath, and said, “Astoria is pregnant,” and before his mother could react, added, “It’s not mine.”

She made no reply, but looked suddenly stern. Bitter.

“It belongs to Ronald Weasley whom her family has deemed unfit as a match for her,” he kept going, through his Mother’s wide eyed reaction, “They have devised a plan with Father that involves Astoria and I having a shotgun wedding and pretending that the child is ours,” he grit his teeth, and growled, “as if anyone would be able to accept a Weasley as a Malfoy.”

“Preposterous!” his mother shouted, looking over to the adjacent wall, behind which she knew her husband sat waiting for the unscheduled visit from his son, “I wish I could say I didn’t believe him capable of making such an agreement, however…”

“I am sure that Father is doing this to punish me for my behavior. For not visiting him as often as I visit you, and for keeping myself in seclusion so that he can’t utilize me for his nefarious business dealings, which are now failing as a result. He seeks to humiliate me and he doesn’t care if he drags the family name through the mud in doing so. He has nothing left to lose.”

He watched her as she stared off into the corner of the room, subtly shaking her head and trying to steady her breath.

“Mother, I need your help changing his mind.”

She turned to stare at him, suddenly seeming not to breathe.

“Draco…” she said slowly, a look of dawning comprehension washing over her, “I’m afraid it
doesn’t work like that, darling.” Her voice cracked slightly.

“What do you mean?” he said, a bit forcefully.

“I’m afraid that the- the marriage promise is… magically bonding.”

Draco raised his eyebrows at this, motioning for her to go on.

“You see, a change of mind alone can’t undo it. It was created along the same lines as the unbreakable vow,” she looked away, as though she was speaking to herself now, working her thoughts out aloud, “well at least that’s how the pureblood families began using it after a few incidences of disobedience on the part of a son or daughter who refused to marry their pureblood match in favor of another. It went from being a promise between families to a nearly unbreakable bond,” she finished, breathless.

“Nearly unbreakable?” he inquired.

“Yes there are certain circumstances under which the magic will yield…” she trailed off.

“Well tell me what they are. Tell me so I can find a way to break it,” he demanded.

“Draco, no. You do not understand fully. This magic is desperately dangerous to attempt to tamper with. If I know your father, he will have imbued it with dark magic. He will have added clauses to the promise that create… consequences for disobedience. I shudder to think what they might be. He will do anything right now to see you in a state of compliance. He’s been so angry with you,” she said, wringing her hands, “I fear that if you were to attempt to break the bond, all manner of horrible, unforeseen things could take place.”

“Mother, I don’t care. Tell me. I shall research it myself anyway, you know that.”

She shook her head vigorously, holding back more tears in favor of being able to speak clearly.

“Draco I beg you not to! It will be the end of your life if you do, I am sure of it! Why not simply make the best out of the current circumstance? Astoria is lovely and I am sure she will soften as time goes on and you will love her in your own way, just as I learned to love your father.”

“I will not!” Draco shouted as he pounded his fist on the table.

Narcissa jumped and put her hand to her chest with a gasp, “Draco…” she said, again breathlessly.

He stood from his chair and paced to the wall, arms crossed. Narcissa was breathing deeply, staring at her son for a long while.

“Draco?” she tried, “Please come back and sit, we have limited time-”

He spun around, “WE have limited time? Mother, my life will be over within the month, apparently. Either I enter a loveless marriage and raise a… a weasel, and become the greatest joke our world has ever seen, or suffer horrific consequences! Why bother living then?” he asked, a bit frantically.

“Draco, please come and sit down,” she asked gently.

After a moment, he obeyed, plopping down in the chair like a small child in time out.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, Draco… but what have you been living for these past few years?”
He opened his mouth to retort angrily, but she interrupted before he could begin.

“What I mean to say is… from my perspective, this marriage to Astoria does not seem quite so horrible. I know it’s fast. I know the baby is indeed not yours. I know you fear the societal reaction, but my dear that’s all you’ve been living in fear of since the war ended,” she offered. He was refusing to look at her, but she continued on, “Per- perhaps this could be an opportunity to rebuild something. The gossip will die away eventually and you will be accepted, it just might be an uncomfortable period before that change occurs.”

He shook his head slowly, “I understand that, Mother, but it’s not even the point,” he mumbled.

“Well then please tell me what the point is, Draco, as our time is wearing down and I am going to be sick with worry over this until I next see you. Please help me understand what you’re truly struggling with, I want to help.”

Like Blaise, his Mother tended to see through him. He expected that he wouldn’t be leaving the room without letting her in on his current predicament, so he ought to yield now, though he had no idea how to go about explaining it.

He put his hand on his brow as he felt hot tears begin to threaten at the corners of his eyes, though he couldn’t understand why.

Taking a deep breath, he willed them away, looking up quickly to face his Mother.

“I… don’t love Astoria, and I don’t think I ever could.”

She scrutinized his face expertly. It wasn’t legilimency, just a mother’s intuition. Even so, it seemed she was fighting with herself, trying to weigh whether or not to say something.

Finally, she took a deep breath and asked, “and… who is it that you do love, Draco?”

He sat straight up, affronted, and glared at her, “I don’t- no one,” he said, scoffing and looking away.

She smiled, sure she was on to something.

“Draco,” she cooed. He sighed deeply, slumping down in his chair with his eyes closed.

He let minutes pass before working up the nerve to speak. Narcissa waited, patient and still.

Finally, words began spilling out of him in an avalanche.

“I can’t call it love yet, Mother, I haven’t even had a chance to discover what it is for myself or to even process what’s going on because it’s been happening for less than 24 hours and the moment we kissed was also the moment Astoria Greengrass showed up at my living quarters and told me that I am to be her husband because of a marriage promise that Father has co-signed and that I am to raise a part weasel and foster a very public very false love affair and marriage with a woman who, beautiful as she is, could never possibly be equal in beauty, mind, or spirit as Hermione Granger.”

Narcissa gasped and her hands flew up to her mouth. He had expected this reaction and was not keen to look up and read the expression of disgust on his Mother’s face.

“But Draco, this is amazing!” she cried, and he snapped his head up to look at her, confusion mixed with alarm all over his face.

She took a deep breath and smiled widely, cocking her head to the side to take him in fully, then
said, “I feared I would never see this day.”

Slowly, he said, “Mother, you’re scaring me. Would you please let me in on whatever the joke is?”

“Oh it’s no joke, Draco, it is so far from a joke, and my apologies for being cryptic, let me be plain: the Granger girl is your soul’s saving grace. I- I believe she always has been.”

Draco didn’t move or breathe, but stared at his mother blankly waiting for her to go on. His thoughts were stagnant, shocked confusion written all over his face.

“Darling, don’t you see? From the first day you wrote home to me to tell me how much you hated that girl, I knew.”

“You knew what?!” he demanded.

“I knew that, if we were lucky enough to survive this war and be rid of the Dark Lord forever, that there would still be a chance for you.”

“I don’t understand—”

“To experience true love for another human being!” she spoke over him.

Draco’s brow furrowed even more deeply than it already had been, somehow. He had no idea what his Mother was trying to say, and was completely confused at her delight at hearing that he had kissed Hermione Granger. Had the whole world gone upside down this quickly?

“I am so sorry sweetheart, I fear I have spent so long not being open with you that what I’m about to say will come as a shock or be difficult to believe, so please just hear me out.”

She put her hand on her stomach and took a steadying breath before beginning.

“You have been raised, in large part, in darkness. I confess, I did not want to bring a child into this world after being forced to marry your Father. I grew to love him, but mostly out of fear for my own survival. The requirement to produce an heir weighed so heavily on my heart, because I knew,” she choked back tears, “I knew that you would be like him, at least in part, and I wanted nothing to do with it. It was bad enough I had to participate in the Dark Lord’s dealings, but to bring a child into that life…” her eyes now filled with tears, “I couldn’t bear it. I feared you would grow to be as cold and heartless as was possible to be, bound to a marriage promise like my own, doomed to repeat the cycle of living disconnected from and above most other witches and wizards. Draco do you know how lonely my life has been?!”

He just stared at her. He had never heard his Mother speak this way about her life. It had always appeared to him that she was happy. As he watched her come undone, he tried to replay scenes from their life and look for clues that pointed to this unhappiness, but came up short.

“This must not seem possible, because I have played my part exceedingly well, even causing myself to believe it. Truthfully, I had forgotten about my glimmer of hope regarding the Granger girl until you just said her name.”

“Mother what does Hermione have to do with any of this? You speak as though she’s the missing piece of a puzzle we are both trying to solve, but I know not the puzzle nor the way she fits in.”

“My apologies, Draco it is difficult to explain because it’s not based in anything you have a solid
foundation for.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Love, Draco! I am speaking of love, the most powerful force in all the Universe, so powerful, in fact, that the department of mysteries contains an entire wing dedicated to the study of it.”

“I’m aware,” he said, gritting his teeth, “but what does it have to do with her?”

“I’m leading there, I promise.”

He shook his head, slightly put out, but kept listening.

“Even though you were involved very directly in this war, you never killed or tortured, so your soul is still intact, but you did do things, terrible things that caused harm or potential harm to people you cared about, however indirectly. I worried. Every night I worried that you had gone too far in, that I wouldn’t be able to bring you back.”

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, thinking back on the things he’d done and feeling a familiar pang of guilt in his stomach.

“In the far reaches of my mind, however, I always recalled the schoolyard crush you seemed unaware of since you were 11 years old, and I thought… if he, being who he is, could love a mudblood, then I will not lose him. If he could open his heart and see beyond the prejudice we have so violently instilled in him, then he could be free,” she gazed out the tiny window in the cell as she spoke the last words of this speech.

Draco’s mind was reeling.

“Mother, what schoolyard crush? I never had a crush on her, and I certainly never loved her. I hated her! I called her mudblood! I tormented her to no end! I can scarcely believe she’s willing to speak to me now, let alone…” he trailed off, grimacing at the memories of his unkindness toward Hermione flooding into his mind.

She smiled kindly, “Draco, the opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.”

He glared at her, disbelievingly.

“Like I said, Draco, this will be difficult to accept because it’s the first we are speaking of it. Forgive me, I feared that being open with you about this in the past would have caused you to go deeper into darkness and hatred before having the chance to discover on your own what your heart is truly capable of.”

“You’re still not making sense, Mother, open about WHAT?”

“About the possibility of your soul being cleared!”

He stared unblinkingly at his Mother.

“Draco, the thing you need to understand is that it’s not your actions that make you good or evil, it is your intentions. I know you have been struggling with understanding who you are now. I know that you have been secluding yourself from the world, believing that to inflict your company on them would be tantamount to torture. The fact alone that you secluded yourself speaks volumes about your true nature.”
“And what is that?”

“And what is that?”

“And what is that?”

“To put it simply, Draco, you are a lover, not a fighter,” she smirked as she said this.

“You’re having a laugh, though I’m not sure why this is the appropriate time to do so.”

“I am not,” she shook her head seriously, “and I need you to really hear this. You are not a bad person, Draco. You have been a mere pawn in an evil man’s game. Do you think that Lord Voldemort went around Hogwarts tormenting mudbloods? Absolutely not, he could not have cared less. He was focused on one thing only: conquering the wizarding world. Manipulating and controlling the people in power. He had no time for hair pulling or schoolyard brawls.”

“He tormented plenty of them as far as I saw!”

“You misunderstand me, I am speaking of his character. He was cold and indifferent. He did not have a capacity to love, only a focus on power and control. It’s something you did not inherit from him… or from your Father. I knew it the day you met that girl. In this moment I am realizing that the apparent hatred you felt for her has been a glimmer of hope I’ve long held onto. Are you beginning to understand?”

He considered her, cocking his head to the side.

“Perhaps in pieces. Are you saying that because I was so openly hateful rather than indifferent, it led you to believe that I wouldn’t turn to the darkness? That I wouldn’t bend to power and control the way… the way he did?”

She nodded.

“Ok so, what bearing does it have on the current circumstance?”

She took a deep breath.

“I confess, Draco, that when you came in here and told me that you were bound to marry Astoria Greengrass, a deeply sad sense of resignation flooded my spirit. I knew you had been secluding yourself. I had been quite sure you weren’t dating, let alone falling in love. An impending marriage and a bastard child would surely lessen your chances of experiencing true love, which is all I have ever wanted for you,” she said through teary eyes.

“But then when you said… it all came flooding back… and there’s something I haven’t told you about the marriage promise.”

He sat up straight and leaned forward, “What is it?”

She breathed in and nodded, stealing herself before saying, “there is one way it can be broken.”

“Yes?”

She squared her shoulders to his, eyes boring deep into him.

“Draco… It is imperative that you allow yourself to fall completely in love with Hermione Granger, and that she respond in equal measure to you.”

He felt a sudden whoosh of fear flow through his very being. His throat was tight when he next spoke, “Why- what- what do you mean?”

“The only way a marriage promise can be broken is if one of the parties falls truly in love with
another witch or wizard, and that love is reciprocated in full.”

Draco stared at her, aghast. For a moment neither said anything.

Finally Draco asked, “So… how does- er, how does it work?”

“Well,” she said tentatively, “I am not exactly sure, just as I am not sure how the unbreakable vow knows if you have broken it. I suspect it causes a magical… disturbance of sorts.”

“So… is it possible that the promise is already broken? Given…”

She shook her head, saying, “You’ve already told me that you can’t call it love and I think you’re correct. It sounds like where you and Miss Granger are right now is something closer to lust.”

He bristled at hearing his mother describe him as lustful, however accurate she may be.

“But why specifically Hermione? I mean, you’re correct in thinking I have no other prospects, but you seem to specifically feel that she-”

She interrupted, “When the Dark Lord branded you with that mark, Hermione Granger became your mortal enemy, someone you would be forced to torture, maim, or kill, or face those consequences yourself. To turn around and profess a true and undying love for that sort of person would, I believe, counteract any amount of dark magic used to seal this marriage promise.”

Draco breathed heavily as he tried to process what his mother was saying to him.

“But Draco,” she said, placing her hand on his forearm, “it will be desperately tricky. You cannot and must not verbally refuse to marry Astoria. I believe the consequences of doing so would be instantaneous and… disastrous. I do not know the clauses your Father and Astoria’s have put on this bond, but they are sure to be strong. It will require quite a magnitude of love to break.”

Draco nodded, solemnly, taking it all in.

The guard knocked on the door to signal that 20 minutes was up.

“Ten more minutes here, thank you,” he managed to say, through ragged breathing.

“So,” he began, “I’m to do what now? Proceed as if the wedding is going to happen and find some way to- to… make Hermione fall in love with me? In the next month?” he finished rather desperately.

“And to allow yourself to fall in love with her, it is absolutely necessary for it to be reciprocal.”

“But- how… what if…” he said, rather feebly.

Stirred by his quiet desperation, Narcissa stood from her chair and came over to kneel beside him.

Gently, she said, “Draco, if you shared a kiss… if you came here biting back tears after only one intimate moment with the girl and in such a short period of time… I expect that neither of you are far from falling. Love acts on the heart like a fever at first. It burns, it’s painful and exhilarating. But it also- can be made firm when it is tested.”

“What are you inferring?” he asked.

“I don’t want to explain it any further, and I couldn’t possibly. I believe this is something you’ll have to come to on your own. It’s not a matter of following directions from anywhere but here,” and she
pressed a hand to his heart.

He didn’t respond, but stared blankly at the floor, a look of horror flooding his face.

“But what if- what if I’ve been too darkened? What if I’m not actually capable… of true love?”

—

Hermione emerged from the Delacour’s library about three hours later, having combed the shelves extensively, finding a number of books with mention of pureblood marriage promises, and stories about various ways that they were worked around, in addition to disastrous ones about the ways in which the couples lives were destroyed due to not adhering to them.

Unfortunately, the stories were almost exclusively of the latter variety.

She clutched a page of notes in her hands, which she began to skim through as she walked.

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**Pureblood Marriage Promise Notes**

**Terms:** “Marriage Promise” - ancient magic designed to ensure the continued reproduction of pureblood wizard kind, bonding two suitable pure-blood witch/wizards together – established at birth by the families

“Bonded” – term for the couple promised to each other

“Un-bonded” – any other witch or wizard not involved in promise

“Clause” – dark-magic-based “terms” of the promise, should it be violated (see examples)

“Loopholes” – three natural ways out of the marriage promise (see list)

Various couples who’d refused to marry endured hardships due to marriage promise clauses

Some examples:
- in every subsequent relationship, the un-bonded person they loved died
- unable to have physical contact with opposite sex without experiencing searing internal pain, akin to cruciatus curse.
- non-bonded couple got pregnant and eloped - baby died in-utero at 6 weeks - mother had had to carry baby to full term - experienced full pregnancy - mother died in childbirth - father took his own life
  [Could Astoria’s baby be harmed this way?] quite worrying

Note: All examples began with couple verbally refusing to marry!

**Loopholes**
- one of the pair falls fatally ill
- one of the pair is imprisoned with no clear release date (Draco)
- one of the pair disappears mysteriously

(Last loophole caused many couples to try and fake a disappearance – always unsuccessfully!!!)

**Clauses**
- Not an original part of the marriage promise evocation, added later using dark magic (!)
- Threat of clauses caused most witches and wizards to surrender to their marriage promise early on
Removal and subsequent re-bonding of a marriage promise?
No concrete information on how this is achieved

One theory: that it would require substantial dark magic to achieve, as a bond was not intended to be broken in the first place

Two known accounts of a bond being successfully broken outside of the 3 loopholes - No information given on how

Hermione sighed as she walked through the halls of the Delacour estate, making her way to the front entrance fireplace. She had missed the conclusion of the brunch and Gabrielle had come into the library to let her know that the family would be going out that afternoon, but she could remain as long as she’d liked and could feel free to use their floo to leave. Everyone else had gone as well, Ron and Harry both stopping in to say goodbye, which she’d hardly acknowledged. She felt a bit guilty about that now, though she supposed it was a behavior that were certainly no strangers to.

The Delacour’s had arranged a special floo connection back to Britain for their out of town guests leaving from the brunch. This had to be arranged with the Ministry of Magic, and would only be open for another hour or so. Hermione had decided to cut her research off so she’d have time to send an owl to Draco before leaving for her flat in London. The trouble was, she had no idea what to say.

Earlier that morning it had seemed fun to wait for him to reach out to her, but she had gone far past fun, moved into worry, and now landed on sheer panic. Why hadn’t she heard from him? Should she write to him at all?

She had hoped she would find some clear information in the library so that she could go to him with a plan, but the library had failed her, which always felt like a betrayal in and of itself, and now he was also not contacting her. What was she to infer by this behavior?

Just as she’d reached the height of her frustration, and eagle owl soared in through the owl hatch at the top of the front door and landed on the stone mantel, right next to a large green bag of floo powder. Hermione hadn’t seen this owl since Hogwarts, but knew who it belonged it. She untied the small scroll of parchment and unfurled it.

Hermione,

As you read this, I am on my way to Malfoy Manor to visit the library there. I have news that I need to share with you as soon as possible, would you be willing to meet me there? The floo will be open. Please bring Ptolemy along if you do, it will save him the flight back.

If you are unwilling, send him back to let me know.

Draco

PS – I cannot stop thinking about your lips. You are pure heaven.

She stared down at the note, feeling such a variety of emotions that she could hardly breathe. Suddenly, the parchment turned into what looked like ash and dissolved into nothingness, without leaving a trace on her hands or in the air.

She turned to look at Ptolemy who was waiting, expectantly, and then looked down at the floo.
Taking her cue, he flew over to land on her shoulder. She drifted imperiously over to the mantel, taking up a handful of floo powder, turning the flames green, and shouting her destination as she stepped
Draco sat at a table in the library at Malfoy Manor surrounded by books, most of them laid open on pages about pureblood marriages. He wasn’t getting very far, as he was glancing up at the doorway every time he heard a noise that might signify her arrival. Just as he told himself to stop and concentrate for about the 40th time, the unmistakable voice of his house elf greeting someone rang through the halls.

“Hello Miss! Master has been waiting for you! Wumply will bring you to him!”

Draco rose from his seat and felt his heart begin to race as he crossed to the doorway. Just as he reached it, she came around the corner and they nearly collided, resulting in them standing face to face, only inches apart.

“Oh! Sorry!” they said in unison.

“Wumply is bringing Master his Miss who just arrived in the floo with his owl sir!”

Draco tore his eyes from Hermione to look at his elf. “Yes, thank you very much Wumply, you can go now,” he said kindly.

The elf hung his head, clearly wanting to be of more assistance. Hermione picked up on this and added, “that is, after you bring us some tea please.” The elf perked up, “Right away Miss!” and disappeared with a pop.

They both stared at the spot where the elf had just disappeared, avoiding eye contact.

“Have they been here this whole time in your absence?” she said to the empty space where the elf had just been.

“No, all of our elves were removed from the manor and sent to work at Hogwarts. We’ve been paying their fee of course.”

She looked up into his eyes now, and he stared back, noticing that she glanced down at his lips for a moment. She was clearly thinking the same thing he was.

“When I was released they were put back in my care and I let them remain at the school. I just called
Wumply back to assist me for today.”

She had abandoned all pretense and was solely staring at his lips now.

“Right, I think I recall reading that… somewhere…” she said, breathless.

And then she was kissing him, and the room around them seemed to spin and disappear. She wrapped her arms around his neck and swayed on the spot. He responded with equal enthusiasm, wrapping his arms around her waist and swaying with her. He had forgotten the feel of her, the taste of her. Even though he’d been replaying their first kiss in his mind on a constant loop, somehow his memory had failed him.

He didn’t know how long they stood there, enveloped in their bliss, unaware of the world continuing to move around them. Stopping and starting and desperately trying to devour one another in a way that couldn’t be satisfied by this alone.

When they finally broke apart, he placed a light kiss on her forehead and she let her head lay upon his chest. He held her to him tightly, then began running his hands gently up and down her back. She let out a sigh and her breath shuddered.

“I need to move away from you now or I will never leave this spot, and I really do need to speak with you,” he said, painstakingly.

She pulled back and stared up at him. He noticed the detail of her eyes, the deep brown color with subtle flecks of hazel. He’d never looked at her this closely before, and she seemed like a different person to the girl he’d tormented from age eleven.

He had the overwhelming desire to lean forward and kiss each of her eyelids. Her jawline. Her neck. He wanted to kiss every inch of her, but he restrained himself. Truly, he wanted to take her hand and lead her to his wing of the manor where his bedroom lay empty, yet recently cleaned and prepared by his elf, in case he should want to spend the night. Oh how he wanted to lead her there now.

Just as he thought this, his mother’s voice invaded his mind…

_Not lust. Not obsession…_

He took a large step backward.

“I’m sure the tea is waiting for us by now,” he said, staring directly into her eyes. She was taking deep breaths, and he suspected she was feeling a similar urge to seek privacy and speak not a single word to one another.

She nodded and made to follow him through the door of the library. He turned and led on, bringing her to two leather armchairs separated by a small table, which indeed held a tray of steaming hot tea.

Neither of them touched the tea, however, both bracing themselves for the conversation.

“Draco, before you say anything… I think I know what you’re going to say.”

“I seriously doubt that,” he said, “but give it a go.”

Hermione looked at him with fear behind her eyes, and gulped before saying, “I believe that you need to tell me that Astoria Greengrass has asked you to marry her.”

His eyebrows flew up.
“And furthermore, that you’ve been forced to accept.”

He let out a swift sigh, “wow Granger, I knew you were smart but I have to say I’m impressed.”

She raised her eyebrows, “returning to my surname, then?”

“Only when you act annoyingly brilliant,” he said with a smirk.

She blushed and a small smile crossed her lips before she took a breath and continued.

“It’s happened then? The marriage promise?”

He leaned in, elbows on knees, almost amused by this turn of events. He’d been steeling himself to deliver this fresh, painful news and here she was already seeing into the future.

“How did you-“ he began.

“Ron,” she said simply.

“Weasley?”

“I saw him this morning, he told me Astoria’s plans to find a suitable husband. He… he said she was going to refuse his right to see the child. I just put two and two together and assumed that that was why she’d been to see you,” she finished sadly.

He didn’t want to look at her. He hadn’t expected them to get to this point of the conversation so quickly and wasn’t yet ready for the next bit.

“So it’s true then? The promise?” she prompted him.

He stared at the floor, nodding. He knew that he still had more information than she could hope to have, yet he was grateful for not having to explain it all in full.

It also occurred to him in that moment that she was still there with him, had still kissed him… perhaps there was hope. Perhaps she would agree to his request.

“But what I can’t seem to understand,” she said, breaking his thought pattern and causing him to look up, “is how did they re-instate it? I’ve been doing research in the Delacour library for hours and I can’t find anything concrete on re-sealing a previous promise.”

“However they achieved it, it seems it’s real. I went to see my Father in Azkaban this morning.”

He watched as her face went from confused to fearful at the mention of his father.

“And what did he say?”

“Not much. I didn’t either, to be fair,” he said.

“But he definitely confirmed it?” she asked.

Draco nodded, “He means to punish me for how I’ve behaved since I’ve been out.”

“But- that’s-“ she sputtered, “How could he seek to hurt his only son? His family name? He’s forcing a Weasely child to become a Malfoy? It’s preposterous!”

Draco grinned, solemnly. “That’s what my mother said.”
She stared at him.

“Draco, how is it that your Father is even able to make these sorts of deals in his... position?”

Draco did not respond, but sat back and took a sip of tea, determined to avoid answering that question. He didn’t want to get into this discussion about his father when he had something more pressing to get to in the conversation.

“Did he tell you what the clauses are?”

Draco scoffed, “as if he’d give me proper warning now. I expect he’s waiting to bestow that information on me if and when I attempt to go back on my word.”

“So you’ve- you’ve officially said yes then.”

“Of course I have, I had no choice,” he said, “my Mother warned me about that part, thank Merlin I spoke to her first. She of course actually cares for my well being. Father has always been desperately jealous of her love for me.”

“But he’s still your father! You’re still his son! He couldn’t possibly-”

“My father has never loved me, Hermione. He has proven it time and time again, and I’ve done nothing but give him reason to become even more spiteful and full of hatred for me these past three years. I believe this to be his moment of glory, as it were. He has me under his control, as far as he is aware.”

Hermione grimaced, looking away and letting his words sink in.

“Cretin,” she said through gritted teeth, “I hope he rots there,” she said, and then slapped her hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

Her words were obstructed by the hand over he mouth as she mumbled, “I’m sorry, Malfoy.”

Looking bemused, he said, “Back to my surname, then?”

She removed the hand from her mouth, looking at him apologetically.

“I didn’t mean to say that. He is still your father and-“

He brushed his hand through the air, saying, “it’s not a big deal, he has had little regard for me for some time now, I’m over it.”

Hermione looked at him quizzically, but dropped the issue quickly, for which he was grateful.

“Draco… I’ve been doing research on these promises,” she said, taking a slip of paper out of her robes and unfolding it, “and what I’ve found has been quite startling.”

He nodded, motioning over to the table full of opened books on the other side of the room, “so have I.”

She smiled ever so briefly as she looked over at the books, clearly noting their shared love of libraries and research. She turned her attention back to him and said, “then you know that awful things can happen to witches and wizards who attempt to break marriage promises.”

He nodded. “I do know, yes,” he said, feeling anxious again to get to the point. He was sure he knew even more than she did about the promises, but he had a plan. He needed to request that she
trust him enough to spend time with him before the wedding. It wouldn’t be breaking the promise for them to appear to be forming a friendship, and now was the time to make his intentions clear.

“Hermione, I know that the circumstances surrounding the marriage promise are… difficult, but I want to ask that we continue to spend time together prior to the wedding.”

“P- pardon?” she said, looking frightened.

He recoiled slightly.

He hadn’t expected her response to be one of fear.

Hesitation, sure, he had predicted that, but instead the look she gave him made his stomach turn over. It was as if he had requested she become a Death Eater.

“Draco, you can’t disobey the promise, it’s far too dangerous,” she said, in a panicked voice.

His heart sank, his mind drawing multiple conclusions about her response at once.

She was afraid of him. It was all he could hear.

He was poison to her, just as he had always been.

“Well if you don’t think it would be worth it…” he said, looking down.

“That’s so far from the point!” and suddenly she was shouting, “we are talking about a potential life or death situation, do you really think… that this is-”

“Well that potential for life or death didn’t stop you from snogging me the second you walked in here, and if you’ll notice, we’re both fine. No dark magic has been enacted upon us.”

“I- I’m sorry, that was- I shouldn’t have-“

He scoffed. “You know, Hermione, if you felt this strongly against us I wonder why you bothered coming here. I gave you a clear choice. I said you could write me back and say you weren’t willing. I especially thought you wouldn’t want to come back to this house and I wasn’t going to force you, but here you are. Perhaps you could make up your damn mind about what you want for once.”

She gasped, “and what is that supposed to mean? ‘For once?’”

He turned away, a familiar righteous smirk on his face, “Never mind, forget I said it.”

She stood. “No, I want to know what you meant, since you seem to have me all figured out!”

“The only thing I have figured out is that you don’t want to be with me, you’ve made yourself quite clear.”

She looked at him, stunned.

All of his walls were up, and he was not going to take them down for anything.

When she next spoke, it was in a softer tone, “Draco please do not take this personally right now, there’s more at stake than just our… whatever this is.”

He grimaced at her description of their relationship, feeling all the more resigned about any possibility of them falling in true love.
“And what else is at stake exactly, by your estimation?” he asked through gritted teeth.

She took a deep breath and looked down at her notes.

“This is only a theory, but… I fear that the unborn child is at risk.”

Draco grunted by way of response.

“It’s happened before,” she offered, “a couple had a child outside of a marriage bond, and they refused the promise. The results were quite… devastating,” she finished, her voice growing weaker with each word.

“Well you don’t actually know that will happen here, do you? Any number of things could have been included in the clauses.”

“Yes but are you really willing to risk it?”

“Clearly you’re not. Clearly you’re the one who has things all figured out, so why do you give a damn what I think?”

“I said it was a theory, Draco, I never said-”

“You’ve made yourself clear, Granger. We have nothing else to discuss,” he said, rising from his chair, “Wumply will see you out.”

She didn’t move immediately, but watched him cross the library and begin closing and stacking the books he’d been reading. Then, slowly, she crossed to the door, stopping to turn and look back at him once she reached it.

“Draco I-“ she began. He listened intently but did not look up.

Then she turned and ran from the room and he heard a single gasping sob as she made her way to the floo.

—

“Hermione, tell me the bit about the couple with the baby again,” Neville said as he started in on his third butter beer. She had flooed directly into the three broomsticks and sent a message to Neville in his living quarters asking him to meet her there immediately.

It had taken two full pints for her to get through the entire story, and Neville had listened intently, gasping and expressing outrage, while also being comforting and understanding in all the right places.

He had graciously accepted her apology for shouting at him the previous night, citing that she too was horrible at keeping secrets. He also hadn’t minded hearing that he was the first and only person she considered going to about this.

She supposed she could go to Harry and Ginny as well, but there had been less foundation to lay with Neville, less explaining to do. She knew she’d go to her other friends in time, but at this moment she really needed to speak to someone who could intimately relate to at least part of her plight.

“I really don’t want to repeat it, Neville.”

“Alright, sorry. Just trying to get it straight, it’s a lot to take in. That part sounded truly horrific. Do
“you really think Lucius Malfoy would stoop that—“

“I put nothing past Lucius Malfoy, Neville. That’s why this is so tenuous! I can’t imagine what good would come from Draco and I attempting to continue a relationship! And yet…”

“And yet you still want to, and you feel cheated out of the opportunity to see what would come of it.”

“Neville this is exactly why I came to you. I still feel I’m losing my mind, and yet you understand it. Thank Merlin for you,” she said, taking his hand across the table.

He smiled and squeezed her hand. “I know it sounds odd, but when Pansy… broke things off with me, I felt similarly cheated. We had never really connected beyond the… the sex.” He blushed.

Hermione grimaced at the thought, but Neville continued on.

“We had these small moments, though, where we seemed to really get on. I think if she could have put down her tough girl act, we might have had more between us. As it was, she just shut down as soon as things got a tiny bit real.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked, now with rapt attention.

“Well… after a while I started to want more and she seemed to as well. Yet, the moment that I voiced concern for what people would think, she blew it completely out of proportion! She accused me of not wanting to be seen with her, which wasn’t even true. I was merely trying to open a conversation about how we should tell people, but she just went off on me and ended things.”

Hermione let this sink in, noticing some glaring similarities between Pansy and Draco. They were both Slytherins, of course, and known for their tempers and bold personalities veiling their insecurities. She looked up at Neville and noticed he was staring off into a corner wistfully.

“Neville, do you really… regret it that much? I mean, you’re with Hannah now…”

He put his hands up, “Oh no! Not at all, Hermione, I’m very happy with Hannah. I just- sometimes I wish I’d had the opportunity to know… if it could have worked.” He looked at her apologetically, but she knew he wasn’t saying anything against his current wife.

She nodded. “I understand. Even if it is with the pug face,” she said with a grin.

“Hey you’re one to talk, snogging the ferret. Have you got little white hairs all over your clothes or did you brush them off before flooing here?” he asked, examining her clothing.

“Neville!” she groaned, smacking his hand away, “it’s not funny!” Even as she said it, she laughed.

“Alright Hermione, I’m done,” he said, taking a sip, “but you’re clearly not.”

She looked up, surprised. “What do you mean?”

He leaned in, “I mean, you told him you don’t want to see him anymore, yet here you are pouring your heart out about it. You’re not done with him by a long shot,” he finished, taking yet another sip of butter beer.

“But I didn’t even tell him that! Wait, did I?”

Neville shrugged, “sounded that way to me based on his reaction.”
Hermione thought hard. Had she said that? She hadn’t felt it, so it didn’t seem logical that she would have spoken it. She did want to see him again. Desperately, so. She simply wasn’t willing to engage in some plot to disobey the promise when an innocent child’s life may very well hang in the balance. Was that so unreasonable? And wasn’t that what he had asked her to do?

How had this gone so wrong so quickly? This was, without a doubt, the worst week of her life.

Well, after the Battle of Hogwarts, of course… and a large number of other horrific experiences in her life. Ok, so she was being rather dramatic, but perhaps the magnitude of a problem was directly related to a person’s most recent circumstances, and couldn’t just be weighed against all potential cruelties the world had to offer.

Her mind was spinning, and it wasn’t from the butter beer. In fact, she’d been talking so much that she’d scarcely touched her first one.

She put her head in her hands and groaned again. “Ugh, I am a complete disaster, Neville!” she said, and she wrapped her arms around her head and put her forehead down on the table in front of her.

“The ferret must be a right good snog,” he said with a grin.

She looked up at him, desperation in her eyes, “It’s more than that, Neville. I think we could have— that is— I just…”

Neville stopped mid-sip and eyed her quizzically, “you really like him, don’t you?”

“I don’t know!” she shouted, loud enough to draw attention from a number of patrons at the bar.

He smiled and nodded, returning to his drink, “You definitely do. You just can’t let yourself admit it. It’s just like it was with Ron. You always have to make it complicated rather than simply being honest with yourself.”

Hermione glared daggers at him upon hearing this.

“Neville, I think I should let you know that I am dangerously close to hexing you again.”

“Then it’s a good thing I took a Weasley hex-protective potion before coming here,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Oh you absolute git, you did not!” she shouted.

Neville smirked, “I guess you’ll have to hex me and find out when it rebounds on you. Still won’t change the fact that you like Malfoy more than you want to admit.”

“Ok fine! I do. I like him a lot, Neville, are you happy now?”

“I am!” he said, grinning, “now you just need to let yourself be.”

“But how could I possibly be happy about this, Neville? It’s all so inconvenient!”

“Love usually is,” he said, matter of factly.

Her eyes widened, “I never said I was in love!”

Neville shrugged, “Only a matter of time.”

“But Neville, he’s to be married in a month’s time!”
“Yes I did gather that, Hermione, you’ve only been explaining it to me for the past hour, along with all of the potentially disastrous consequences of him breaking his promise. I’m just saying… even a marriage promise can’t get in the way of true love.”

Hermione stared at him, perplexed.

“What in the world are you on about?”

He slammed his drink down, and she noticed a small sway in his body, indicating the beginnings of being quite pissed.

“Hermione, you read all sorts of books, don’t you ever delve into romantic fiction? This is the perfect set up!”

“Neville,” she said with a laugh, “are you actually telling me you read romantic fiction?”

Realizing his embarrassing admission, he grew still and said, “Maybe,” through almost unmoving lips. She attempted not to laugh more, but unsuccessfully.

“I may have gotten bored on holiday with Hannah and picked up her copy of Pride and Prejudice! Jane Austen is a classic muggle author, though. It’s hardly something to be embarrassed about!” he shouted.

“And yet your cheeks have never looked rosier,” she said, taking a sip of her own butter beer.

“Well ha ha, Hermione, your point is made, shall I get back to mine?”

“Oh please do, I can’t wait to hear this.” She continued taking long gulps of her drink.

“Well… actually I’m not sure of my exact point,” he said, looking confusedly around, “it’s just important to note that most great love stories involve a fair amount of struggle before a resolution. Darcy and Elizabeth go through plenty before they get together, including him being promised to another, though of course they are muggles, so no violent catastrophes threaten to befall them should they choose another. Lots of societal pressure though! And his Aunt is formidable…”

Hermione was holding back fits of giggles and staring at him with a most gleeful expression.

“You know, you should read that one and see for yourself, Hermione, I’m not going to sit here and explain the plot to you. I mean, I would, but I don’t think I can take you looking at me like that for much longer.”

Hermione put her hand to her face and smiled, “I’m sorry, Neville, it’s just such an amusing revelation.”

“Glad I can be here for some comic relief,” he said, downing his pint.

Hermione took his hand again, “Seriously Neville, thank you. I mean, I think I’m even more confused now, but still. I needed this.”

“Any time, Mione,” he said, squeezing her hand again and smiling. She returned to her drink before he spoke again.

“Hey how come we never dated, Hermione?”

She choked on her butter beer and then began coughing and sputtering.
“Neville that’s quite enough drink for you, I think!”

“I’m just saying! We always got on well…”

“You’re pissed, Neville. I always know you’re at your limit when you start attempting flirtatious conversation with me. It’s no wonder you ended up where you did with Pansy that night. There was quite a good amount of fire whiskey wasn’t there?”

“Hey! That was a deep-seated and unspoken attraction she’d been sitting on for years!” he shouted, and some witches nearby looked over, giggling.

Hermione tossed a few coins down and leaned across the table, “and that right there is the difference between me and Pansy Parkinson, Neville. I was a bit busy harboring my own unspoken attraction for someone from another house.”

She kissed him on the cheek.

“Thanks again. Get back to the castle safely, ok? Patronus me when you’re there, if you can pull it off in your current… state,” she smirked and walked to the floo.

“Hey, Mione?”

She turned to look at him. “Yes?”

“What you ever do, please be careful. I know you will be, but… will you keep me posted so I don’t worry? You know, about whether you’re going to chance… things?”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Neville. I just needed to vent, I don’t intend to stray from the current plan.”

“Ok just… still promise me, okay?”

“Ok fine, I promise! Don’t trouble yourself with it, Neville, truly. I’ll be fine.” she said as she waved goodbye to him.

He waved back as she disappeared into the green flames.

Chapter End Notes

New updates Mondays and Thursdays!

Please leave a comment, they breathe life into my writing!
Dear Potter

Chapter Summary

Draco calls in the cavalry... in the form of Harry Potter.

Chapter Notes

I’m now on a twice-weekly posting schedule – Mondays and Thursdays
This one is ready now and I’d rather post it than wait for midnight, so enjoy!
This chapter is just under 3k words, but Thursday's edition will be a whomping 5.1k so
just know that this one is a necessary stepping stone, and hopefully an enjoyable one. I
personally enjoyed it very much :)

Tons of love to all of my loyal commenters, especially Sarah_Seasoning, Misscolefox,
AccioPemberly, Seakays, and ThePsychicGnome. And welcome to our newcomers
who have been happily binge-ing, Frau_Blucher and hstraven! And anyone else I've
failed to name, there are more of you than I could hope for. I live for your comments
and you constantly fuel my creative process, so thank you very much for your
contributions!

Dear Potter,

Well here it is, you said you would believe it when you saw it. Do you believe it, Potter? I’m actually
writing to you. 

Originally I’d intended to simply ask you to meet so that I could give you a much deserved
explanation for leaving Britain so suddenly without telling you where or why I was going. I do still
intend to give you that explanation, however, something of a much more pressing nature has come
up and I need to ask for your assistance once again.

While I would love to put it all here in a letter and skip the part where I have to watch your reaction
to what I have to tell you, I’d rather not chance this message falling into the wrong hands.

Could we meet this evening? At that muggle pub we used to frequent?

Please let me know as soon as you can.

Regards,
DM

—

Dear Malfoy,

Wow it’s been a while since I’ve written that particular greeting. It feels oddly nostalgic.
I suppose you really are you and not some sort of hoax?

Seeing as I am an Auror these days, I wouldn’t be doing my due diligence if I didn’t require a security check prior to agreeing to meet.

Please reply back and tell me three things only the real Draco Malfoy would be able to.

Potter

PS - this could have been avoided had you been writing to me, I’d simply know your handwriting by now, but as it is...

—

Dear Potter,

1. You absolutely threw mud at me in Hogsmeade third year, even though you weren’t supposed to be there.
2. You witnessed Hermione Granger slapping me across the face that year as well, because I had come to watch that beast being slaughtered.
3. When you found me in the bathroom after Katie Bell came back, I was sobbing.

Do I pass?

DM

—

Malfoy,

Meet you at 8.

Potter

—

Draco arrived early, a bit anxious to get this unpleasantness over with but also looking forward to having some sort of direction. He made his way to their usual booth. The pub was fairly quiet as it was a Sunday night, but since it was a muggle pub he had little worry of being overheard regardless. He had recognized the bartender from his previous visits, and recalled that the man was also the owner. A strange sense of belonging washed over him as he walked by and was greeted with a knowing nod.

Potter arrived on time, striding through the door all windswept as if he’d flown there, and perhaps he had. Draco could see him clearly from where he sat, and noticed that after walking through the door, Potter looked back suspiciously as if checking whether he’d been followed. Seeming to decide all was well, he turned and began making his way to the booth.

It was Draco’s turn to look suspicious, however, when a cloaked figure entered behind Potter and began advancing on him.

Draco stood and drew his wand, causing Harry to spin around, but before either could act, the figure pulled back his hood to reveal his face.
“Zabini, damn it, I knew you were following me!” Harry shouted, drawing some attention from a few patrons, as well as the muggle bartender. Not wanting to cause a scene, Draco strode forward and waved to the man behind the counter.

“It’s alright, Brett, they’re with me,” he said before grabbing his two friends by the arms and dragging them back to the booth. The force was necessary because they’d been nose to nose and likely about to hex one another. Brett the bartender gave him another nod.

Draco shoved both men onto opposite sides of the booth as they protested loudly. He pulled up a stool and sat at the head of the table.

“Keep your voices down, are you insane?” he said to them in a stage whisper.

“Blimey Draco, you’d think we were meeting to discuss resurrecting the Dark Lord the way you’re carrying on,” Blaise said.

“Well considering present company I think we can rule that out as a possibility,” Draco retorted, “I’m merely not keen to attract attention. Speaking of which,” he turned to Harry, “unable to keep my messages private, Potter?”

“I might have done, if this git hadn’t been nosing.”

Blaise scoffed and turned to Draco.

“Here’s a tip, mate… if you don’t want your correspondence recognized, don’t send Ptolemy. He’s as much of an attention seeking peacock as you once were,” Blaise said silkily.

“How did you even see him? Why were you two together?” Draco asked, looking between them.

Harry and Blaise exchanged looks, each seeming to urge the other to explain. Harry scoffed at Blaise’s apparent deference and took the lead.

“Ginny and Gabrielle were having such a wonderful time together, they wanted to carry on. We all flooed back to mine and Ginny’s together after brunch.”

“Oh right Potter, it was all to do with our significant others having a good time, you were brought by sheer force is that it?” Blaise shot at Harry.

Harry glared at Blaise but turned to Draco without missing a beat.

“Oh I’m sorry, Malfoy, I left out the bit about how I was finding Zabini to be subtly tolerable and figured a few more hours with him wouldn’t kill me,” he said scathingly.

Blaise shook his head and looked away.

“Wow, alright then,” Blaise muttered, “I thought we were all having a good time, but whatever.”

Harry looked momentarily taken aback by the hurt in Blaise’s voice, but continued on.

“Anyway, your owl arrived as we were all together in the kitchen, it was quite obvious to both of us who it was from,” Harry explained.

“Yea and then when Potty here finally came back from his study where he’d presumably been corresponding with you, I heard him whisper to his wife who he’d be meeting at 8 and decided on following him,” Blaise said.
“As if it’s within your rights to do so,” added Harry.

“Maybe it is,” Blaise said, “if my best mate is sending you urgent messages, I’d like to know what they’re about, Potter,” he spit the surname with venom.

“Well perhaps it’s none of your business or he would have summoned you here as well, rather than merely putting up with the fact that you took it upon yourself to nose in.”

“Gentlemen I assure you there’s no need to fight. Plenty of me to go around,” Draco said, teasingly. He was rather enjoying watching them argue, if only because it was forestalling having to explain his intentions.

They both glared at him.

“Malfoy, I have lots of other things I could be doing right now. I don’t appreciate having to fend off your boyfriend here. Can we get on with it, please?”

“And Draco I don’t appreciate not being kept in the loop, this is like 6th year all over again.”

“Yes, only back then he was planning murder for the sake of keeping his family alive, I think he had a good reason for keeping you out of the loop,” Harry bit back.

Blaise ignored him and kept looking at Draco, expectantly.

“So what is it now, then? Another life or death scenario that I’m somehow not aware of?” Blaise asked jokingly.

Draco looked back and forth between the two, not sure whether to simply say “yes it is” or to lead up to it more slowly.

“You two might want to grab drinks first, I’ve got quite a lot to tell you.”

**

“So you did or did not ask Hermione to help you break the promise? I don’t understand,” Harry said a while later, now on his second fire whiskey.

He’d spent the majority of the story staring intently either at Draco or at the table top, taking steady sips as he listened to it all unfold. Blaise had been far more animated, gasping and cheering at various points, and attempting to add in commentary, which Draco had quickly squashed each time. This was exactly why he hadn’t requested Blaise be there, Harry knew how to just listen.

“That’s the thing, Potter,” Draco said, “I didn’t, but she just insisted that I had! Clearly she is determined to believe that I’m evil and that I’m going to pull her into some dangerous plot. It doesn’t matter what I say, that’s how she sees me, and there’s nothing I can do to change that.”

Blaise shook his head, “You’re a prat.”

“Blaise, seriously I’m going to hex your mouth shut if you don’t stop-“

“I agree with him,” Harry interrupted, abruptly.

Draco and Blaise snapped their heads to stare at him.

“Excuse me?” Draco said.
“You’re a prat, he’s right,” said Harry, simply.

Blaise raised his eyebrows at this. After an evening of being insulted and disagreed with by Harry, this was a startling change in tone.

“Oh please, do go on,” Draco drawled.

“Gladly.” Harry said, putting his glass down rather forcibly. “you’re a prat because you’re too hurt and insecure in yourself to recognize when someone else sees the best in you.”

Draco sneered. This was that same tosh he’d become accustomed to hearing from Harry after Azkaban, and he was no closer to believing any of it now than he had been then. He’d chalked it up to Harry’s post-war counseling and Auror training which had taught him how to see and evoke the best in people, and assumed he was no different than any of Harry’s official charges. A side project, a hobby… not someone who deserved to have their greatest and most terrible flaws forgiven.

“The best in me? Who was seeing the best in me then, Potter? Because Granger surely wasn’t. She thought I was trying to put her in harms way for my own aims.”

“You’re missing the point,” Harry said.

“He always does,” Blaise said quietly, and he and Harry shared a quick non-malicious glance before Harry continued.

“Malfoy, you insist on believing you’re no good, it’s almost like it’s your... life philosophy,” Harry said.

Blaise stared at Draco, nodding in agreement with Harry’s words.

“So even if you deserve to be thought well of, which you do, by the way... you’ll refuse to let it in,” Harry said.

“Yes that’s true,” Blaise said, wagging his finger at Draco. “you’ve been hiding and insisting no one wants you around and then the second you show your face you’re greeted by most everyone with acceptance and yet you still don’t want to see it. You’re on the bloody front page of The Prophet in an entirely sympathetic story about redemption, and yet you’re still hiding out in a muggle pub,” Blaise said.

“To avoid being overheard,” Draco said.

“To avoid the reality that you’re not actually a social pariah,” Blaise insisted, “I know you’ve traded on your bad boy image your whole life, Draco, but the cat’s out of the bag, as the saying goes.”

“What cat?” Draco asked.

Blaise laughed and turned to look at Harry who was now smirking.

“He doesn’t see it!” Blaise exclaimed.

“It’s rather amazing,” Harry agreed.

“What is? What are you two on about?” Draco said, his frustration mounting.

“It’s what I’ve been telling you since the day you got out of Azkaban, Malfoy. You are forgiven for your crimes, and you ought to accept that already,” Harry said, “Meanwhile the rest of the world has moved on without you there to take notice.”
“Not to mention that you’re in love with the Golden Girl herself, the fact that she’d snog you alone should be something of a fucking clue that you are no outcast, Draco,” said Blaise.

“I am NOT in love with her, stop saying that, Blaise. I don’t even think I’m capable of love!” Draco shouted.

This caused nearly everyone in the pub to stop speaking and turn to look at them. Harry and Blaise stared at him, speechless.

After a few moments had passed, the muggles turned back to their drinks and conversation.

“Do you really believe that, mate?” Blaise asked.

“You think you’re incapable of love?” Harry quickly added.

“I just… I can’t be sure really. I gave up a lot to become a Death Eater. It takes its toll on you, “ Draco said, looking morosely down at his drink. It was taking everything in him to speak this admission aloud to his two friends; it had been hard enough to say it out loud to his mother.

“You’re serious, Draco.” Blaise said.

Not a question, but a statement. Draco was grateful and a bit confused that Blaise was not using this as an opportunity to take the piss out of him. He supposed that Harry’s presence was now informing Blaise’s behavior.

“I just can’t believe it,” Harry muttered to himself.

“You can’t believe what?” Draco asked quietly, but with a demanding tone.

“I can’t believe you’re so focused on your own sad story that you’re forgetting the most obvious example of how a Death Eater could love, and love deeply,” Harry said.

“Snape,” Blaise said quietly. Harry nodded.

After the war, everyone had of course heard the entire story about Severus Snape being a double agent, risking his whole life because of his love for Lily Potter. He was considered a great hero, and this was something Harry had been sure to fill Draco in on in great detail when he’d written to him in Azkaban.

Draco considered Harry’s comment for a while, and turned his whiskey glass in circles as he thought. Harry and Blaise watched him intently.

“You’re right, Potter, I hadn’t thought about him,” Draco said finally. He wasn’t completely convinced, but this did complicate his previously solid belief.

“Well thank Slytherin something got through that thick skull of yours,” Blaise said to Draco before turning to Harry, “Well done, Potter, nice catch.”

Harry gave Blaise a courteous nod.

“So now that we’re done with the pity party, I suppose we have some planning to do?” Blaise said to the table at large.

“What do you mean?” asked Harry.

“Well, Draco said the only way to break the marriage promise is for one of the parties to fall truly in
love with someone else. His someone else is Granger and he’s already botched it, so like I said, we need to make some plans to rectify the situation.” Blaise was regaining his swagger now that there was action to take.

“Hold on a moment, I never agreed to participate in any schemes to get my best friend involved in a potentially life-threatening situation,” Harry said.

Blaise looked at him, perplexed. “She’s already involved, first of all, and second, I thought Weasley was your best mate.”

Harry looked suddenly awkward.

“Yes well, things change.”

Draco looked up intently. “You and Weasley aren’t friends, Potter?!”

“It’s- well, it’s a bit complicated. It’s not that we aren’t friends at all, we just… grew apart, you know? I had always planned on becoming an Auror, but Ron was mostly just following my lead. The training was grueling and the work even harder, and after a few months he decided to leave. He quickly received an offer to play professional Quidditch and of course jumped at it. Fame always was his weakness, and he could get it much more easily and without risking hardship, torture, or death that way,” Harry said. Draco and Blaise just listened, not making any commentary.

“Ron’s done with that now, he’s back working at the ministry and in a much less life-threatening position, but those first few years created a- a break in our friendship. I don’t think we ever fully recovered from it, and now this thing with Hermione…” Harry said, “I just hate seeing her in pain, and I’m not keen to see her in any more.”

Harry finished speaking and looked up to see both Draco and Blaise with their mouths hanging slightly open.

“Wow,” was all Draco could muster.

“It is what it is,” said Harry, and an awkward silence followed in which everyone took a drink. Draco wondered whether this was common knowledge or something Harry had managed to keep under wraps. He hadn’t been paying close attention to the news over the last few years, so it very well could have been and he just hadn’t noticed. He felt oddly guilt for not knowing, especially because he’d left Britain after he and Harry had begun to form a friendship. Had Harry been lonely then? Perhaps that’s why he’d been writing to Draco in prison in the first place? How could Draco have been so selfish as to not notice?

Harry broke the silence.

“Hermione and I got much closer after the war and she never seemed all that happy with Ron once they were married, but I kept my mouth shut and now look what’s happened. I can’t stand idly by once again and see her get her heart broken… or worse.”

Harry said the last bit directly to Draco, not in an accusatory way, but very matter of factly.

“I swear to you Potter, I am just as uninterested in hurting her as you are,” Draco said, “that’s exactly why I need your help.”
Dear Oh Dear Oh Dear

Chapter Summary

Hermione does a bit of overthinking, and Harry invites her over for dinner.

That's all I'll say :)

Chapter Notes

I love you all so very much - thanks for the wonderful comments on the last chapter, I can't wait to hear your thoughts on this one!

Dear Draco,

I feel horribly about the way things were left between us yesterday and I fear I have multiple apologies to make. You said we have nothing further to discuss, so rather than insisting we speak again, please permit me to assuage my guilty conscience here in a letter and I will do my best to be brief. Although, I do have a habit of going on and on, so apologies in advance if that is how this turns out.

Firstly, I must truly apologize for jumping on you the moment I saw you. I was feeling a large number of mixed emotions, not least of which was fear, as you alluded to, due to being back at Malfoy Manor. I must say, my logical mind had already lost the reigns of control by the time I stepped out of the fire. To be quite honest, I don’t entirely recall deciding to accept your invitation, and before I knew it I had gone through the Delacour floo and there I was.

I confess that your last few words seemed to act on me like a summoning charm and I was on my way to you before I had a chance to make a logical decision. The moment I stepped out of the floo, my body flooded with terror and if not for your enthusiastic house elf, I think I would have turned right around and left.

Then, seeing you again after what had happened that morning brought me back to a sense of comfort and elation I was in such dire need of in that moment that I simply could not help but kiss you.

I’m sorry if these sound like excuses, I’m not trying to justify my behavior or minimize the impact it must have had on you, I simply want you to understand I meant no harm. I was not quite myself, and I sincerely hope you accept my apology.

Secondly, I am also sorry for shouting at you. The fear that I’d been able to keep at bay up until that point came swooping back and I tried to speak calmly and rationally but I believe it was too little too late. I should have kept my composure and had a rational conversation but instead I flew off the handle and I was out of order.
I’ve been rather on edge lately, as I believe you know, and I’m afraid I haven’t had many conversations that haven’t ended in shouting or hysteric in days. Again, it’s not a justification, but I hope it provides some context for my behavior and lessens any negative impact on you.

Having said all that, I do stand by what I said yesterday. It is far too dangerous to risk violating that marriage promise.

I do not pretend to believe there is nothing between us, I think we both know there is something, and yet perhaps it’s a good thing we didn’t have more time to explore it. We could have had ages together before finding out that this promise had been enacted, and think how painful that would have been.

I think it’s better this way, and neither of us will have to feel responsible for any more destruction than we already do.

I hope that you accept my apologies and that everything works out for you and Astoria.

Sincerely,

HG

—-

Hermione finished the 8th draft of her letter and held it out in order to give it the usual once over. She had been incredibly apologetic in this one. Perhaps too apologetic? But then it was an apology letter so shouldn’t that be the case? Perhaps she had over-shared. He didn’t really need to know about her fear regarding the manor, that would probably just make him feel guilty. Ugh! No matter how she wrote the apology, it had always seemed manipulative. Perhaps she was being manipulative, then?

Thus far, her entire Monday morning at her desk in The Department of Magical Law Enforcement had been eaten up by this task.

Why was this so difficult? She had never had trouble expressing apologies before. Any time she had bungled something up on a job or accidentally insulted a co-worker or whatever she’d done, she had always been excellent at communicating her thoughts and repairing the damage. So why now was she second guessing herself?

A small knot in the pit of her stomach was really nagging at her. It had moved in the moment she’d opened her eyes that morning and was refusing to dissipate. She’d gotten home from The Three Broomsticks and had an additional few drinks while she unpacked from her trip, riding out the pleasant flow of alcohol and allowing it to whisk her off to a dreamless sleep.

In the morning, reality had crashed in. She had been through a whole hell of a lot in the past week. As an exercise, she had written out all of the events of the last week, most only from the last two days, in an effort to remind herself that she had every reason to be a bit unhinged:

Cheated on by Ron
Spent a week crying daily
Ran into Draco Malfoy for the first time since his trial
Discovered feelings of attraction for Draco Malfoy (!)
Harassed by Ron at the party leading to a very public row
Fell to pieces in front of Draco Malfoy
Almost kissed Draco Malfoy (!!!)
Discovered that Harry had been harboring a secret friendship with Malfoy for (5!) years
Offered herself on a platter to Rita Skeeter
Screamed at Neville
Was saved public humiliation by Draco Malfoy, someone who had previously been the purveyor of such embarrassment for most of her life (?!)
KISSED DRACO MALFOY (!!!)
Discovered she can’t be with him unless she wants to risk the potential death, illness, dismemberment or who knows what else, of a number of human beings including an unborn child
Returned to the place she’d been tortured
KISSED DRACO MALFOY AGAIN (!!!!)
Had a row with Draco Malfoy
Ran out of Malfoy Manor sobbing

Why didn’t she just turn in her wand and go live a quiet muggle life like the days before she’d gotten her Hogwarts letter?

Her life read like one of those Latin television shows where everyone is sleeping with everyone else and also has a dead but newly resurrected evil twin!

Perhaps she should leave well enough alone and not send any letter at all. She could just let it be and have no reason to assume she’d be seeing Draco again. It wasn’t as though she’d be invited to the wedding. Oh Merlin, it would obviously be at that dreadful Manor! She began to picture it.

Her heart rate spiked and the room started to swim.

Closing her eyes, she took a few deep, steadying breaths.

She had what the muggle doctors called PTSD from her experiences in the war, as did most everyone involved, even if they didn’t know this particular terminology for it. She had worked through it to a point where it no longer hindered her day to day activities, and yet there were still times when something would trigger it again, and she’d have to fight to stay in the present moment. It had happened the moment she’d stepped foot in Malfoy Manor again.

She’d known that she had the tools to re-train her brain not to react in that way, and once she’d seen the house elf there, and wearing clothes, she’d had an anchor to grasp onto, something that was different than it had been years ago. Then, when she’d kissed Draco it had become infinitely easier to employ her grounding tools. The initial shock was always the biggest hurdle, but she’d become rather proficient at seeking out anchors through lots of practice over the years.

When Draco had suggested defying the marriage promise, her inner terror had lunged at her and taken control.

Then he’d had the gall to make that comment about “making up her mind about what she wants, for once”. The nerve of him! She was perfectly able to know and say what she wanted.

Although...

The events of yesterday morning had her a bit unsure of herself.

Ron had shared the full story of his affair, and revealed that he hadn’t, in fact, been conscious during it. He might have been drunk, but who knows what else could have happened? Drugged? Potioned? Cursed?

The pathetic thing was that he hadn’t mounted a case to discover the true culprit, but had merely accepted his fate and then kept it from her for over a month.
He hadn’t felt able to go to her, out of fear.

She couldn’t tell if this made her more appalled at or sympathetic towards him. Wasn’t it an egregious offense to omit the fact that it had taken place?

Shouldn’t a husband and wife be able to be totally honest with one another?

What if he’d been attacked and was so focused on not upsetting her that he hadn’t even considered it worthy of investigation?

Merlin, that didn’t make her out to look very good either. What husband couldn’t tell his wife he’d been attacked? Was she really that rigid and controlling as a spouse?

Though, didn’t couples go through troubles like this? Wasn’t it idealistic fantasy to assume she could marry her Hogwarts sweetheart and have everything go smoothly for the entire rest of their lives? Did she perhaps want to get back together and try to work things out?

Wait, he was to have a baby with Astoria.

A baby that he would have no contact with but who would be fathered by none other than the man she had just snogged on two separate occasions in the same day.

Yesterday!

Again, the muggle life was sounding so sweet... even though the Latin television shows were made by muggles, and she knew full well that muggle lives were no less dramatic than wizarding ones, just a touch less flair.

Oh, she was doomed!

She looked back down at her letter and wondered again why it had been so difficult to write.

Then it hit her...

It had been a tiny inkling in the back of her mind, which now somehow stood front and center.

She didn’t know what she wanted.

He’d been right about her.

If she had known for sure what she wanted, the letter would be simple to send.

In reality, she was incredibly torn. She didn’t actually want to be done with him. Wanted to see if perhaps their row was just a row and they could make it up somehow. Yet, her fear and morals regarding the promise were clashing with her curiosity.

Sending this letter would create a sort of finality to the whole matter, and so she was stalling and hesitating.

Merlin, she hated when anyone knew her better than she knew herself. It especially irked her that Draco Malfoy apparently knew her in this way. Had he paid that close attention to her in school?

He had mentioned as much in the library, but that had been to do with her magical abilities, not her personality quirks. Why had he bothered to understand her when he’d hated her?

She shook herself. This line of questioning would go on forever if she let it.
And that’s why she had to simply send it. Be direct. Make a choice. State boldly how it was going to go and be done with it.

That would show him.

On second thoughts…

Why did she care? She had nothing to prove to him, so maybe she shouldn’t send it. She’d been far too open, oversharing and going on and on. Didn’t that read like she secretly wanted more from him?

Because secretly, she did?

Oh bugger, she was annoying herself to no end with her own overthinking!

In a fury of dazzling flames, she set magical fire to the 8th draft of her letter, vanishing the ashes even before they had even landed on her desk.

Reaching for a new sheet of parchment and quill, she bent over it and wrote...

—

Dear Draco,

I’m writing to express my sincerest apologies for all that took place over the weekend.

I wish you the best of luck with the marriage and truly hope you will be happy.

Sincerely,

Hermione

—

Before allowing herself to analyze or second guess it, she closed up this version with her wax seal and attached it to the leg of her office owl.

Glancing at the clock, she saw that she had indeed spent her entire morning on the task. Ignoring the fact that she had no appetite at all, she left her office to take her lunch break.

****

It had been two days and she hadn’t received an owl back from him. Not that she’d expected one, of course! Her note had been rather one-sided, not really requiring a reply.

If he did reply, what would he say that would be satisfying?

—

Granger,

No hard feelings. Have a nice life.

—

Malfoy

—

Or worse! He could be polite and impersonal and not sarcastic at all!

—

Granger,
Thank you for your note. I wish you the best of luck as well.

Malfoy
—
Very unlike him!

She would hate that almost as much as she hated the way he spoke to her at the end of their meeting on Sunday.

Or he could be wistful and romantic and make her yearn...
—
Hermione,

I do so wish that things had ended differently between us. Please, permit me to see you one last time to make a final plea...

Draco
—
But he wouldn’t do that, and she didn’t know if she even wanted him to! No, she certainly did not want that.

Even if she did want that, why in the world would he write that kind of letter to her?

He had been cross with her and she hadn’t said anything at all that would have inspired his affections.

She supposed that on some level she did want him to send her something wistful and romantic, even though it went against everything she had said, er, shouted, at him on Sunday.

It was odd, but she found that she missed him.

A stupid thing to feel, she thought, she’d only had a few hours total of his company, if that.

Merlin, she had really let her spinning thoughts get the better of her this week.

Her work had been piling up since she’d left for France last Friday, and this growing obsession with Draco Malfoy was not aiding in her productivity.

She resolved to put him out of her mind for the day and pour herself into her work.

This plan went rather successfully, as once she began to work through the pile of papers in earnest, it really did become all-consuming.

It wasn’t until a knock on her office door broke her concentration that she even realized it was nearing the end of the day.

“Come in!”

Her door swung open to reveal her best friend looking fairly careworn after what must have been a day spent mostly in the field.

“Well, you look a mess,” he said.

“I would say the same were I as rude as you.”

Her tone was light and a small smile crossed her lips as she said this.
He was right of course, she hadn’t been sleeping well with all the stress over Draco and her letter. She’d also become completely immersed in paperwork all day, so much so that she hadn’t really eaten lunch. Come to think of it, she hadn’t fully eaten her lunch all week, each day the remnants forgotten on her desk to be swept into the bin on her way out.

“Calling out the obvious is part of my charm and one of the things you love about me most, Hermione.”

“Fair point, Potter.”

“Dinner at ours?” he said.

She gaped at him and then turned to look at her Holyhead Harpies desk calendar, this month featuring Ginny zooming through the air, quaffle tucked tightly under her arm as she dodged a well-aimed bludger.

“Is it Wednesday already?!”

“Are they keeping you that busy over here? Gods, Hermione, when will I ever be able to persuade you from behind that desk? You know I could really use you on my team.”

“Harry, please tell me there will come a day when you give up on this ludicrous plan to coerce me into being an Auror, you know I don’t fancy field work, having had enough of it forced upon me in our younger years.”

“Oh give it up! Forced, indeed! You loved it. You miss it,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“I certainly do not miss it. I quite enjoy my work here and I’ll thank you to stop acting as though you know me better than I know myself.”

“Wound pretty tightly today, then? I’ll make sure Ginny has a pitcher of margaritas ready for your arrival.”

Hermione let out a sigh and smiled serenely.

“Bless you two Potters, I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“See you at seven, then?”

“Yes, I’m just going to finish up a few things here and pop home to freshen up. As you’ve so studiously stated, I am a bit of a mess.”

Harry tapped his hand on the door frame and said, “Don’t be late, you don’t want your icy pitcher watered down before you’ve have a chance to pour a glass.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “See you in a few hours.”

—

Hermione popped home as planned, and changed out of her work robes and into a well fitting pair of muggle jeans and a Beatles t-shirt, then paired it with a comfy black blazer with a subtle pattern to the fabric, finishing it off with combat boots for a chic yet cool after work look. She and Ginny loved playing with muggle fashion and always erred on the side of punk/tomboy styles more so than anything super feminine. They had created something of a tradition of visiting muggle street fairs and vintage shops to find interesting pieces to throw together.
Hermione hadn’t put much thought into her wardrobe in the past, and Ron certainly had never seemed to care either way. This was something she delighted in that was just for her.

She shared this fascination with Ginny. Between Quidditch and working at the ministry, they were both so accustomed to wearing uniforms that they found great pleasure in going out on their own to discover new methods of self-expression.

Once she was satisfied and felt refreshed, she headed to the floo and was standing in Harry and Ginny’s living room in a matter of moments, dusting her jeans off and coughing a bit.

“Ginny, where’s my margarita? I just inhaled at least a pound of ash and I require it at once or I shall topple over onto your floor in a cloud of smoke!” she yelled into the kitchen, on the good assumption that Ginny would be standing on the other side of the door.

Sure enough, the cheery red head emerged through the swinging kitchen door with a salted rim glass in one hand and a large pitcher in the other.

“Allright then, pipe down bossy pants and you’ll have your drink just as soon as I’m able to tip it into its tumbler- oh! I love this outfit!! Is that the blazer from Petticoat Lane?! I adore it, I only wish I’d seen it before you had!”

Hermione was not listening, however. In the split second that the kitchen door had swung forward, she’d spotted a shock of white blonde hair on the other side.

It couldn’t be. No. How could he be here? And why? And again, how?

What other blondes did they know?

“Ginny… is… is Luna here?”

“Luna Lovegood? Gods no, Hermione, don’t you know she’s off romping the globe with Rolf Scamander?”

Hermione’s eyes widened in recognition.

“In fact,” Ginny said, looking suspicious, “you’re the one who told ME that. Are you feeling okay?”

“I just- blonde hair- the kitchen,” was all she could manage, as she stared at the now closed kitchen door.

Ginny turned around to glance at the door. “Oh, Malfoy! Yes well Harry just had to invite his boyfriend over after they ran into each other today at the ministry,” she said and then lowered her voice, “they have a ‘special friendship’ and I’m not allowed to make commentary on it, but between you and I it is so weird! Imagine going from simply loathing one another to being bosom buddies! Though I will say, to Malfoy’s credit, he’s quite tolerable to be around. Seems to have lost that smarmy swagger he used to carry. He’s even made me laugh a few times. Harry is, of course, at liberty to befriend whomever he likes, but I still think it’s so weird seeing them as chums.”

Hermione had gone rigid and speechless. He was here. In this flat. The flat which she had come to in order to unwind and forget her troubles.

To forget him.

How dare he.
She was beside herself with anger. It settled in her chest and she noted that it felt similar to excitement.

Was she excited?

Hadn’t she been wanting to see him desperately ever since she’d floo’d away from Malfoy Manor? Hadn’t she been hopelessly awaiting an owl that would never come?

Had he known she would be there when he’d accepted the invitation? Surely not, he couldn’t possibly want to see her.

Well, he’d just have to deal with it. This was not Malfoy Manor. This was her territory, not his, and he was trespassing in HER life now. The tables had turned!

Still not tearing her eyes from the door she said, “Pour my drink please, Ginny.”

“You are on good terms with him, aren’t you?” she asked as she carefully poured the drink into Hermione’s glass, “Harry mentioned that you came to his aid when that Skeeter cow was trying to poach him for a story. Seems she got what she wanted anyway, but Harry reckons there’s no more bad blood between the two of you and that you wouldn’t mind an evening with him.”

Hermione hardly heard her. “Let’s go in, it’ll seem odd if we delay here for too long.”

Ginny stood in her way as Hermione made to move towards the kitchen. Hermione’s face was set and Ginny looked alarmed.

“What has gotten into you, Hermione?”

“No time now, Ginny, it’s a very long story and I’d rather get this evening in motion than stand here talking about it for another minute.”

Ginny’s eyes went wide. She wasn’t used to this sort of directness and severity from Hermione, but took it in stride.

“All right then, you’re the boss. Just please promise me you’ll eventually explain what the hell has your wand in a knot?”

Still staring at the kitchen door like a zombie, Hermione managed a stoic, “I promise”

Empty words.

Though it pained Hermione, she didn’t think she could stand to tell Ginny what had happened between her and Draco, but especially not in this moment. She’d have to give this more thought before deciding who to share it all with.

She didn’t even know if there was anything pertinent to share. Her non-relationship with the once-dark wizard on the other side of the door had ended quite abruptly, and after sending her letter and receiving no rebuttal from him by reply, she saw little point now in introducing the subject to her friends.

Neville would likely be where the sharing began and ended, so long as he could keep his mouth shut.

Ginny raised her eyebrows and turned on her heel, pushing open the kitchen door and holding it for Hermione to step through behind her.
Wow. She looked incredible in her casual yet put together muggle attire.

Draco had been playing out this moment in his mind since Sunday evening, and even her strangely stoic and unnecessary letter on Monday morning hadn’t put him off fantasizing about things going very well once he saw her again in person. Not sexual fantasizing… well, maybe a tiny bit, but really he kept imagining scenes in which they simply got along and were able to be around one another, giving them a chance to get closer.

He had written to Harry for advice upon receiving Hermione’s letter…

—

Dear Potter,

I received the following two-line missive from Granger this morning [see enclosed copy]

What do you make of this? Should we change our plans for the week? Should I respond?

Please let me know your thoughts. Ideally Blaise is not currently at your flat and/or looking over your shoulder again? The way you two were getting on by the end of last night, I confess I wouldn’t be surprised.

DM

—

Malfoy,

This is classic Hermione. She is likely a mixture of angry with you, with herself, and with the entire situation, and is mentally obsessing over what the right thing to do would be. I wouldn’t regard this letter as new information. I say we proceed with you casually showing up for dinner as planned.

Should you respond? I think not. It doesn’t really necessitate a response.

My instinct is to leave it alone, and Dumbledore once said that my instincts are good and nearly always right.

I bet you just rolled your eyes, didn’t you?

HP

PS - I managed to shake Blaise off, believe it or not. I do believe he’s officially put down his shield of hatred and rather unabashedly fancies me now. Don’t be too jealous, though. Unlike you, I’m straight as an arrow *wink wink*

—

Potter,

I did roll my eyes.

And, I agree.

Thanks and see you Wednesday.
PS - Try again. Straight as an arrow men do not include *winks* in their letters, sorry to break it to you. Despite my playing along with Blaise, if you can even call it that - it’s more like being resigned to his behavior, I don’t swing that way … but we’re getting off the subject at hand.

—

Through some further communication, and amidst copious distracting innuendos and playful character attacks, Draco had also learned that Hermione had not yet confided what had happened between herself and Draco to Harry, which Harry thought was to be expected. After all, it would be quite a lot to swallow.

The events of the weekend were each individually shocking, but to put them all together in one list would likely make her sound as though she were reciting made up dreams for divination class.

He didn’t fault her for her behavior, and in the days since he’d found himself worrying about her quite a bit. He’d considered dropping by her office at the ministry, but Harry had warned him against this. It was imperative that he keep his behavior casual, and not cause her to think that he was purposely putting himself in her path. He was simply back in Britain and they had some mutual friends. Though, he wondered if she’d be able to sense the lust behind his eyes. His occlumency training had taught him many tricks, but if Blaise hadn’t been fooled…

He’d thought of her quite a bit more than he should. Building her up in his mind only made situations like the one he was in at present more fraught with tension and nerves, and he needed to be accountable for his actions.

Merlin, he had been able to manipulate and lie as a servant of the Dark Lord, but with the affect she had on him, he truly wondered if he’d be able to keep up his farce long enough to re-gain her trust.

That’s why, when she met his eyes tonight while standing in the Potter’s kitchen, it made his blood run cold.

She was entirely expressionless, and it was the lack of emotion that caught him off guard. Staring at him impassively was so much worse, he realized, than a look of coy excitement or of anger, both of which he had envisioned.

This reaction, however, was… unprecedented.

“Hello,” she said stoically, and then took a sip of her drink.

“Hermione, I hope you don’t mind, I ran into Malfoy at the ministry and—”

She turned her head quickly to look at Harry, her expression unchanged.

“Yes, Ginny told me.”

Oh bugger, what was that look in her eye? He had never seen this cold side of her before, and suddenly felt the sense that he shouldn’t be there. This had been an awful idea. An intrusion! How could he have thought this would have been the right move? Damn Zabini and Potter for planning this dinner!

Re-gaining her trust was clearly not on the menu for this evening.

Then, all of a sudden, she plastered on a false grin. It was one that even Dolores Umbridge couldn’t
rival. When she opened her mouth, it was in a similar simpering tone to the giant-bow-headed witch.

“Lovely to see you, Malfoy. What brought you to the ministry today? Readying your marriage paperwork?”

Fuck. This was going to be a long night.

****

The level of falsely pleasant conversation that followed over drinks and dinner was positively alarming. It was as though Hermione had been replaced by some alien version of herself.

Her first question had made his insides squirm. He had, in fact, been at the ministry with Astoria to begin marriage paperwork. After that, Astoria had left for a week-long trip to New Zealand to retrieve her Grandmother’s engagement ring and personally invite some family members to the wedding. Potter’s suggestion to have him casually come by for dinner on Wednesday had coincided too well with Draco’s existing plans, and had seemed meant to be.

Yet, as fate would have it, it wasn’t turning out quite the way they had imagined.

He’d managed to dance quite quickly through explanations of being at the ministry to apply for a marriage certificate, as well as those about Astoria’s whereabouts that evening. Hermione had had that plastic grin on her face, and so if she had been perturbed by hearing about it, no one in the room could tell.

What they could tell, however, was that some other-worldly presence had taken up residence in Hermione’s brain this evening.

It seemed that the more she drank, the worse it got.

At one point, she even expressed some cockamamie nonsense about how Draco would surely make a better father than Ron Weasley, and that the child would be quite fortunate, to a chorus of silence and wide-eyed stares from all involved.

Hermione wasn’t bothered, however, as she continued to down her margaritas. Draco knew from Harry that Hermione did not typically drink to excess, so this behavior had been quite alarming to everyone at the table.

It had been an unmitigated disaster of an evening, and when it came time for after dinner tea, Draco had been quite ready to go home.

Harry and Ginny had tried to reason with Hermione. They tried to take the tequila away from her, which she had begun drinking straight out of the bottle, but to no avail.

Hermione seemed intent on acting out the very same farce that Draco had come there to engage in: that everything between them was platonic and that they were merely friends with acquaintances in common.

Talk about a plan backfiring.

Draco excused himself and went upstairs to the loo. Once inside, he splashed water on his face and looked at his reflection in the mirror.

He thought absurdly of the time in sixth year when he’d escaped to the bathroom to do this very same thing, and the hellish circumstances under which that had occurred. Was his current
predicament more or less dire? He hardly knew.

He opened the door and found himself face to face with Hermione, just like they had been only a few days prior.

She jumped and let out a small gasp, swaying on the spot from the level of alcohol consumption. “Oh! Draco I- I thought you went to the downstairs loo-”

“No I- I didn’t.”

She looked into his eyes.

They stood there for a long moment, searching each other’s faces.

Now that they were alone, her energy was entirely different.

She was vulnerable… an extremely strong sense of yearning emanating from her being. She was certainly pissed, he’d witnessed the amount she had drunk, and yet… the surprise of finding herself alone with him seemed to sober her.

Suddenly, she burst into tears and threw herself forward, resting her head on his chest and wrapping her arms around him. He put one arm around her and the other rested on her head, stroking her hair in a calming manner.

“Draco I-”

“Shhhh- it’s okay.”

He kissed her head and kept uttering calming phrases and running his fingers through her hair as she wept heavily into his chest. She ran her fingers over his chest as she cried, and it made chills erupt over his entire body. He logically knew that he shouldn’t be turned on in this moment, but he couldn’t help himself. He’d been so starved for some true emotion from her all evening, not to mention in the days previous, that to get it in a huge wave all at once was quite overwhelming.

At the same time that he desired her, he also wanted to make her calm. He wanted her to be content and happy. He desperately did not want her to be in pain, and certainly not because of him. He at once regretted his decision to be there, and was grateful he was getting this moment with her.

Snapping his fingers, he conjured a handkerchief as he had done in the Delacour library, and placed it in her hand. She wiped her face haphazardly as she continued to cry, a mumbled thanks escaping her lips. He let out a deep sigh and felt her relax into him, her sobs lessening now, her breath steadying. She breathed in deeply, and he had the sense that she was taking in his scent, just as she had done that night in the library. It made him tingle all over, the idea that she was studying, even memorizing him, like one of her favorite books.

Slowly, she lifted her head off his chest and looked up into his eyes, hopeful… searching…

As he met her deep doe brown eyes, all of his faculties failed him. His heart rate increased to astronomical levels and his breathing became ragged. Her familiar pattern of looking from his eyes to his lips began and he felt himself leaning in against his will, against his better judgement…

Their lips brushed just as his restraint kicked in.

She was incredibly drunk, he did not want anything to happen this way. Not now, not ever. He took
a deep breath and whispered, “Hermione.”

“Hermione!” Ginny’s voice called from the bottom of the stairs, “Are you up there?”

Hermione snapped her eyes open and turned in the direction of the sound.

“Be right down!”

She turned back to look at Draco.

“I…” she said, breathless, “I have to go.”

She turned and ran, leaving him alone in the hall, chest heaving, heart pounding so loudly he was sure it could be heard from the floor below.
Out Sick

Chapter Summary

After a night of tequila, Hermione skives off work for the day and ends up spending her time in quite an enjoyable way...

Chapter Notes

Surprise Saturday/Sunday chapter! I need to post this before Monday because I want to start posting a shorter chapter every Monday, and the longer ones on Thursday. I'm off-pattern currently with what I've already written, and I'm also experiencing writers block because I have too many queued up. I think I need to publish them so I can move on with the writing.

So... due to my ever-changing creative process, you get this one early, and another 2.5k word chapter on Monday! Enjoy!

Come play with me on tumblr: https://liliansilverstuff.tumblr.com

Hermione woke the next day already holding her head in her hands.

The world was far too bright, it was unseemly. How dare the sun shine so brightly at such an hour? She looked over to her clock and saw that it was, in fact 10:30am

“Oh, bollocks!”

She was two hours late for work.

And her head was absolutely pounding.

Fumbling around haphazardly in the drawer of her nightstand, her hand finally rested upon its quarry.

She uncapped the years-old and hopefully not useless hangover potion with all the deftness she could muster and downed it in one.

As the potion took effect, her headache mostly lifted and her fogginess almost cleared. Too bad the potency had waned in all the time she’d had it. Drinking to excess was something she had only done enough times to count on one hand.

She didn’t think she could face a normal day in the office, whether she got new potion from somewhere or not.

Her foggy remembrance of the events of the previous night left her with a sense of foreboding significance, even though she could not expressly remember them.
It was now time for the most painful part of any hangover morning: taking stock of what had actually occurred.

All that she could recall in the moment was that Draco Malfoy, the sneaking spy, had infiltrated her safe haven and polluted the only clear waters she’d had to swim in. The foul git!

An unbridled pool of anger began surging through her at the thought of his pale, handsome face smiling in the Potters’ kitchen.

Stupid handsome face, she grumbled aloud.

Reaching back into the drawer of her nightstand, she fumbled a bit before her hand emerged clutching ink and quill. She grabbed a blank slip of parchment as well and scribbled a note to her supervisor saying that she had fallen ill, and although she’d be fine, she hadn’t slept through the night and would need the day to recover.

Then she realized she had no owl to send it with and let out an aggravated sigh.

Chucking it aside, she grabbed her wand and cast a patronus. The otter swam out of her apartment on route to the ministry, and she noticed it looked a bit sluggish, devoid of its usual happy sway.

Did patronuses get hangovers too?

Given that she hadn’t yet taken one sick day in her entire stint as a ministry employee, she thought that it would probably be alright that she miss today.

She lay back in bed, pulling the covers up over her head when she heard multiple talon taps on her window pane.

Owls. And just when she no longer needed one.

It seemed that two of her friends had chosen this moment to send her messages, or perhaps they had been collecting outside and she’d been too unconscious to hear them.

She groaned with guilt as she realized it was probably the latter.

Dragging herself out of bed to let them fly in, she stopped at her jar of owl treats and grabbed two before going to collect her messages.

One seal bore the Hogwarts crest. Neville. He would, of course, be checking up on her. She didn’t have the energy or the memory, frankly, to fill him in on what had happened.

The other seal was a familiar shade of orange. Ginny still used her Weasley family seal even though she hadn’t been a Weasley anymore for quite some time. Her reasoning was that it matched her hair, and Hermione smiled at the thought.

Ginny would, of course, be demanding her promised explanation, and Hermione found herself near tears at the idea of replying to either of these requests, out of sheer exhaustion and confusion of her own.

Just as her tears were close to falling, a handsome eagle owl soared through the window she hadn’t bothered to close, and landed on her bed next to the others who were both enjoying their treats. She jumped up to retrieve another for Ptolemy, which he promptly refused to take from her before she removed the letter from his leg.
Chivalry. From an owl. Alright then.

She detached the letter from Ptolemy’s outstretched leg and exchanged it for the treat, which he took gratefully. As she fumbled with it, attempting to break the seal, her heart rate sped. After what seemed like an eternity, even though it had only been about five seconds, she opened the letter and read.

—

Dear Hermione,

I would like to offer my sincerest apologies for appearing unannounced at your dinner yesterday evening. Given the events of our last meeting, I can’t imagine that my presence was a welcome one. Almost immediately after seeing your face, I felt as though I was intruding upon your space and wished I hadn’t come. I didn’t want to be rude to our hosts by leaving suddenly, and so propriety kept me there, which I now regret. In retrospect, I ought to have chosen rudeness.

I’m quite sure that I’ve upset you deeply, and given the fact that you burst into tears upon meeting me in the upstairs hallway, I’m also quite sure that the rest of your night must have been rather unpleasant.

I do not wish to cause you upset in future. To that end, I want you to know that it’s likely our paths will cross again. Blaise and Gabrielle are planning a get together tomorrow evening, to which you will obviously be invited if you haven’t been already.

I will absolutely abstain if you do not want to see me there. Simply say the word.

Please send your reply with Ptolemy, I’ve instructed him to wait for it.

If you’d prefer to ignore me by way of reply, you can ask him to leave and he will oblige.

I hope you're feeling well.

Regards,

Draco

—

Hermione hadn’t breathed once while reading the letter. Her mouth agape, she exhaled as she reached the end of the page and looked over at Ptolemy who had finished his treat and was watching her intently. The other two owls had gone while she’d been reading, and she hadn’t even noticed.

“You can wait, Ptolemy, I’m going to write a reply,” she said, and he hooted dolefully in response. She crossed the room to retrieve another treat for him to have while he waited for her to compose a reply.

She grabbed a new slip of parchment and stared at it, dumbfounded. What should she say?

A small voice inside her told her to start writing and allow what she needed to say to flow through her without overthinking.

She expected that the remnants of her hangover not doused away by old potion were rendering the overthinking parts of her brain a bit useless, making this inner guidance louder than her usual logic.

Putting quill to page, she began to write without filtering.
Dear Draco,

I really appreciated your message. You’re correct, I did feel intruded upon. If I’m honest, I’m still quite cross with you for showing up there last night, but the apology does help. It’s very thoughtful of you.

As for the matter of Blaise and Gabrielle, I’m still not quite used to the idea of them as a couple, but I have been invited and I’ve accepted.

Since you’ve asked and because it won’t be a surprise, I think it will be alright for you to be there. If I change my mind I will let you know.

Hermione

She folded and quickly sealed this message before she’d had a chance to review it, and attached it to Ptolemy who gave her an affectionate nip before taking off through her still-open window.

The part of Draco’s letter where he referenced her bursting into tears came sharply back into her memory and she felt a hot rush of embarrassment flood her cheeks.

She had cried... into him. Head resting on his chest.

She had... smelled him.

He’d smelled like sandalwood and vetiver and plush leather armchairs.

If she had to drown and perish in a scent, his would be the one she’d choose.

The whole memory was now intact. Somehow, crying while being held in his arms was one of the best feelings she had ever experienced. So often, and especially in the last week, her crying had felt arbitrary and pointless. As if it could go on forever, and no one would care and nothing would be different.

Being held by him while she cried had made it feel productive. The way you feel after a good long day of work when your inbox is empty at the end. She’d had that sensation of a day’s work complete, after just a few moments of him holding her, and she’d been able to calm down quickly.

She couldn’t remember ever being held that way by anyone.

Whenever she cried to Ron, he would regard her as a tiny volcano that might sear him with lava if he got too close. Even on the occasions when he had held her, she had sensed his obligation to do so, but Draco... had seemed to want to.

It was almost as though it was his life’s purpose in that moment, the way he’d enveloped her in his arms. Like he had always been there waiting for her to break down so that he could pick up the pieces.

She got back into her bed, Ginny and Neville’s letters still unopened and unanswered at her feet, and curled up under her covers. She didn’t want to interact with the world, she just wanted to re-live those moments. Not the crying, obviously, but the feeling of being safe and held in Draco’s arms. Closing her eyes and imagining it, she could almost smell him.
Her eyes shot open and she sat up, an idea occurring to her.

She scanned the room, searching, and then spotted her blazer and Beatles T-shirt strewn across her desk chair. Grabbing her wand where she had responsibly left it on the night stand even in her super-drunken state, she levitated her clothes over to the bed and grabbed them greedily out of the air.

Pressing them to her face, she inhaled. Tingles spread through her entire body right down to her toes, as the still-intact scent of him filled her. She sighed contentedly and drifted off, back to sleep.

****

It couldn’t have been more than an hour later when she was awoken by the sensation of talons kneading at her legs. Eyes still closed, it occurred to her that she had never shut the window and was now receiving yet another message. Probably her supervisor letting her know it was okay that she miss the day.

But wait... she had never sent that owl!

She opened one eye and peered down, receiving a jolt of excitement up her spine.

It was Ptolemy.

Draco had sent a reply.

She sat up, alert, and took the scroll from the regal eagle owl’s leg, unfurled it, and read.

—

Dear Hermione,

It is gracious of you to accept my apology. At least, I think you’ve accepted it, if only part way. Be it partly or fully, I dare say I don’t deserve such grace.

I too am a bit unsure about this pairing of our two friends. Age difference aside, I’ve never known Blaise to stay with any one woman for longer than an evening or two. The fact that they are acting like a couple is quite surprising, to say the least.

He seems to really care for her, and he’s been a better version of himself since the after-party. He even managed to get along with Potter a few evenings ago, and I think they enjoyed one another’s company.

I know that most things I say are dripping with sarcasm, but I promise that last sentence was entirely sincere.

So for now, at least, I’m withholding my judgements.

You must be feeling well if you were able to send such a neatly penned letter? I don’t think I’d even be conscious if I’d had as much to drink as you last night.

No insult intended there, it was actually quite impressive.

Draco

—

Hermione finished reading and instantly had her quill and ink pot at the ready to respond.
Dear Draco,

I confess I am shocked by these revelations about Blaise Zabini’s character, and the apparent effect that Gabrielle has had on him. Is he in Britain because of her, or did he follow you here? It’s none of my business, but it does seem like a lot of life changes in a short time, though I’m certainly no stranger to that. In fact, I may have Zabini beat.

As for Harry enjoying his company, I will need to see that with my own eyes tomorrow night. Though, I never did think I’d see the day when you two would be friends, so perhaps it’s not so difficult to imagine.

I will join you in withholding judgements, for now.

Regarding my penmanship and level of consciousness, it may interest you to know that there are these things called potions which can relieve hangover symptoms quite effectively. You should look into them, the topic may be of interest you.

In case there is any doubt, those last statements were intended to be dripping with sarcasm.

Thank you for the compliments, though I dare say I don’t deserve them; my behavior last night was appalling.

You won’t find an apology from me here, however, as you definitely deserved to endure the evening that you did.

Still, I don’t think I’ll be having tequila again for quite some time.

Hermione

—

A broad grin plastered across her face, Hermione tied the letter to the owl’s leg and he flew off without waiting for a reward.

She wondered if Draco had told him not to dawdle in bringing back her reply, and it made her belly do a flip flop.

Just then, the floo in her living room sounded and Ginny’s voice flooded her apartment.

“Hellooooo! Are you alive?!”

Hermione rushed to shut the window and put away her parchment and quill.

Then, she took them back out, thinking that it would be best if she were at least starting to reply to Ginny’s letter when she came in.

Oh, bollocks she hadn’t even opened Ginny’s letter! She grabbed it up off her bed and ripped it open, but it tore in half in the process. At that very moment, Ginny walked into the room, a look of complete befuddlement on her face.

“What in the blazes—”

“Hi! Um, I was just, going to answer your letter, that is after I read it, which is now…” she cleared her throat nervously, “a bit difficult.”
Ginny shifted her weight onto one hip and crossed her arms, her mouth agape. She could channel Molly Weasley like nobody’s business.

“Hermione Jean Granger, you are going to follow me to your kitchen, and we are going to get you a strong cup of coffee and then you are going to explain to me why you are behaving like a third year who snuck into Hogsmeade without a permission form.”

Hermione slumped where she sat, and Ginny’s eyes widened as she motioned out the door with her hand, shouting, “move!”

****

Coffee was a wonderful thing. Hermione sat in her cozy nook-style kitchen taking greedy sips of the hot liquid, and feeling it infuse calm and rationality into her veins as if it had been shot into her skin by muggle injection.

“Ready now?” asked Ginny, who was right beside her at the two-seater table.

Ginny had let her know that her message indeed demanded an explanation, no more, no less, so the fact that it was now ripped in half was of little consequence. The author was here in person for a live answer, and she could save her ink!

Hermione had stalled as long as possible, but she still wasn’t sure she could tell Ginny the whole truth yet. Given the events of the morning thus far, the “truth” was still in draft format, and changing with each passing hour!

She’d decided that instead of telling Ginny the whole story, she’d start with some of the unfiltered honesty employed in her letters that day.

“Ginny, before I tell you, I need to ask you something.”

“I am all ears, my curious conundrum of a friend.”

“What- what are your thoughts on my relationship with Ron? Only, we haven’t really talked about it beyond you comforting me while I sob, and it’s occurred to me that I don’t know how you feel about it.”

Ginny did not miss a beat before responding.

“It’s none of my business, that’s what I think.”

Hermione cocked her head to the side and said softly, “Gin…”

“No I’m serious, Hermione, believe it or not I have thought about this. You are my friend and he is my brother and as far as I’m concerned, those wires do not cross.”

Hermione regarded her friend for a few moments and decided that she probably had her head on straight about this. After she’d thought about it, she’d realized that Ginny had kept her nose out of the pair’s relationship from the word go.

In fact, it hit her like a stack of library books that this girl before her, her very good friend, had always managed to keep her nose out of anything that wasn’t strictly her business. She reeled at the thought, recognizing how hard it must have been for Ginny to stay out of it, over and over. How had
she missed it?! All these years, Ginny had expertly steered clear of any situation in which her opinion of her brother might be a wrench in her relationship with Hermione.

She wondered when Ginny had decided this just as her friend continued on.

“Besides, don’t you remember how weird it got on that muggle TV program when the two friends fell in love and then the sister began meddling?”

Hermione giggled in surprise, it had been years since she had shared television with Ginny, and she was shocked that she’d retained these details.

“When Rachel found out that Ross loved her and Monica got all bent out of shape about whether they were going to date?”

“Yes! Ross and Rachel, yes! And I would be the Monica in that equation, which by the way, no thank you, she is a disaster of a person.”

Hermione let out a full belly laugh at this.

“I paid attention to that part in particular, very aware that I could end up all neurotic like her, taking it personally and meddling in a relationship that is, like I said, none of my business, and I decided back then that I’m taking a hard line on this. I have no sides, I have no opinions. I mean, I do… but you won’t hear them from me.”

“Wow Gin, that’s… actually brilliant. You are definitely not a Monica.”

“Thank you. To be honest, I hope not to be any of them, they’re all liars and cowards who can’t for the life of them have an honest conversation! I mean, what is that about?!”

Hermione was tearing up from laughing now. “It just makes for good TV, Gin, all the miscommunications and what have you.”

“It’s frustrating and stupid, is what it is, but sure I agree that I was fairly entertained.”

Both women laughed together for a good while.

“Hey thanks, Ginny. I didn’t know how much I needed to hear that.”

“You’re welcome, but to be clear it’s as much for my own self-preservation as it is for yours and Ron’s. I mean, imagine the walloping I would have to give him if I chose to get involved! Mum would never forgive me for accidentally murdering her youngest son.”

Hermione nodded, wide eyed. “He would certainly be in for it.”

“As it is, I haven’t discussed it with him. I’m waiting for him to come to me if he wants to.”

“How did you end up the most mature Weasley, even as the youngest?”

Ginny cocked her head and pursed her lips in contemplation.

“Watching everyone else muck up their lives and learning what not to do?” she ventured.

Hermione chuckled. “That’s probably correct.”

“Yes, yes it is, now stop stalling and tell me whatever this salacious secret is!”
Hermione shuffled uncomfortably in her seat, playing for time, but Ginny’s brow furrowed and she continued, “Also, why did you need to ask me about Ron first? What could that have to do with whatever you need to tell m-”

Ginny gasped. Hand over her mouth, finger pointing at Hermione accusingly.

“You’ve met someone else! So soon?! Wowwww, good for you! And before the divorce is even final! Hermione I didn’t know you were a slag!”

“Ginny! How dare you use that offensive word! And no I haven’t met someone, I already knew him,” she said and then promptly gasped and put her hand over her mouth, causing Ginny to gasp again and point at her even more forcibly.

If they both carried on gasping this way there’d soon be no air left in the tiny kitchen.

“Who?! Who?! Tell me who!”

Just then, an owl hooted loudly from outside the small, high kitchen window. Hermione froze, wide-eyed.

Ginny looked up and spotted Ptolemy, then turned and took in Hermione’s expression.

“Wait… that’s…”

“It’s not what you think, Ginny!” Hermione said, panicked, as she rose from her chair to let the owl in. Her less-than-cool demeanor was giving her away.

“Hermione, that’s Malfoy’s owl,” she said, slow and severe.

Hermione opened the window and let Ptolemy in. He flew past her, wings flapping alarmingly given the lack of space in the tiny room and the awkward angle of entry. She shrieked and then said, “Yes, yes it is;” still staring wide-eyed at her friend.

“What is Malfoy’s owl doing here, Hermione?” Ginny asked in the same slow, severe tone.

“I suppose he’s bringing me a letter from Malfoy?” she squeaked.

Ginny nodded, “I see, and what is Malfoy writing to you for?”

“I- erm- well, I’d have to read it and see!” Hermione said in an even higher pitched tone, if that was possible. She was now nervously wringing her hands together.

She had never been a great liar, and this was a perfect demonstration of her complete ineptitude. Ginny’s eyes flitted down to Hermione’s hands and she rose from her seat to grab her right one. As she held it up, Hermione was shocked to realize that she had ink along the side of her palm, the way she would after furiously writing essays in the Gryffindor common room all night.

“Oh what rubbish, you’ve been exchanging letters all morning, and,” she gasped and shrieked at once, “you hadn’t even opened mine!”

Hermione seemed to come to that same realization right along with Ginny and her eyes filled with tears.

“Ginny I’m so sorry! I didn’t consciously intend to- you’re always a priority in my life, you know that! I just- I got caught up- and…”
Hermione stopped speaking when she noticed that Ginny did not look cross with her at all, but was actually laughing. It was a while before Ginny could form words, so great was her mirth.

“You- you’ve got it BAD for Draco Malfoy!” she scream-laughed and snorted, and she doubled over, slapping her leg with glee.

“First Harry… now you! Will the man be wooing us all before the year is out?! Is it my turn yet?!”

Hermione was beside herself. She didn’t know whether to laugh along or scream or vomit. Vomiting was feeling like the right choice.

She was afraid to open her mouth for fear of what might come out.

“But this explains EVERYTHING!” Ginny shouted, finally drawing a steady breath, “I mean you were a complete lunatic last night! And it all started when you realized he was there! Oh Merlin, this is incredible. Was it because you had to hide it from us since he’s engaged to be married?! And to the woman carrying your still-husband’s baby?! Hermione, your life could be one of those TV programmes! How long has this been going on?!”

Hermione put her hand to her own head and then pinched the bridge of her nose, “Ginny, could you do me a small favor and stop shouting?”

Ginny began to use a stage whisper, “I’m sorry, Hermione, is this better?”

Hermione looked very annoyed. Crossing her arms, she said, “Sure, thanks.”

Still whispering, Ginny said, “Ok good, how long have you been shagging Draco Malfoy!?”

“Ginny!” Hermione shouted.

“Whisper please, you’ve got a headache!”

Hermione was incredibly frustrated, and yet she could not help marveling at how much of Fred and George’s humor had rubbed off on Ginny.

“We haven’t shagged yet, we’ve just snogged.”

“Yet!” Ginny whisper-shouted, pointing a triumphant finger at her.

Hermione leaned her head back against the wall and shut her eyes. How had she made that mistake twice in the same week?

“When am I going to learn to keep my mouth shut? And Ginny will you please just speak at a normal volume?” she asked resignedly.

“I will if you open your letter, that owl is bound to get moody if he’s anything like his master.”

Hermione glared at her as she reached for the letter.

“Protective of him, I see. Interesting.”

Hermione snapped her fingers and said, “Okay, zip it!”

Ginny mimed zipping her lips and folded her hands in her lap obediently.

Hermione opened the letter and read.
Hermione,

I’m going to surrender for this round of verbal jousting and cede to your clever tongue. You win this one, for now.

I know enough to quit while I’m ahead, and I’m not just saying that to get back in your good graces. I look forward to having ample tequila shots of my own while in your presence tomorrow evening.

And I don’t even like tequila.

Draco

—

As Hermione read, a grin spread across her face and her cheeks flushed. The letter filled her with such elation that she had quite forgotten she had an audience.

As she stood there reading and re-reading the missive, one hand pressed against her mouth, fingers curled into a half fist, partially concealing her smile, Ginny sighed and said, “Oh dear, are you in trouble.”

****

Ginny stayed for another hour or so, and Hermione was able to get her to cede her snark long enough to tell the full story, including the part about the marriage promise and potential consequences.

“But that means… something could happen to the baby. To… well, to my unborn niece or nephew if the promise is illegally broken.”

Hermione had made this connection already and had not been looking forward to this part of the conversation. Ginny sat in thought for a while before speaking.

“Hermione, I understand why you are encouraging caution, though perhaps caution is now out the window based on your love letters of late…”

“They’re not-“

Ginny raised a hand. “Ah ah ah, not done yet. As I was saying, I understand why you are looking to be cautious, but I truly do not believe that you spending time with Draco, or even shagging him for that matter, will interfere with the marriage promise. And remember, this is coming from someone whose flesh and blood would be harmed if she were wrong.”

Hermione stared at her, a brown eyed doe caught in wand light.

“But Gin, how do you know that?”

“You forget, Hermione, I come from a pureblood family. I’ve heard all about these things in bits and pieces all my life. Witches and wizards who are bound by marriage promises always sleep around and do whatever they please until their wedding night. It’s even built in to the deal! There’s a whole year-“

“Where they are encouraged not to be monogamous so they can explore the world and know what’s
out there, yes I did my research and discovered that, but I worry it will be different due to the circumstances under which-“

She stopped speaking as Ginny was shaking her head.

“I see how you would come to that conclusion, but that’s not how this magic works, Hermione. I believe that as long as Draco intends to go through with the wedding itself, he has free rein to do as he pleases until then. Technically, even after he’s married.”

“Pardon me?!”

Ginny nodded. “Yea, the marriage promise is for legal purposes, but if a husband or wife chooses to stray, which was especially common in sham marriages where one partner is actually homosexual, it doesn’t alter the promise itself. The promise exists so that the marriage happens and the families are united legally. There are very few loopholes and they all have to do with the legalities and logistics, though I do recall Mum mentioning that there’s another way, perhaps I’ll write and ask, or we could go see her.”

“Ginny! Think what you’re saying! I am not going to go and visit my MOTHER IN LAW and inquire about ways I could potentially break a marriage promise for someone who is not HER SON!”

Ginny shrunk down in her seat, “Fair point.”

Hermione sighed heavily, but Ginny perked right back up.

“Still! I don’t think you need to be quite so cautious!”

“And end up as what? His mistress?!?”

“There could be worse things, Hermione. I can’t imagine Astoria is actually excited about any of this, either.”

Hermione paced the small kitchen now, while Ginny sat on one of the chairs, deep in thought.

“Hey! Maybe Astoria will fall in love with Ron and you can all have one big sham marriage together!” she grimaced, “oh but not like that, gross. I take it back, that sounded better in my head.”

Hermione groaned. “Ginny! Please don’t be so flippant about all of this!”

“Well why the hell not? You’re being serious enough for all involved!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Ginny gave her an amused look.

“Hermione, I am using no double meanings, but I’ll speak slowly for you since you’re so distressed. You are being too serious about this. Please, take it from a pureblood witch who has paid attention. I am quite sure that you can go shag Draco Malfoy senseless and no one will die.”

Hermione put both hands on her face and let out a deeply stressed sigh. Ginny watched her closely before smirking.

She pointed at Ginny’s smirk. “What’s that? What does that mean? I don’t like the looks of it!” she said in a panicked voice.
“Hermione… do you suppose that on some level, you want this promise to be a problem?”

She looked taken aback. “What?!?” she shrieked.

“Just a theory of mine, it may be utter tosh, but shall I expand upon it anyway?”

Hermione looked scared, but nodded her head slowly.

“Okay,” she sat up and squared her body to Hermione, giving her her undivided attention.

“Back when we were in school, you liked Ron early on, right?”

“Ye- yes, I think I probably did immediately but didn’t start noticing it until well into second year.”

“Yes! So you liked a boy who was utterly clueless that you were a girl, and he became the thing in the way of anyone else wooing you, even though you were never together until after the bloody war!”

“That’s not true, what about Krum?! Krum woo’d me! What about Cormac?!”

Ginny swatted the air. “They didn’t count! You went out with both of them just to make Ron jealous, and it worked.”

Hermione crossed her arms. “Alright Ginny, I grow impatient for your point.”

“Fine I’ll get right to it then. You will never just let yourself be happy. You always have to find some damn obstacle to put in the way. Meanwhile, you never admit what you truly want, how could you, you’re too busy not being able to have it!”

Hermione stared perplexedly at Ginny, letting the sheer gravity of her words wash over her.

“I’m going to need you to say that all again. Maybe a few times, please.”

Ginny did. She ended up repeating it four times, slowly, point by point until Hermione seemed satisfied and sat down in a contemplative silence.

“Hermione are you still with us?” Ginny said, waving a hand in front of her friend’s face.

“Yes, it’s just- it’s the strangest feeling. It’s almost as if my body knows you’re right, and my mind cannot latch on.”

Ginny let out a small laugh. “That’s your trouble right there Hermione, you’re always thinking with your head more so than your heart.”

Hermione looked up at Ginny, her eyes filled with tears.

“Ginny I don’t know how to do that.”

Ginny lunged forward and put a comforting hand on Hermione’s shoulder.

“Do what?”

“Think with my heart.”

Her voice was so feeble, she was sure Ginny would have laughed if she hadn’t sounded so pathetic.

“Well, maybe this is your chance to finally learn from something other than a book.”
Torture

Chapter Summary

Draco goes rogue, making some moves without consulting his friends. Hermione gets her head on straight and decides to make a big move of her own...

Chapter Notes

If you feel a bit tortured after reading this, in any way, then my work here is done.

Not done writing though, by any stretch ;)

Longer chapter out Thursday... enjoy! and please leave a comment, I love hearing your thoughts!

Draco awoke the next day feeling happier than he had in years.

It had all started when he’d sent that rather risky note, forgoing formalities and being directly taunting. Sending it had made his hands sweaty. He had mentioned her clever tongue, and he’d not just been referring to her way with words. He had revealed his plan to have her current least-favorite drink under his nose all evening in service of torturing her. It had had a familiar flavor of his schoolyard taunts, yet with a loving caress. His words and actions might be similar, yet his intentions were to tease and make it difficult for her to keep her focus on anyone else.

He had almost stopped to confer with Harry before sending it, but after the disastrous events of Wednesday evening, he’d decided that perhaps he should rely on his own instinct for a while. Harry and Blaise were certainly helping, but having their constant input was making his actions (or inactions, as it were) feel too manufactured. Something was telling him that it wasn’t going to work out that way, and so he had sent the slightly bolder letter and then waited patiently, hoping she would respond.

She had kept him waiting for a while. Well over an hour had passed and he’d been sure he had overstepped his boundaries, until…

—

Draco,

Wow, I am honoured.

I hate to break it to you, though, we will not be going to a muggle pub tomorrow evening. Sorry, no tequila for wizards. You’ll have to think of some other way to torture me, but I have faith in you.

Hermione

—
He had no idea what had happened to shift her attitude towards him, but their communication had moved rapidly from stoic and professional to playful and familiar.

Perhaps it was the veil of letter writing that had allowed both of their guards to come down, but the remainder of the evening was spent furiously writing back and forth.

They had created some unspoken agreement not to mention their row, his impending wedding, or the marriage promise at all. She had previously expressed fear around them spending time together, but this was different. Letters were safe.

He had thought more than once about suggesting they get together in person rather than exhausting his owl. However, he worried that seeing him in the flesh would break the spell that had apparently come over her, and Ptolemy seemed all too willing to continue. The owl hadn’t worked this hard in his life, Draco had been sure of it, and yet he’d seemed just as pleased with the activity as his owner had.

Around 10pm, he’d received a letter from her that had made his head spin.

—

Have you come up with another way to torture me yet?

—

That was it. No greeting, no signature.

Upon reading it, something deep inside of him had purred to life.

He knew that the idea had been to steer clear of lust and focus on love, and yet he wasn’t sure he could simply skip that step. He needed to move their relationship forward in some way, and when the two of them had spoken logically, it had never led anywhere positive.

He’d mimicked her lack of greeting in reply, yet extended the length to make this one truly worth Ptolemy’s trip, the last one of the evening. Hopefully he wouldn’t cross her boundary line, the location of which he had still yet to discover…

—

A variety of things have crossed my mind.

We will be among a number of people who know nothing about what has transpired between us. I could always choose another witch and put on an act of flirting with her.

That, however, would likely result in one of two things:

1. You’d get annoyed and go home
2. You’d see right through it, and I’d be stuck having to continue the farce all evening

Neither of those things would be fun for me, or for you, and torture is meant to be fun.

No, my plan is much more nuanced than that, and I have no trouble sharing it with you, as it will surely work whether you know I’m enacting it or not.

In fact, it might even work better this way, so thank you for asking.

First, I’ve seen the way you look at me in muggle attire. There is a palpable hunger that comes over
your eyes. So step one will be my choice of clothing, which will likely not hurt my new sympathetic
media persona should any reporters come gawping. Win win.

Regardless, I will ensure it to be extra difficult for you to see me across a room and know you can’t
lay a finger on me with everyone watching.

Next is my cologne. Have you memorized the scent yet? I know that you love it. I’ll be sure to wear
just enough without it being overpowering. You won’t be able to walk by me without one deep
inhale causing the lids to flutter shut over your gorgeous brown eyes.

Finally, I will make sure to find myself alone with you in the course of the evening, but I will not lay
a finger on you unless you move first. When you see me get up and leave the group, know that I will
be off somewhere waiting for you to come and find me.

You are free to do with that information what you will tomorrow evening.

Again, I’m glad you asked me what I was planning. It turns out that you’ve added a new layer to the
torture. It actually begins right now, with you reading this and knowing that I’m spending all of my
mental energy from now until then formulating the best ways to bring this plan to fruition. Imagining
your reactions and tweaking the circumstances to get it just right.

Tonight as I lay in bed, I will think of nothing but the various facial expressions and involuntary
noises I would like to be responsible for causing in you.

You will be my mind’s sole focus.

And you, delectable witch, are also free to do with that information what you will.

Sweet dreams, Gryffindor Princess.

Until tomorrow evening…

—

He felt a very small amount of nerves about this letter. On the whole, he thought it was the right
move. He had signed off in a way that told her a reply wouldn’t be necessary. For good measure, he
had told Ptolemy to return home as soon as the letter had been delivered, giving her no chance to
reply.

He enjoyed feeling in control again. It had been so long…

Part of his plan that he had not yet mentioned to her was to arrive at the ministry shortly before it
would be time for her to leave, and either leave the small bottle of tequila he’d bought in a muggle
shop, or else walk into her office and demand they have some together. Perhaps steal a kiss?

He was going to play it by ear, unsure of what circumstance he might meet upon arrival.


Hermione awoke the next day feeling happier than she had in years.

She dressed quickly and headed into work, with great intentions and expectations for the day ahead.
The backlog of work had been a welcome distraction from her… thoughts. Her rather tortured and… explicit thoughts that had no business being in her mind while at the office.

Yes, work had kept her wonderfully busy, the hours seeming to fly by, hurling her ever closer to what would surely be an intriguing evening.

The previous day had introduced her to a sense of excitement and anticipation she could not recall having before.

Never had she experienced such… temptation.

Ginny’s comments about thinking with her heart had acted on her like potion. She had had a new sense of freedom.

At first she had been hesitant to engage with him at all, however, after speaking with Ginny her resolve around the dangers of the marriage promise had weakened substantially. Maybe it made more sense to try going with her instincts rather than her research.

And why shouldn’t she? She was a young woman, soon to be divorced and deserving of a bit of intrigue. Godric knows she’d spent enough years being studious and serious. Perhaps this was her time to break free of the version of Hermione Granger the entire wizarding world expected her to be.

So, she had engaged in the owl exchange the previous day, well into the night, without giving way to overthinking about what it would mean for her future, or his.

Letter writing, for her, had always been for the express purpose of exchanging information.

Yesterday’s exercise, however, had given new meaning to the act.

Letters could be these little acts of vulnerability and connection.

They could also cause a flurry of sensations in her body, both from writing and from reading, and hell, even from sending and waiting! It was all teasing... temptation... seduction.

And Merlin, had he known exactly what she’d wanted to hear! Things she herself had not known would have that effect on her.

Perhaps being known better than she knew herself wasn’t such a terrible thing after all…

Oh, if only her 13-year-old self could see her now, sitting in her office reeling from the thought of being seduced by Draco Malfoy over a series of owls! Well, she’d probably proclaim it illogical nonsense.

Hermione smiled gently at the idea of her younger self receiving that information and thought that she would have privately felt a small swell of excitement in her chest at that age. You know, along with horror, disgust, and confusion. Draco had been intolerable, to say the least, and yet she had always privately noted that if he hadn’t been such an unbelievable prat, she might have fancied him.

Merlin, it had always been patently impossible. They had hated each other.

Yet… wasn’t hate some twisted form of…

A loud knock sounded on her office door and she was indelicately wrenched from her thoughts.

“Come in!” she yelled, a bit too panicky.
Her visitor cracked the door open and peeked in, cautiously.

“Is it a bad time? Your owl said to stop by sometime in the afternoon, if I’m too late we can-”

“No it’s fine, you just startled me, Ronald.”

Ron released a breath and walked in, leaving the door slightly ajar, presumably as a way of appearing non-threatening.

Hermione noted yet again that he looked scared of her, and her conviction around making the divorce final strengthened all the more.

She’d had too much history with Ron, and frankly, finding a way to make things work between them was a prospect without a lot of promise.

The promise. That was what had spurred her to ask Ron here today. If Draco could do nothing about his marital status, she could do something about hers. Being in limbo around a divorce was something she had no interest in, especially with her recent… revelations. She’d been with Ron this long, and he had never made her feel wanted… needed… desired.

Indeed, she’d felt almost like an obstruction in his life that he’d had to work around.

“Thank you for coming.”

Ron shrugged, “I’m a lift ride away, it’s not as though it’s a great hardship.”

“That’s not what I meant, Ronald.”

“I know what you meant,” he said, staring at her with a sad yet blank expression.

Hermione took a deep breath and stared back at her soon to be ex-husband. Regardless of how angry he’d made her, making this divorce final was difficult and sad.

Standing up and walking around to the front of her desk, she placed a small packet of paperwork and a quill down, facing Ron.

“I know this is… unpleasant, but I thought it would be better to move things along than to wait.”

If she hadn’t known better, she would have thought Ron looked annoyed at this. He let out a grunt and walked forward, a look on his face that meant he was holding in a number of things he’d actually like to say. Rather than annoyance, it was hurt and pain.

She hadn’t seen that particular look on his face since Fred’s funeral.

A momentary rush of guilt flooded her body at the thought before she remembered that he put himself in this place.

And yet… she had begun seeing her side of making the relationship difficult.

“Right, where do I sign?”

Hermione pointed to the blank space above her already perfectly penned signature, then proceeded to flip to the next blank space, and the next, and the next. After about a minute of signing, she flipped to the last page.

“Initial here, here and here… and that’s it,” she said, a small quake in her voice on the last few
Ron finished signing and looked up at her.

Noticing a small tear drop falling from his eye, she reached up and brushed it away, surprised to find he didn’t flinch or try to cover it up in the first place. He took her hand and held it to his face, closing his eyes. they stood there in silence for a few moments as she felt her heart breaking. For all they’d shared, for all they’d lost.

She thought absurdly about the day they’d met. How she’d pointed out his dirty nose like she was his mother. How she’d always functioned as something of a parent to him in their relationship. Nostalgia mixed with shame and sadness, and she began to feel a lump in her throat.

“Can I ask you something, Hermione?”

He opened his eyes to see her response, which was an almost imperceptible nod. She was holding her emotions stubbornly at bay.

“Do you still… love me?”

Hermione felt a quake of pity course through her.

“Ron… please don’t.”

“I’m not doing anything. I just… I still love you so much it hurts. I just need to know.”

She felt hot tears begin to build up behind her eyes, and took a step closer to him, placing both hands on his shoulders, giving him a gentle squeeze. He closed his eyes momentarily, taking in her touch.

“Ron… you were my first love. My only love. I suppose I will always love you.”

Without warning, he leaned in and kissed her. Caught off guard, she didn’t shove him away. Then she made an instinctive decision to allow the kiss to happen. To let herself receive what she suddenly understood to be a kiss goodbye.

It was probably the most passionate kiss they’d shared since their first in the Room of Requirement.

What a shame it was that ending their relationship was the only thing that could bring that passion back. It spoke volumes about what they did and did not have now.

When they separated, both had tears streaming down their faces. Ron took her hand and gave it a single squeeze.

“I love you, Hermione.”

And with that, he turned and left, and she stood there.

Heartbroken… yet free.

She hadn’t felt this way since they’d won the war. The mix of elation at Voldemort being gone and utter grief for the people she’d lost along the way. Apart from the people, the war had taken her youth and innocence. This new development felt like she was losing the last vestiges of her youth right here, standing in her little office.

Oh, how powerful the simple swipe of a quill could be…
Glancing at the clock, she realized with a start that she needed to freshen before meeting Gabrielle. She walked forward to close her office door, but not before spotting something on the table outside her door. This table was reserved for messages that arrived when she was in meetings that could not be disturbed.

It was a small bottle of… tequila.

Hermione’s eye’s widened in shock. A gasp of recognition. Heart in her throat.

Her door had been ajar… when had he… he couldn’t possibly have seen…

“Fuck.”
Draco stormed out of the ministry lift as it reached the atrium, intent on flooing back to his newly acquired London flat and skipping the evening event. He could not understand how Hermione could go from exchanging letters with him all day and night to being back with that tosser the very next day. Sure, he had no claims over her, and was indefinitely tied to another witch by magical bond, but still… how could she do it?

Certain that he had read everything wrong the day previous, he cursed himself for sending his last letter. Clearly he’d alarmed her and pushed her right back into the Weasel’s arms. He couldn’t discern whether he was more angry with her or himself.

Sneer permanently affixed to his porcelain face, he stalked toward the row of hearths when something solid stepped right into his path. He collided with another wizard and spun around, shoulder aching.

“Hey watch where you’re going you-“

He stopped speaking when he saw it was Blaise smiling down at him.

“You’re so pretty when you’re angry, Draco.”

A few steps behind Blaise, but now catching up was Harry.

“Everything alright, Malfoy? Or is that sneering stride always the way you travel?”

Draco looked around the atrium, checking who might be watching them. Being in areas populated by wizards still made him uneasy after so many years of seclusion.

“What are you two doing together?” he asked, but then shook himself and said, “No you know what, I don’t have time to talk, I need to get the fuck out of here. If you’ll excuse me.”

He made to walk around Blaise, but was stopped by a firm hand grasping the arm with his aching shoulder. Wincing in pain, he slowed his stride as Blaise pulled him to a resigned halt.

“Oh no you don’t, how do you expect us to enjoy our evening if you’re sat there all surly?”

“Well I’ll save you the displeasure, I won’t be there tonight.”
Harry and Blaise both pulled the same perplexed face.

“Like hell you won’t,” said Blaise, “we planned the whole thing for you! So you could woo Granger!”

Draco leaned in severely, “Keep your fucking voice down you twat, think of where you’re standing.”

“Certainly. Once you tell us what the hell happened!”

“Fine! Alright! Let’s just floo to my place, I need to get out of this building before-”

“Ron,” Harry said stoically, looking over Draco’s shoulder. Draco spun around.

Ron Weasley approached the trio, looking as though he’d recently vomited.

Draco’s brow furrowed at the sight of the sickened wizard, and the anger (as well as the punch he’d immediately prepared in his balled-up fist) loosened slightly.

“Hey Harry,” he said, turning then to Blaise and Draco, “Zabini… Malfoy…” he said, with a nod to each.

“Weasley, you look like utter shit,” Blaise drawled, “though I have to admit, you look a right sight better than the morning after the party.”

Ron scratched his head and looked away.

“Yea… well, just finalized the bloody divorce with Hermione. How would you look after that?”

Ron had a distinct and unsettling sense of melancholy and regret shrouded over him. This was surely not the look of a man who had just gotten back together with his lifelong love. Draco sensed that truth before he’d even taken in Ron’s words, and the pre-prepared punch left his fist entirely as the knot in his stomach released.

“Ron, I’m sorry,” Harry said, his sense of loyalty overpowering his animosity toward the man for the moment.

Ron mumbled a thanks to Harry and turned to Draco.

“Malfoy, I never got to thank you for your help on Saturday evening. Zabini told me you had a hand in it. Trust me, I was entirely mortified to discover who had gotten me out of that party, but I appreciate it nonetheless. You saved me from being pissed on the front page of the Prophet again.” He held out his hand to Draco.

He took it, his mind spinning in multiple directions. Obviously, Ron hadn’t known just how accurate that statement about the Prophet had been, and Draco would keep it that way.

“You were a fucking disaster, Weasel, any decent wizard would have-”

“Funny, I never knew you to be a decent wizard, Malfoy,” he said as he released his hand, “And yet I suppose things change...”

The distraught man before him looked away wistfully, clearly reflecting on his failed marriage. He seemed to have lost all sense of himself, even missing the opportunity to insult Malfoy in reply to the weasel comment.
Draco was torn between his intense life-long hatred for Ron, and a new sense of pity. He absurdly wished for Ron to call him a ferret and tell him to piss off and never touch him while inebriated again. Anything other than the indecency of the sadness and regret painted all over his visage.

Perhaps the kiss he’d witnessed through the crack in the door was one of goodbye, and nothing more. Still, it disgusted him, and he wasn’t sure he could go through with the evening as planned.

“Well, I’m off. Zabini, please tell Gabrielle I’m grateful for the invitation but I won’t be coming tonight. I can’t face seeing… you know.”

Blaise nodded. “See you around, Weasley.”

“Take care, Ron,” said Harry, as Ron strode away and disappeared into green flames.

Draco turned and closed in on Blaise.

“Well, I’m off. Zabini, please tell Gabrielle I’m grateful for the invitation but I won’t be coming tonight. I can’t face seeing… you know.”

Blaise nodded. “See you around, Weasley.”

“Take care, Ron,” said Harry, as Ron strode away and disappeared into green flames.

Draco turned and closed in on Blaise.

“He was invited?!”

“Hey I can’t help who my witch is related to!” Blaise shouted back, then turning to Harry, “Lucky break, though. Now we don’t have to run interference. I admit I wasn’t looking forward to a night of conversation with Weasley.”

“Honestly, I wasn’t either,” admitted Harry.

Draco looked between his two friends, feeling a momentary swell of gratitude for their plotting before realizing where he was standing. A renewed sense of urgency washed over him.

“Right, let’s go before we’re intercepted by-”

Just then, an all too familiar voice came ringing across the atrium.

“Well well well, look what we have here!” said Rita Skeeter as she emerged from the lifts, portly photog in tow, as usual.

The three men turned to each other and said in unison, “Run for it!” and they sprinted to the floos, disappearing to Draco’s flat together.

**

They tumbled out of the hearth of a posh loft with floor to ceiling living room windows overlooking the heart of London. As they stood up and brushed off, two of them looked around in amazement.

“A bit of an upgrade from your humble cottage, isn’t it, Draco?”

Draco grunted. It was, indeed, much more upscale than he even wanted. He’d become accustomed to a humble life, and the large amount of space unnerved him. After two years of living in a cell, he’d preferred smaller spaces. The Manor had been an absolute non-starter, of course, so he’d settled on this. Well, he’d sort of settled on it.

“Astoria’s Father chose it, for the sake of appearances. When I refused to move back into Malfoy Manor.”

“Well the man surely has taste, let’s give him that,” Blaise said, striding around the room and examining the tall bookshelves, leather couches, and random decorative items on copious side tables.

Just then, an owl zoomed through the hatch up near the ceiling and floated down to Draco. He
cringed when he noticed that the letter attached was bright red.

A howler.

Lunging forward, he detached it and broke the seal. It was always better not to wait on howlers. Rita Skeeter’s voice came screeching unceremoniously into the room.

“Mr. Malfoy! The scene that just took place in the atrium of the ministry was entirely unacceptable! I will remind you, we have made a deal to do quite a number of follow-up articles to the one that ran last Sunday morning, and as you will also remember, our agreement was weekly. Thus far I have not been able to get a hold of you this week and my patience is growing thin. You have one hour to meet me in The Leaky Cauldron for our next interview or I will run the story you so desperately wanted me to keep from the papers!”

With that, the letter burst into flames.

“Well, bollocks,” Draco said.

“Well, way to make a deal with the devil, Draco,” said Blaise.

“Yea, mate, I’m not entirely sure that was wise,” Harry said, watching the remnants of ash fall to the floor.

Draco shrugged. “She was always going to write about me anyway, at least now I have some semblance of creative control. Plus, it keeps Granger out of it.”

“So sweet, you are, Draco. I wish I had such a thoughtful and self-sacrificing boyfriend.”

“You’ve got Potter, he’s the biggest martyr around, I’m sure he’ll throw himself in front of a curse for you any day now. Why don’t you go get into some life or death situation and test it out?”

Harry piped up, “Why do you both insist on talking about me as though I’m not spoken for?”

“Does that mean if you weren’t you would-” Blaise said before Harry cut back in.

“And straight!”

“Yea, that’s likely,” Blaise said, sardonically.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Are you two finished? While I’m quite glad your pleasing attentions have shifted over to Potter, Blaise, I now have a limited amount of time to deal with two rather annoying issues and you both need to get to the pub before people start arriving.”

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy, Draco? You know you’ll always be my-”

“SOD. OFF!”

“Yes sir,” Blaise said, then turned to Harry, “Don’t you love it when he’s forceful?”

Looking a bit perturbed, and throwing a perplexed side-eye at Blaise, Harry said, “Ok Malfoy, tell us what’s up.”

Draco took a breath.

“Well I suppose the situation changed slightly after seeing Weasley, but-”
“Ron had something to do with this?” asked Harry.

Draco nodded, sternly. “I went to Granger’s office to... well it’s a long story, but I fancied stopping by prior to the evening’s events and-”

“Hey wait, that wasn’t part of the plan! You didn’t clear that move with us, Draco. What are you trying to do, bungle everything?!”

Draco held up a hand. “I think I’m capable of thinking for myself, Bla-”

“Clearly not, if it ended with you giving up on the evening we planned!”

“Zabini let’s hear him out, I want to know what happened and we’ll be here till bloody Tuesday if you keep interrupting.”

Blaise squinted menacingly at Harry and said, “You’re lucky you’re handsome.”

Harry and Draco simultaneously rolled their eyes rather dramatically, and Draco went on.

“Like I said, I dropped by her office and noticed that the door was ajar. I wasn’t intending to spy, but as I walked up I spotted her through the crack in the door snogging Weasley with what looked like a great deal of… enthusiasm.” The last word was dripping with disgust.

Harry and Blaise stood, mouths agape.

“But-”

“What-”

Draco looked away. “After hearing what Weasley said, I assume it was a goodbye. Still makes my stomach turn.”

“Wait so that was what made you run home to pout?!?” Blaise said, a bit alarmed.

“Blaise relax, I think he’s perfectly within his rights to storm off after witnessing a scene like that out of context.”

“Like hell he is! He’s gonna need a stronger resolve than that if we’re gonna have any hope of breaking this sodding promise!”

“Oh yea, Blaise? So you think if you walked in on Gabrielle snogging an ex you’d be able to face an evening with her straight away?!”

Blaise held up two hands in an “I surrender” position. “Hey mate, I’m not the one who needs to cultivate true love in less than a month’s time.”

Draco raked his hands through his hair and let out a frustrated yell.

“Blaise you need to leave. I want to talk to Potter alone.”

Blaise looked as though Draco had slapped him.

They stared at each other, neither one blinking for a long moment.

“I see,” Blaise said, “Well, good to know where we stand.”
Without a second look at Draco or Harry, he moved away from the pair, turning back to say, “see you later, Draco, if you grow some balls by then.” Then he turned on the spot and with a CRACK, he was gone.

“You’ll be paying for that later,” said Harry.

“I will pay for fuck all, he’s an irritating prat.”

Harry shrugged and plopped down on one of the leather sofas, and Draco seated himself opposite Harry, leaning his elbows on his knees.

“This whole situation is so fucked, Potter,” he said, rubbing his hands over his face.

Harry observed him pensively for a moment.

“Are you really not going to go tonight? From what Ginny told me, Hermione is quite looking forward to it.”

“Your Weaslette spoke to her? About… me?”

“Ginny did, yes,” he said, emphasizing her given name, “and if you call her anything other than Ginny this evening, I will start calling you Draco in front of everyone.”

Draco’s eye’s widened, “Deal, Potter. Now tell me what was said, what do you know?”

“Well first off, I got quite a walloping for keeping the whole thing from her since Sunday. You’re welcome, by the way, but yea, it seems Hermione divulged everything to Ginny when she’d gone to Hermione’s apartment to make sure she wasn’t dead from alcohol poisoning.”

Draco nodded, taking in this information.

“Did she give you any specifics?”

“Well, after she was done yelling at me for my utter and absolute betrayal, she mentioned that you two had been sending owls all morning, and by the time she got there Hermione still hadn’t responded to owls from her and Neville. They’d been cast aside in favor of writing to you.”

Draco sat up straight. “What’s Longbottom writing to her for?!!”

Harry looked at him with a bemused expression. “Relax Malfoy, they’re quite good friends, and besides he’s with Hannah Abbott. According to Ginny, she went to see him after she left the manor on Sunday for moral support. And hey, did you miss what I said? She ignored two of her best friends so that she could write to you.”

Draco grimaced, a slight growl erupting in his throat. He was still stuck on the communication with Neville.

“Malfoy… you’re gonna need to lose the territorial crap and recognize that at the end of the day, she’s focused on you. Whether its Ron or Neville, they’re both of no consequence to you now. If you get hung up on it every time she speaks to someone of the opposite sex, you’re going to lose the plot really quickly, and tonight is a great example.”

“That’s pure nonsense and you know it, Potter. I’m just supposed to stand by while she confides her deepest secrets in and snogs other blokes?”

“In these particular circumstances, yes! She’s perfectly at liberty to give her lifelong love a goodbye
kiss on the day their divorce is final, and she needs friends to confide in just as you do! If it hasn’t
registered with you yet, she FINALIZED HER DIVORCE today. You think that was a random
decision? It seems to me like its directly related to her wanting to go into this evening fully free to do
as she pleases.”

Draco considered this for a moment, raising his eyebrows with this pleasant realization.

“See this is why I wanted to speak with you alone, Potter. After years of thinking you an utter prat,
it’s a welcome revelation to discover you actually have a good head on your shoulders.”

Harry shrugged. “Spoils of war, I suppose.”

Draco allowed a small smile at this, but it quickly turned back to melancholy.

“So what do you suggest?”

“For tonight?” Harry asked, and then looked up in thought.

“I think you go deal with Rita and then get your arse over to drinks as planned, and don’t mention
anything to Hermione about seeing that kiss.”

“Why not?”

“Because it probably meant nothing more than a goodbye to her, like you said, and I’m sure she’d be
mortified if she knew you’d seen it.”

“Well I don’t think lying to her is a great way to lay a foundation of relationship. It didn’t go very
well Wednesday night, for example.”

“Fair point, but I doubt you can tell her without getting angry. Then again, if you think you can…”

Draco inhaled sharply and balled his fists, steeling himself. “Message received, Potter. I’ll work on
getting my temper under control tonight.”

“Fair enough,” Harry said, standing, “You better get to the Leakey before Rita does something
regrettable.”

“She said an hour, I don’t need to leave yet. I would much rather hear what else Granger said to…
Ginny about me.”

Harry smiled at the use of his wife’s name, and Draco grimaced.

“Unfortunately I don’t know much else- oh! But I completely forgot!” Harry yelled, smacking palm
to face.

“Forgot what?!?”

“The marriage promise! Ginny reckons that nothing bad will happen if you two… if the relationship
turns physical. Like beyond snogging.”

“That’s not new information, Potter, I told you we snogged already, it was Hermione who was
worried-”

“But that’s the thing! Ginny told her, in no uncertain terms that she could, um…” Harry trailed off,
suddenly looking awkward and struggling to go on.
“Spit it out!”

“Fine! Ginny told Hermione that she could go shag you senseless and no one would die!”

Draco sat in a stunned silence, but after a moment a grin spread across his face.

“Well, that explains her change in tone.”

“You spoke to her?” Harry asked urgently.

“Letters, we wrote letters yesterday, remember?”

“Right, of course, good thinking on sending the owl, by the way.”

Draco looked up at Harry, pride swelling in his chest. “So I guess my going rogue wasn’t such a horrible idea.”

“Not at all, but it’s a good thing we bloody caught you at the ministry today. I get your annoyance with Blaise, Malfoy, but—”

“Don’t say it!”

“He’s right.”

Draco groaned and hit his fist against his knee before pointing an accusatory finger at Harry.

“You know I really don’t fancy this little alliance between the two of you.”

Harry smiled. “I think you do, you’re just wired to act like a stubborn prat.”

Draco grunted, not sure how to respond to this, but clearly not arguing the point. He hated how Harry always saw right through him, and yet it was oddly useful under current circumstances.

He glanced up at the ornate dragon clock on his mantel.

“Right, I better go now, before Rita gets lonely.”

Harry chuckled quietly to himself, but Draco ignored it.

“Thanks, Potter, for… everything.”

“See you later, Malfoy,” he said with a small smile.

Draco turned on the spot, closely followed by Harry, and two loud CRACKS echoed through the loft apartment.

———

Hermione apparated to the front of the pub in Diagon Alley feeling a distinct sense of foreboding. She had been worrying herself senseless for the last few hours, wondering and theorizing about whether Draco had seen her kiss with Ron, and what it would mean for the evening.

So much for thinking with her heart. She’d been in full-on logic mode since she’d left the Ministry. Desperate to get on with the evening and have some answers, she charged into the pub and began scanning around for Gabrielle.
“Ermione!”

She heard the young witch before she saw her. Spinning around, Hermione saw that a far corner of the pub had been reserved for the group. Gabrielle sat next to Blaise, who was looking up at her with what seemed like disdain as Gabrielle rose from her seat to greet Hermione. Shaking off the look he’d given her, she turned to her friend.

“Gabrielle! How was your first week?”

“Absolutely ‘orrible! Zees goblins are so unpleasant, I ‘ave no idea ow my sister deed it!”

Hermione smiled. “You should ask her, I’m sure she’d have some pointers for you.”

“Yes I wrote to ‘er today, she could not make it ere tonight, so ‘opefully I will ‘ere soon!”

The bell on the front door of the pub rang and a lone wizard walked in, turning immediately in their direction.

“The party is here, Zabini, wipe that look off your face and let’s get you a drink!” Theodore Nott crooned across the room as he approached. Hermione had seen him at brunch from across the room, but hadn’t been face to face with him since the days in Potions class when he’d join Draco in tormenting her. This unpleasant thought floating through her mind must have shown on her face.”

“Easy there, Granger,” he held up both hands, “I’m sure you owe me a number of hexes for my past mis-deeds, but I promise I come in peace.”

Hermione wasn’t sure what to say to this. Her mouth opened and then closed twice.

“While leaving women speechless is a talent of mine,” he bowed, “maybe it would help if we started over.”

She looked at him, still taken aback and trying to decide what to say.

“Hi, I’m Theo. My father was a Death Eater prat and I never wanted anything to do with him. I don’t suppose I could ever take back any pain I caused you in school, but permit me to say,” he stepped closer to her, “were it not for my parentage I would have asked you to the Yule Ball in fourth year in a heartbeat,” he said, taking her hand and kissing it without breaking eye contact.

The kiss had been quite… sensual. Hermione blushed.

Theo Nott was not as she’d remembered him, though perhaps she hadn’t ever looked properly. He was extremely good looking, with perfectly coiffed dark hair that sat in cool waves atop his head. He had flawless skin and one of those noses that was so perfect you wanted to punch it. The man could easily be a model, and in fact, she thought vaguely that she’d read something about that in a Witch Weekly article about “Sons of the Death Eaters.”

The revelation about wanting to take her to the ball in fourth year was perhaps the most difficult thing to wrap her mind around. She decided to put it away for now, she’d have to think through the possibility of that being true at a later time.

Before she could respond, however, Blaise was standing next to her.

“Easy Theo.”

Theo looked up at Blaise, confused. “Easy on what? I’m just being friendly!”
“You’re just being your usual calculating manipulative self. Granger just got out of a marriage and you’re going to swoop in on the same day? Bad form, mate.”

Hermione looked questioningly at Blaise. Theo scoffed. “Zabini are you planning to be a bloody killjoy all evening, because if so I may go elsewhere.”

“As if you have more a more interesting place to be,” Blaise flung at Theo, but Hermione was staring at him now.

“How did you know I finalized my divorce today?”

Blaise looked at her a bit shiftily.

“I er- saw Weasley on his way out of the ministry, he told me.”

“Did he?” Hermione said, surprised that Ron would confide anything in Blaise Zabini.

“Didn’t have to though, it was written all over the poor sod’s face. He looked a wreck.”

“As would I,” Theo interjected, “if I’d been fool enough to fuck things up with Hermione Granger.” He threw a wink at her.

“I mean it, Theo, lay off,” Blaise said, with all the attitude of an older brother. Hermione studied him carefully. What in the world was he on about? First he’d looked annoyed to see her and now he was defending her against Theo’s advances. She wondered idly if it had anything to do with Draco…

The pub bell rang again and Harry and Ginny entered, followed by Tracey Davis and Millicent Bulstrode.

Hermione smirked at the oddity of the group and wondered what other strange pairings of former Hogwarts students would be in attendance. The absence of a certain Slytherin, however, had her attention most of all. Perhaps he wanted to arrive fashionably late, but Hermione had a bad feeling that she wouldn’t be seeing him at all.

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The evening plodded on at an excruciating pace… for Hermione, at least.

A number of other witches and wizards from their year arrived and the group table grew rather large and sprawling, as did the number and variety of drinks on the table. It seemed with a small bit of libation, former houses and affiliations seemed to disappear. Hermione had had this experience before. Post-war society had generally lent itself to more and more mingling among people who would otherwise have avoided one another. Perhaps it had to do with their dwindling numbers, or perhaps everyone had made a silent pact to bury the hatchet in favor of peace.

In addition to former students that she knew, there were also a smattering of Gabrielle’s human colleagues from Gringotts, and a few ministry colleagues that had tagged along with their invited friends. Hermione had been introduced to every person there, but hadn’t retained any of their names, far too intent on keeping her eye on the door to pay attention to new acquaintances.

Everyone knew her, of course, being a war heroine and all. She’d become used to exchanging pleasantries with strangers who admired her so much that they couldn’t speak to her like a normal person. Slowly dying inside from all of the rote, empty conversations she was having, she began to formulate some way of leaving early.
Just as she was thinking up a plan, however, the bell on the pub door sounded once again and in walked the tall, blonde Slytherin.

Delicious.

That was the only word echoing through her mind as she took in his appearance. He’d donned muggle attire just as he’d said he would. Simple jeans, a green t-shirt and a jet black sweatshirt hoodie. It gave her the sensation of snuggling up on the couch with hot cocoa at Christmas. She imagined that scene with Draco on the couch with her. How he might snatch the mug from her hands and place it safely on a side table before running his fingers into her hair and capturing her lips…

She gasped and looked around as she realized she was gawping at him, but no one at the table had noticed her, their eyes all focused on Draco who was strolling over to them with that familiar swagger.

“There he is! Where the hell have you been, Draco?” demanded Theo.

Draco made a sweeping wave to everyone there and sat on a stool far on the other side of the table from Hermione. She noticed with a pang of recognition that he hadn’t looked at her at all, and the knot in her stomach became tighter and more acute. Shame and fear stole up her neck and she found herself holding her breath.

He had seen. He was going to ignore her all night.

“Skeeter cornered me again, the result of which I’m sure you’ll see in this Sunday’s Prophet,” he explained.

“That cow!” Ginny and Tracey said in unison, and then giggled. The two women had been getting on well. Apparently, Tracey had been a fan of Ginny’s Quidditch team.

Hermione was glad that Ginny was so preoccupied with Tracey that evening, she didn’t think she could take any significant smirks from her friend just now.

“Malfoy, I hear congratulations are in order!” shouted Marcus Flint, who must have slipped in when Hermione hadn’t been looking.

Draco looked at him confusedly and flint re-coiled. “On your upcoming nuptials? Only, I received an invitation today for what I believe is to be your wedding to Astoria Greengrass?”

Draco shook himself, “Oh of course, thanks, sorry Flint. I didn’t realize invitations went out.”

They shook hands as Theo said, “Poor sod probably had no say in the invitations, wedding date, or the fact that it’s happening in the first place!”

“Shut it, Theo, this not going to be a topic of conversation.”

Theo threw his hands up in the air, “First Blaise, now you, do you both simply take pleasure in telling me what I may and may not say in a public setting?”

“And in a private one, yes,” Blaise said from his seat next to Gabrielle. He and Draco, who was smirking subtly, shared a significant glance before turning back to Theo who was now pouting.

“All right there, Potter? Ginny?” Draco said.

“Doth mine ears deceive me?! Did you just refer to me by my given name? How much did Harry
“As if I need his money.”

Harry turned to Ginny, smirking. “I threatened to start calling him Draco.”

This caused a round of laughter from those listening at the table.

“Not ready to be on such intimate terms with him then, Potter? I knew you couldn’t be as good of friends as Skeeter reported.”

Blaise reached over and hit the back of Theo’s head and he let out a yell of protest.

“You know full well they’re good friends, I’ve told you.”

Theo rubbed the back of his head, eyes scrunched up. “Maybe I just won’t speak for the rest of the evening.”

“Excellent,” said Draco and Blaise in unison, then exchanged another significant glance.

“I suppose old habits die hard, right Potter?”

“Right, Malfoy,” Harry said automatically, while taking a sip of his firewhiskey.

Hermione watched this all in a stunned silence, still hardly breathing. He still hadn’t even spared her a glance and she wasn’t sure if she was about to burst into tears or simply stand and run from the pub.

At that moment, the door jingled again and Neville came swooping in. He approached the table at speed, as if he were there to rescue someone.

Her! She needed rescuing! This evening was going to be a completely different sort of torture than she’d anticipated.

Mercilessly the only empty chair was near Hermione, recently vacated by some witch from magical maintenance who had asked her to autograph three photos for her nieces and nephew before making and excuse and bolting out of there.

Joy of joys, meeting strangers.

Neville made a bee-line for her and sat down after giving a brief greeting to the group and apologizing for his lateness, as he’d traveled from Hogwarts.

“Hermione, where have you been? Did you get my letter?”

Hermione’s eyes went wide and she slapped a hand over her mouth, momentarily forgetting the torture she’d been feeling in exchange for some fresh guilt.

“Oh Merlin, I’m so sorry Neville! I… I was hungover yesterday and I must have… left it on the foot of my bed and never…”

He put a hand on his chest and let out a breath. “You had me worried, you always respond straight away. So… what happened, you were hungover?”

“Er- yes, one too many of Ginny’s margaritas.”
She glanced up as she said this and noticed that Draco was staring. Not at her, but at Neville.

His look was one of a jealous lover, menacing and foreboding. This confused her, but she tried to bring her focus back to Neville.

“Ah yes, those I have fallen victim to myself,” he said, “why I remember on my birthday last year she mixed two pitchers and made me sample each as she went. Before any guests had arrived I’d already begun dancing on the table…”

Hermione wasn’t listening now, as Draco’s gaze had shifted to her. They stared at one another, his face impassive, hers scared.

“When Harry arrived, I ran up and kissed him! Thanked him for saving us all! Think he’s still mad about that-” Neville went on, not even noticing Hermione could no longer hear him.

Without breaking eye contact, Draco stood from his seat. He mumbled something to those nearest him who nodded in response, all deep in conversation and not really paying him any mind.

And then he strode away, taking care to pass by her as he went.

Amidst trying to partly listen to Neville’s story, she noticed that Draco snapped his fingers as he walked by and suddenly her nose was filled with his scent. Far more powerful than what it would have been otherwise, she knew he’d magic’d the scent there.

“Matter of fact, that was the first time I let Hannah know how I felt about her! At least, that’s what people told me later…”

Her eyelids fluttered and her heart rate increased as she swayed a bit in her seat. Through hazy eyes, she saw Draco move to the staircase in the pub.

Neville had been prattling on, but stopped speaking upon seeing the effects of the spell wash over her.

“Hermione are you okay?!”

She snapped her eyes open, realizing where she was and with whom. She feigned dizziness and said, “I’m alright, maybe one too many butter beers. Speaking of drunken nights!” she chortled, nervously, “You know what, Neville? I’m just going to pop up to the loo and splash some water on my face, I’ll be right back.” She turned and made to leave.

“No!” she said as she spun around, “I mean, thank you Neville, but I’d rather go alone.”

He agreed, but watched her carefully as she walked over to the staircase leading up to the bathrooms.

As she ascended the stairs, she took care to hold on tightly to the railing. The spell he’d cast had been truly intoxicating, but it seemed to be wearing off already. She must ask him about this spell, as it was one she’d never heard of.

She entered the upstairs hallway and saw a door, slightly ajar, at the end labeled “employees only.” The warm light emanating from behind it peeked through the cracks, beckoning her.

Instincts taking over, she walked straight to it and slipped inside.

“You lost, Granger?”
Hermione spun around, breathless, to find Draco sitting nonchalantly on a leather loveseat to the left of the door.

“Returning to my surname, then?” she said with an attempt at being calm and collected even though her heart was beating like a drum, her chest heaving.

“Old habits die hard, I suppose,” he said, letting his eyes run down her body and then back up to her eyes.

“Right,” she said breathlessly.

Hermione stood there, not sure what exactly to do next. Did this all mean he wasn’t cross with her? Hadn’t seen the kiss? She had to know.

“Thanks for the tequila.”

He smirked, “I assume it’s sitting unopened in your office?”

She nodded.

“I knew I should have stuck around. Was in a bit of a rush, I left it with your secretary.”

She released her breath fully for the first time since she spotted the small bottle.

“Oh that’s… fine,” she said, her overthinking mind relaxing.

“Don’t let me keep you, if you were on the way to the loo.”

“Oh I- uh… no I wasn’t-”

She looked at him perplexedly before realizing he’d been play-acting.

Her breath caught in her chest when he stood and began walking towards her, a sly smirk on his face.

Merlin, she had forgotten how devastatingly handsome he was.

She felt her heart rate increase further, not taking her eyes off his, which were glimmering in the low light of the employee break room.

Eventually, he was only inches from her, and the scent which he had magically invaded her with moments ago was now hanging in the air between them. Her eyes traveled quickly down over his muggle clothing before snapping back up to his face.

When he spoke, it was almost a whisper. “Remember Hermione, not unless you move first.”

Inhaling sharply, her breath shuddering as it always did from the sound of her name on his lips, she felt anticipation pooling in her stomach and a warm sensation now aching between her legs.

She would have spoken, but her voice was suddenly disabled.

Everything about his body language indicated that he was ready to pounce, and yet she knew he’d meant what he’d said. He wouldn’t move until she did.

Filled with desire to have him touch her, she reached up and placed her hand on his cheek. For good measure, she dragged her thumb across his bottom lip just as he had done when they’d first kissed in
his cottage.

He took a deep, shuddering breath at her touch and she felt a shock and elation course through her at the realization that he wasn’t quite as calm and collected as he’d seemed, and that she had caused it in him.

“Good enough for me,” he growled, before reaching down to grab her legs and wrap them around his waist, walking forward and pushing her against the wall. She let out a surprised squeak before their lips connected. It was a deep, longing kiss. They moaned in unison in almost the exact same tone. She would have giggled at it if she hadn’t been so caught up in the absolute ecstasy of him.

Writing letters had created an intense craving in her, and it seemed they’d had the same effect on him. The anxiety of the day washed out of her system in a flood of relief, her mind clearer than it possibly had been in many years.

He broke the kiss and moved down to her neck as she dug her nails into his shoulders in an effort to hold on, breathy moans leaving her mouth at a rapid pace. Apart from being suspended in the air and caught between the wall and his body, she was quite sure her legs wouldn’t work even if she’d had them placed upon the ground.

She felt as though she was levitating.

Somehow, he’d known the exact spot below her jaw that drove her completely mad, and she was entirely unable to contain her moans of approval. She suddenly became aware that his hands were cupping her bottom firmly, but had no energy to feel bashful about it. His grip on her strengthened and she felt secure enough to release her grip on his shoulders and rake her fingers through his hair. It was ridiculously soft, and she gave it an experimental tug as she bucked her hips into his.

Taking this as a cue, he spun her around and before she knew it they were on the loveseat, and she was straddling him as he continued to bite and kiss her neck. Her sensible heels fell off her feet and hit the ground with a clatter, as she pressed her heat into him and felt that he was rock hard beneath his jeans. A small gasp of surprise left her mouth at that moment, and he groaned in response, placing his mouth back on hers and sending her into waves of delight as he bit and licked her lower lip.

“I love these noises you make. Better than I even imagined,” he growled.

He kissed her again and began unbuttoning her blouse. Gaining access to her soft, lightly freckled skin, he began placing soft kisses all over her chest. Her euphoria boiled over as he moved down to her bra and ran his tongue along the edge of it. Just as she let out her most emphatic moan yet, he pulled away from her.

Dazedly, she opened her eyes at looked at him questioningly. He reached down and grabbed his wand, flicking it at the door, presumably to cast locking and silencing charms before turning his attention back to her.

“No one should disturb us, but just in case. I paid the barman enough to ensure no interruptions.”

“You- what?!” she gasped, but then his hand was back in her hair and he pulled her down into a deep kiss. Her mind was reeling. He’d pre-planned this.

But of course he had, he’d told her as much in his letter. Still, the fact that he’d been thinking about it this much, and putting so much effort into creating the night just so. It made her feel special in a way no one ever had before.

Then she broke the kiss, a panicked thought occurring to her.
“But what about everyone downstairs, won’t they notice we’ve gone?”

He put both of his hands on her face and looked deep into her eyes.

“No thinking allowed in this room. Leave the details to me.”

“But..” she said, looking towards the door. He took her chin gently in his hand and guided her gaze back to him.

“Hey… do you trust me?”

She made a small gasp, considering his question. His expression was warm… gentle… consoling. She couldn’t remember ever seeing him so… caring. In any other circumstance, she would have found it strange, but in this moment it simply felt… wonderful.

“Yes,” she breathed, almost automatically. A sincere grin spread across his face and he pulled her down into a kiss so meaningful, so deeply intimate that she began to feel truly dizzy. She had the intense desire to be closer to him, even as she was sitting atop his lap and grinding her body into him. She began tracing hisses down his jawline and onto his neck and collarbone. He let out a moan, and she knew she’d found his weak spot. He grasped her hair more tightly with one hand and cupped her breast with his other, over her blouse.

“This needs to come off,” he said, tugging on her blouse.

She leaned back obediently and he began undoing the remaining buttons, keeping his eyes locked with hers.

“Did you think of me in bed last night?” he asked.

Automatically, small smirk spread across her mouth and she bit her bottom lip.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said, now removing her blouse fully and taking in the smooth, creamy fabric of her bra, in Slytherin green.

“Oh, you absolute minx.”

She giggled and leaned down to kiss him again, as he reached back to unclasp her bra, which he then tossed to the floor, cupping her breasts in earnest and running his thumbs over her taut nipples. She released his lips and let out a breathy moan at his touch.

“I want to see,” he said, and she looked down at him, trying to understand what he’d meant.

“You want to see?”

“What it looks like when you think of me, Hermione,” he said, and she gaped at him, having a hard time wrapping her head around what he was asking.

“Will you show me?”

Her breath stilled as she stared down at him. She had never… done that in front of anyone, but before she knew it she was nodding.

No thinking allowed in this room. Hermione had always been good at following rules.

She placed her feet on the floor as he unbuttoned her jeans and slid them down, caressing her legs as he went. He let out a small growl when he saw that she was wearing matching knickers, and took the
opportunity of his mouth being so near her to bite at the edge of the fabric as he helped her slip out of her jeans.

He placed her down on the loveseat next to him and she felt some discomfort thinking of how many people had likely sat in the place where she was currently almost naked.

“I conjured this anew when I came in, by the way, no one has sat here before,” he said, noticing her hesitation as he removed his sweatshirt hoodie, “I told you I handled the details, now where were we?”

She relaxed into the loveseat and leaned back, left arm draped above her head holding on to the arm of the couch tightly, a devilish smirk crossing her face. It was almost as if she were watching the scene from above. The whole thing was surreal in the most intriguing way, she felt so unlike her usual self.

“You wanted to see what I look like… thinking about you,” she said as she slid her right hand down between her breasts, across her stomach, and down past her center, stroking her inner thigh.

He followed her hand’s progress with rapt attention. She grazed past her center and back up to her breasts, running her fingers over each of her peaked nipples, tweaking them gently and groaning with satisfaction as she did so.

Eyes now closed, she heard him shift in his seat and clear his throat, but she didn’t look at him. It gave her an intense sense of satisfaction to know she was affecting him.

She grasped her breast, running her thumb back and forth across her nipple.

“Draco,” she whispered, and heard him gasp and then growl.

Slowly, teasingly, she moved her hand back down between her legs and began massaging herself over her knickers. Letting out an involuntary moan of her own, she let her body writhe around.

This was so different than it had ever been alone. She found that she rather enjoyed having an audience. And an extremely captive one at that.

Her body tingled with the promise of release as she sped her movements and fell into a rhythmic motion. He was breathless, she could tell without looking.

Bringing her fingers slowly back to the edge of her knickers, she chanced a glance at him and saw him lick his lips as she slid them underneath.

Even she was surprised by how wet she was as she slid her fingers between her hot folds. Her head lollled back as she gently moaned and bucked her hips into her own hand. Just as she had the previous night after receiving his letter, she tried to imagine it was his hand teasing her. It had been difficult, as she knew her fingers to be far more petite than his. Mostly, she’d imagined skipping this bit altogether and letting him take her.

She’d never been too interested in foreplay, although this moment of having him watch her was steadily changing her mind on that score.

Still, she wasn’t interested in playing this game for too much longer. Thinking that she knew how to speed things up, she went ahead and inserted two of her fingers inside her and brought her other hand down to grasp her breast and tweak her nipple again.

And then she spoke not in a whisper, but in a sudden demanding moan.
“Oh Draco, Draco- shag me please.”

“Sod it,” she heard him say, as a belt unbuckled and his jeans fell to the floor.

She smirked surreptitiously, knowing it had done the trick, but kept going as if she hadn’t heard him. Then suddenly he was upon her, his bare chest pressing against her hot skin and his mouth capturing hers in a deep dance of tongues. She loved the taste of him, the feel of his body on hers, and now the solid tension pressing against her core. He reached down and expertly tore her knickers right off, and she squealed with delight, unbothered by any thoughts of what she would do when it was time to leave.

He positioned himself at her opening, but then looked up at her and raised an eyebrow.

“I confess I didn’t intend to take it this far tonight, but you were driving me mad. If you don’t want the first time to be in some pub, we could—”

“You’re not following your own rules, Draco. Kindly stop thinking and shut the fuck up.”

She dragged him down on top of her, and he entered her swiftly, almost solely from the force of gravity and the angle he’d been at. It also helped that she was slick as oil and beyond ready to receive him.

“Oh!” she gasped, and then let out a long moan of approval, which he matched.

He was much larger than what she’d become accustomed to, and she felt no want for more friction as he stretched and prodded her at varying speeds, exploring her thoroughly.

After all the buildup, she realized she was already on the edge of coming undone. She wished she weren’t because it felt incredible to have him inside her. Raking her fingers through his hair, she pulled him down for a few clumsy kisses before realizing that he was sliding his hand down to help her along. He began rubbing small circles in her most sensitive spot and she felt her body convulse, her walls fluttering around him uncontrollably as her orgasm crashed over her like a tsunami. Just when she thought it was cresting, it grew larger and more imminently devastating in a way she’d always wished to be devastated by a man. Not made to cry, but to scream in ecstasy.

He continued to thrust into her, his moans indicating that he was also getting close. They began shouting each other’s names in turn, which only served to push them both closer to the edge.

She broke first, letting out the most strangled moan she could ever remember leaving her lips. He followed closely behind her, and his orgasm also seemed to be going on longer than average, as he released inside her. So great was her relief that each panting moan of rapture turned into euphoria, and she found that she was laughing.

Catching his breath, still firmly inside of her, he looked down and quirked an eyebrow.

“Not the reaction most blokes are going for.”

“I’m sorry,” she said through panting breaths, “Nothing is funny, I’m just… feeling uncommonly euphoric.”

He leaned down close enough to kiss her and grinned.

“Leave it to you to use big words at a time like this,” he said, and kissed her adoringly, running his
hands gently through her hair. She kissed his cheek a few times and then settled her head in the
crook of his neck, wrapping her arms around him tightly, both still working to catch their breath.

After a while, she whispered in his ear, “What are we going to do?”

He leaned back to look into her eyes.

“About?”

A sad smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “About us, about… this… and… everything.”

He leaned in and gave her a small kiss.

“I’m not ready to think about all that just yet. Is that alright?”

It warmed her to hear him ask her this.

“I… suppose… for now. But eventually-”

“I promise, Hermione. Eventually,” he said, nodding.

She reached up and kissed him again, then placed a hand on his cheek, grazing his jawline.

“Alright, Draco.”
Chapter Summary

Draco wakes in an unfamiliar bed and makes an uncomfortable discovery.

Chapter Notes

Longer chapter will be out this Thursday. Thanks to everyone for all of your thoughtful comments!!!

Draco didn’t want to open his eyes. The sun streaming into the room was oppressive... unseemly.

Even as he thought it, he realized he wasn’t in his own bed. He’d always drawn his curtains before going to sleep, for one thing, but he was also distinctly aware of the absence of his usual silk down pillows. In fact, there was no pillow beneath his head at all.

With a warming realization, he remembered that he was with her. In her bed. That they’d surreptitiously left the group gathering last night at staggered times and met up in front of Flourish and Blotts before apparating to her flat together. Harry and Blaise had been ready to confund anyone who seemed suspicious, giving them a clear path to move freely.

The night had been... incredible.

He’d been having trouble wrapping his head around so many positive things happening in such a small amount of time. To him, it felt as though the world was suddenly in screaming color, after years of seeing only gray.

The overwhelmingly positive sensation felt tenuous.

Perhaps it was just because it was so foreign, but he’d never been very good at allowing things to continue going well once they’d got started. Indeed, he was much more accustomed to chaos and turmoil.

Turning to look at her, he realized that he was staring at her feet. His head was at the foot of her bed, while she had her head up at the top.

Remembering the reason why, he grinned. After having sex three or four more times upon arriving back at her flat, they concluded that they needed to stop and sleep. Every time they laid down face to face, however, they’d end up snogging and it would start all over again.

It seemed that their attraction had been built up and stored for what must have been years for both of them, and they were retroactively getting it out of their systems.

Draco knew it would never be fully out of his system. If he couldn’t break the marriage promise in the allotted time and was going to be stuck with Astoria, then perhaps they could create some arrangement...
He shook his head.

Not the time to think about that yet.

He needed to allow himself to just enjoy the current moment, even if it might be fleeting. Even if it would be difficult later. He deserved at least a drop of happiness before returning to his obligations.

Yes, that was what he’d focus upon today, and he would make this day worth it.

A knot formed in his stomach as he remembered that he’d lied to her the night before. A white lie, all things considered, and yet he’d felt horribly about it. He wasn’t as concerned about admitting his lie as he was about making her feel embarrassed that he’d witnessed her kiss with her now ex-husband.

He would tell her. He’d find the right time, perhaps when it all wasn’t so fresh. For now, he’d keep things peaceful. Happy. Fun.

Just then, he turned his head and felt something stab into his scalp. Lifting up onto his elbows, he reached back and found a letter wedged between the mattress and bed frame. It was unopened, addressed to Hermione, and with a Hogwarts seal.

“Longbottom,” he grunted quietly, then glanced up to see that Hermione was still fast asleep.

He looked down at the letter with a grimace, resisting the urge to either open it or tear it to pieces. Seeing her with the herbology professor last night had ended his plan to ignore her for the first hour. The way he had rushed through the door with his pathetic Gryffindor heroics had made Draco’s blood boil.

The idea that Neville Longbottom could be competition for him would have been laughable back in their Hogwarts days.

However, he would have to have been an idiot not to recognize that age had been rather kind to Neville, even earning him the cover of Witch Weekly for most charming smile shortly after gaining his position at the school. Draco had noted this when reading the French newspaper prior to Gabrielle’s party, but had brushed it off as unnecessary information.

What an annoying obstruction the man was turning out to be for him.

In hindsight, however, he was grateful that his jealousy had flared up and caused him to rise from his seat and lead her away sooner than planned. It meant that they’d had much more time together than they otherwise would have.

With a sudden stroke of mischievous inspiration, he reached over and dragged the letter across the bottom of her foot, and WHACK!

The involuntary movement of Hermione’s foot into his face was sharp and painful. He grasped his nose as he shouted out.

“What? Draco oh my god!” she said, sitting up in a panic.

“Suppose I deserved that,” he said through his hand.

Her eyes went wide. “Did I just kick you?!”

“A bit,” he said, taking his hand away from his nose to check for blood. There was none. He grinned at her.
“Remind me never to tickle you again.”

She had her hand over her mouth and her cheeks were blazing.

“I’m sure there’s something I’ve said or done in all our years of acquaintance that would warrant a foot to the face.”

She allowed a small smile and he reached back to grab the letter.

“Unopened owl?”

She took it and let out a small laugh.

“No use even opening it at this point, it’s from Thursday and I’ve already seen Neville in person so I know what it says.”

“What does it say?” he asked, snatching it back from her.

“Hey! Give that back this instant!”

Grinning, he waved the letter tauntingly.

“But if it’s not important then why do you care?”

Crossing her arms, she glared at him. “I never said it wasn’t important, I just said I’ve already spoken to him. I forgot to reply to that one on Thursday,” she said, emphasizing the day, “because I was a bit caught up exchanging messages with another wizard.”

Not having lost the grin, he said, “lucky bloke.”

She smirked back, still pouting.

“Draco Malfoy, you give me back my letter.”

“Oh so you’re full-naming me now, there must be something in here you’d rather me not see for you to be so severe.”

“I am not severe. I’m just acting on the principal of the thing, it is not proper to take another person’s post. As for the contents of the letter I could not care less if you read it.”

He broke the seal without taking his eyes off her, still grinning.

“You sure, Granger?”

“I’m sure,” she said haughtily.

He opened the letter and read.

—

Dear Hermione,

I hope you are well after what happened on Sunday. I’m glad I could provide some comfort, but if I know you, you went straight back to worrying come Monday morning.

Since I haven’t heard from you I assume that either everything is fine, OR everything is decidedly not fine and you have stubbornly chosen to suffer alone.
Let me know which it is. I worry about you.

I hope your plan to stay away from Malfoy is going off without a hitch.

Love,

Neville

PS - I’m sorry for my drunken comments about us never having dated. Please hex me if I ever say anything of the sort again, I give you my full permission in advance.

—

Many thoughts flooded Draco’s mind as he read this, and his eyebrows were in danger of leaving his forehead altogether.

“What’s wrong? What does it say?” she asked, snatching it back and reading through it herself at a rapid pace.

“What drunken comments then?” he asked with a try at playfulness, even though he was seething inside.

Hermione put her hand on her face, “it’s nothing, just, whenever Neville gets pissed he starts in about how we would have been a good couple, it’s how I know he needs to be cut off.”

Draco grunted. He could tell she thought this an innocent habit, but he knew better. Neville must certainly harbor some pent-up feelings for the witch if it came out whenever his inhibitions were lowered. Plus, he’d signed his letter with “love,” which was a dead giveaway.

“And what’s this business about a plan to stay away from me?” he asked, knowing the answer. She’d left the Manor on Sunday and gone straight to Neville, who had advised her to steer clear of him, he was certain of it.

She sighed, looking at him sadly. “Draco I do not want a row over this, it’s all nonsense, it’s not even pertinent any longer seeing as a lot’s happened since Sunday. If you haven’t noticed, you are currently half-naked in my bed, so I think it’s safe to say my previous plan is now null and void.”

He looked away, unconvinced, but then Harry’s voice came to mind. It told him to check his temper and recognize that her focus was on him. She’d left Neville last night, for him. So what if the lousy sod was in love with her, she’d brought him home with her. He took a deep breath and looked up at her.

“Sorry, I- you’re right.”

She smirked. “Wow an apology and an admission of being wrong all in one fell swoop, am I hearing things? Is it Christmas?”

He looked at her, hurt by the speed and ferocity with which she voiced this opinion of him.

“Am I that much of an arse that you think I can never admit I’m wrong?”

She leaned in, smiling, and just before their lips met said, “yes.”

And then she was kissing him, gently at first but quickly switching to passionate, even ravenous.

Draco thought he owed Harry a great deal of gratitude for the tip on keeping his temper under
control. It certainly had its rewards. He bit back any retort that might have been occurring to him and sank into the kiss.

She tasted like a perfect spring day. He wasn’t sure how a person could achieve such a taste, but there it was.

Just then, a familiar voice sounded from the floo in the living room.

“Hermione! Are you decent? Can I drop in?”

When. When would a time come that their embrace wouldn’t be interrupted by THAT voice. He growled moodily as they broke apart and another familiar voice joined her.

“Ginny I told you, forget about Saturday brunch, I’m sure Hermione is not-”

“Don’t you start with me again, Potter, it’s tradition. We already missed last week for Gabrielle’s party, I’m not missing it again.”

Hermione chuckled.

“They wouldn’t just floo here would they?”

“Oh Ginny would. Better put on your pants unless you want to give her a show.”

Hermione hopped up off the bed and threw on her jeans and the t-shirt she’d worn Wednesday night, which had been hanging from her bedpost. He wondered idly why it had still been there when the rest of her room had looked immaculate. Yet he followed suit, buttoning his pants just as Ginny’s voice sounded from within the apartment itself, followed again by Harry’s.

“Ginny she’s probably not even here!”

Hermione shook her head and called, “I’m here, Harry!”

“See! I told you, still in bed!” Ginny shouted at her husband.

Draco stared at Hermione, in shock that she allowed her friends to drop by seemingly unannounced whenever they pleased.

Hermione shot him a bemused expression and said, “Three… two… one…”

Ginny burst through her bedroom door. “Wake up sleepyh- aah! Well hellooo, Malfoy!” she cooed. Harry nearly ran into her as he skidded into the room in her wake.

“Sorry guys, I tried to stop her.”

“Well well well, it seems someone took my advice for once! Well done, Hermione,” Ginny said, wiggling her eyebrows. Harry grabbed her elbow and began pulling her out of the room.

“We’ll just, be going…”

“Did you mention something about food, Potter?”

Harry and Ginny stopped in their tracks, looking from Draco to Hermione.

“Yes but we didn’t,” Harry said, shooting a side eye at his wife, “I didn’t want to intrude on your day if-”
Draco shrugged. “We need to eat. I don’t happen to have other plans,” he said, looking over to Hermione to see if it was ok with her that he join them.

She looked like it was Christmas morning indeed.

“You’ll... come to brunch?”

He shrugged again, feigning indifference, though he did not know why. In reality, he was feeling anything but indifferent about being let into her personal world, this time by her choice.

“Why not?”

“N- no reason, only…” she turned to look at Ginny, “are any of your… brothers planning to stop by?”

Ginny shook her head, “Not today, Percy and Bill are working overtime after missing so much last weekend and Ron, well…”

Hermione grimaced. “It’s alright, I don’t need to know where he is, but I don’t think I’m ready to be in the same room as him… so as long as you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” Ginny said, shaking her head, “it’s possible Neville will stop by, but otherwise it should just be us.”

Draco and Hermione shared a quick glance, which was unmissed by Harry.

“Yea Hannah is back this morning from her field work for the Floo Network Authority and if they have time they will drop by.”

Draco understood that this information had been intended to aid in his suppression of any jealous rages that might have occurred to him, and he appreciated Harry’s thoughtfulness.

“Well, I’ll just stop back at my flat first to get ready and then we’ll meet you there?”

Ginny was grinning like an idiot and Harry was again pulling her from the room.

“Yep, very good, we’ll be off. See you both soon.”

As they walked down the hall, Draco could hear their mumbled argument. Something about gawping at them and deserving privacy. He smiled over at Hermione who was looking at him warily. He started, seeing her expression.

“If you don’t want me to go-”

“No! That wasn’t- I want you to I just-”

He walked over to her, a look of concern on his face. “What is it?”

To his surprise, a mischievous smirk came across her face. “Do you have to go back to your flat to get ready? Only… I need to shower as well and I thought perhaps…” She was leaning closer and closer to his lips as she spoke. Her voice now a whisper, she said, “we could do that together.”

“Minx,” he said, as he closed the distance between their lips and kissed her with the same ferocity as he had the night before when she’d grazed his lip and given him the green light to take her wherever he pleased.
The water in the shower was just getting to the perfect temperature when he arrived back, having gone home just to grab a change of clothes. A pair of warm arms wrapped around her waist as she stood facing the shower and she leaned in to his bare chest. He’d already removed his shirt, and she had stripped down completely. Pulling her hair back from her neck, she felt him begin to kiss and suckle on her and she let out a moan of pleasure that reverberated around the tile walls of her tiny bathroom.

He released her neck and let out a long sigh. “I really can’t handle these noises you make, and I feel sure they are permanently embedded into my mind.”

She smirked and spun around. “Well that’s convenient, for all the times when I’m not there and you feel the desire to enjoy them by memory.”

“There’s nothing like the real thing,” he said, shaking his head, and he captured her lips once more and did not let them go until she had stepped into the tub, unbuckling his belt as she did so.

Truly, she could not fathom the change that had come over her since last night. She had never been particularly promiscuous in her school years, and apart from a few snogging sessions with Viktor in dark corners of the Hogwarts Library, she had very little experience with being... seductive.

Now, however, it was as though she’d just discovered a secret language that she’d never known herself to be fluent in. Something about him brought it out of her and... she was rather enjoying it.

His jeans dropped to the floor for the third time in the last twelve or so hours, and she smirked as she tilted her head back into the hot water and left him to finish undressing as she released a few more small moans, not even intending them to taunt him. He growled in response and she giggled as she realized what she had done.

“Hermione Granger, you will be the death of me,” he said as he climbed into the shower behind her.

She shuddered. Thoughts of the marriage promise flooding back into her mind. But she pushed them away, and remembered Ginny’s words.

For now, at least, she would suspend her fears and just enjoy the moment.

And she intended to fully enjoy it.

This whole not thinking thing was something she could get used to.
Dirty Laundry

Chapter Summary

Brunch time with the Potters

Chapter Notes

I just did a really awesome photoshoot for my fanfic account! Come check it out :) https://liliansilverstuff.tumblr.com

“You took your time,” Ginny said with a knowing smirk as she sipped coffee out of a Holyhead Harpies mug, curled up on the cushioned bench in her kitchen. It was just she and Harry in the room, with him managing the bacon while she relaxed.

“We just- needed to-” Hermione sputtered.

“Mm hmm!” Ginny squeaked as she smirked at them, then looked down to pour Hermione a mug of coffee. Hermione chuckled nervously as she walked forward to take the cup of coffee.

Draco felt oddly at home here, standing in Potter’s kitchen with his wife sat there, somehow approving of the fact that he and Hermione had been together last night as well at this morning.

Something about it just felt right.

A new sensation flooded his consciousness. Was it yearning? Melancholy? He grimaced, realizing for a fleeting moment that he wanted this to be his reality. Being there with her... with her friends... his friends.

“Malfoy will you grab the eggs for me?”

Harry’s voice snapped him out of his trance.

“Sure,” he said, walking forward and pulling the fridge open. Behind him he could hear Ginny having a whispered conversation with Hermione.

“Good night, then?”

He couldn’t hear Hermione’s reply, but in glancing back he saw that she was smiling broadly at her friend. Looking back into the fridge, he smiled to himself.

“They should be right on the top shelf, Malfoy.”

“Yep, got em,” he said, and brought them over to the counter next to the stove.

Harry placed down a large bowl in front of him and said, “get cracking, then.”
Draco raised an eyebrow at him. “I’m not sure I like you ordering me around, Potter.”

Harry turned to him with a haughty expression on his face. “Sorry Malfoy, you’re new here so you are unaware. The correct response would be “yes chef” followed by doing whatever it is I ask.” He leaned forward and poked Draco in the chest. “My kitchen my rules.”

Draco chuckled and began cracking eggs, shaking his head. It always felt a bit odd not to be argumentative with Harry, but he was getting more and more used to it with time. It took a lot less energy, for one thing.

“He cooks?” he heard Ginny whisper excitedly.

Again, he couldn’t discern Hermione’s response, when suddenly both women rose to their feet.

“We’ll be back!” announced Ginny, pulling a giggling Hermione from the room, “I need Hermione’s help with my... laundry!”

“Be back in ten, or you get cold eggs!” Harry yelled without looking up.

Malfoy leaned over to him. “Laundry?”

“Not likely, she finished that before we came over this morning. Probably she wants details about last night.”

Draco grunted, looking back nervously at the spot where they’d just disappeared.

“I don’t, by the way.”

“What?”

“Want details, I mean. In case you were planning to confide any in me, Hermione is essentially my sister and I don’t need to hear any sordid play by plays.”

“I wasn’t planning on it, Potter.”

“Good,” he said, just as Draco had finished cracking the eggs. Harry took the bowl from him. “Having said that, you can still share whatever else you need to.”

Draco moved to the sink to wash his hands. “Not too much else to tell if not those details” he said, smirking.

“Noted. Any ideas on what next?”

“Nah mate, I’m just trying to enjoy the moment.”

“Well that’s a welcome change,” Harry said, looking up from his egg scrambling with a smirk.

Draco nodded and began slicing pieces of bread for toast.

A short while later, the floo sounded from the other room and it seemed Ginny and Hermione had been on their way back to the kitchen just in time to meet...

“Hannah!” Ginny’s voice trilled from the other room, “you made it!”

Hermione re-entered the kitchen, flowed closely by Ginny and their new arrival.
As soon as Hannah spotted Draco she stopped in her tracks, a look of surprised delight on her face.

“Oh!” she cried, looking over at Hermione and then quickly back to Draco.

“I didn’t realize-”

“Hannah, you remember Draco Malfoy, I presume?” Hermione said hurriedly.

Hannah stumbled forward and held out her hand, a dazed look on her face.

“Y- yes of course! I mean, yes, we were in school together weren’t we? I mean not that you noticed me ever unless it was at my expense, not that I’m cross about it, I’m not, it was a long time ago and time heals all wounds as they say!” she chuckled nervously.

He kept his face impassive as he looked down at her hand, still firmly holding his. She dropped it immediately and wiped hers against her jumper, evidently needing to rid it of sweat. Glancing around, he noticed that Harry and Ginny were both biting back laughter, while Hermione looked aghast.

“So!” Hannah continued, “What brings you here, Draco? Is what I read in the Prophet true and you really are good friends with Harry now? I’d assumed it was all part of a well-calculated show. Not that I think you’re calculated or… or… or showy! Just that, well you know, the papers, you just never know if anything you read these days has even an ounce of truth to it. Why Neville has been written about countless times in the last few years and I’d surrender my wand if you could show me even one blasted article that contained more truth than embellishments!”

She laughed again in that same nervous way and then trailed off, as her eyes looked him up and down and the glaze reformed over her face.

“H- Hannah, will Neville be arriving soon?” Hermione tried.

Hannah started. “Who? Oh! Yes!” she let out another chuckle, “he should be here any moment!”

Just then the floo sounded and a loud SMACK proceeded Neville’s shout of pain. Swirling around and running through the door, Hannah went hastily to his aid. They had a muffled conversation in the other room before Neville pushed open the swinging door and stopped in his tracks at the sight of Draco, now holding a large bread knife at the counter.

Neville looked from Draco to the knife to Harry, Ginny, and Hermione, silently bidding any of them to explain what was happening.

“Neville darling, look! It’s Draco Malfoy! Turns out the papers were correct and he is in fact friends with Harry now and he’s here! Cooking brunch!”

She sounded like a teenager going on about getting tickets to see The Weird Sisters.

Draco couldn’t help but smirk at Neville, who was currently still standing in the doorway, beside himself with shock.

“Ginny, I thought you were going to owl Neville and let him know about our guest,” Harry said, with a forced sense of calm.

Ginny smiled innocently over at her husband and said, “oops.”

Harry shook his head and returned to placing the eggs on a serving tray.
“Malfoy,” Neville said, nodding.

Draco was rather enjoying this sudden turn of events and so threw Neville an uncharacteristic smile. “Hello, Professor.”

Neville grimaced and looked around at the others. “Morning all, is the food almost ready? I’m starved.”

“Nearly!” Said Harry, handing Draco a platter of bacon to bring to the table along with the eggs.

“So, Ms. Abbott,” Draco said, carrying the platters over, “Potter tells me you work for the FNA.”

“Oh call me Hannah, please!” she simpered, “and yes, I just got the position earlier this year.”

“And do you enjoy it?” Draco said, passing out plates to everyone as though he did this every day. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Neville was attempting a silent conversation with Hermione, and he looked livid. Smiling inwardly, he leaned forward and pretended to be very interested in Hannah’s babbling description of her work duties and the types of issues she had to handle on a day to day basis.

Hannah herself looked as though she’d quite forgotten that anyone else in the room existed.

This dance continued for several minutes, with Draco asking increasingly more detailed questions about Hannah’s work. Harry busied himself with his food, while Hermione continued to monitor the anger clearly bubbling just below Neville’s surface. Ginny followed the conversation, pleasantly adding in prompting comments to help it along and looking as though Christmas had come early.

Yes, he’d been right, Ginny would have done well in Slytherin. Mischief was one of her primary delights, and one that they shared.

“Now, you’re still an Abbott, I notice. So tell me, how is it that Longbottom hasn’t locked you down yet? A charming, talented woman such as yourself surely-“

“As it happens, Malfoy,” Neville said forcefully, “I have.”

Draco raised his eyebrows and turned back to Hannah. “I had no idea. You’re not wearing a ring...”

“The ring belonged to my Gran. Goblin made and needed adjustment. We’ve been having a bit of trouble with the... jewelry maker. Probably just tying us up with paperwork since they don’t believe in ownership of Goblin made items the way wizards do.”

“What a shame!” Draco said, feigning sincerity. He took Hannah’s hand in his and she let out a small gasp. Then, without looking at Neville, he stared right into her eyes and said, “if I were you I’d do whatever it took to move that paperwork along. You wouldn’t want anyone assuming she’s not taken... Professor.”

Hannah let out a ridiculous giggle that filled the entire room. She did not pull back her hand but reached across the table to hit Draco playfully with the other.

“Oh Draco, you flatter me!”

Neville and Harry stood at the same time.

“It’s alright Neville, stay here. Malfoy, please accompany me upstairs. I need help with… laundry.”

Laundry indeed.
Draco knew his time was up. He gave a small shrug, released Hannah’s hand and stood from the table, following Harry out of the room.

Hannah, looking startled, called “bye then!” as the door swung closed.

Neville rounded on Hermione.

“What in the bloody hell is he doing here, Hermione? And why in the name of Merlin’s pants is he hitting on my fiancé?!”

Hannah’s eyes went wide. “Was he?!”

“Yes, Hannah, but I think it was just to get a rise out of Neville.” When Hannah’s face fell, Hermione added, “oh I didn’t mean it that way Hannah!”

“Hannah will you help me brew a pot of coffee while these two talk?” Ginny interjected.

Hannah nodded, still looking glum, but rose from her seat and followed Ginny.

“Go in the den, Hermione, we’ll be here.”

Hermione grabbed Neville’s arm and led him out of the kitchen and into the small den off the living room, taking care to cast a silencing charm as she shut the door.

“Neville I can explain.”

Seeming not to hear her, Neville shouted, “Hermione I do not like that man. I thought I could be civil and I was when I saw him at Gabrielle’s, but after that display I-”

“NEVILLE HE IS JEALOUS OF YOU!” she shouted.

Neville stared at her, his jaw nearly hitting the floor.

“He realized how close we are, he knows I went to see you after our row on Sunday and then he found your letter in my bedroom and got all jealous and possessive. Apparently, Harry had to talk him out of coming after you just for writing me in the first place and-”

“Hermione stop.”

She looked up at him and saw that he had his eyes closed.

“Say it again.”

“What?”

“Tell me again?”

She stared at him, utterly perplexed.

“Tell you what? That Malfoy is jealous of you?”

Eyes still closed, Neville took a deep breath.
“Neville what- Are you alright?”

Neville opened his eyes and a grin spread across his face.

“Oh yes, Hermione, I am quite at my leisure.”

Hermione let out a low laugh. “That quickly, huh? The man was gratuitously flirting with your fiancé not five minutes ago and just like that you’re alright about it?” She scoffed, “I thought he was making me sick but now the both of you have that in common.”

Neville broke free of his trance and looked up at her in surprise.

“I’m making you sick?!”

“Yes! I don’t care what the reason is, there is no cause to be alright with anyone being so lascivious with your fiancé!”

He hung his head. “You’re right,” he said, and then mumbled something about it feeling good to finally have an upper hand.

“As it is I’m plenty cross enough for the both of us, so don’t trouble yourself.”

He looked up at her, sad puppy dog eyes in full effect.

“Hermione what’s going on? Last I heard from you the plan was to avoid him completely.”

Hermione shuffled her feet back and forth awkwardly, looking down at them as she went.

“Neville I- I haven’t been totally honest with you, but it was only because it all happened so fast and I didn’t have time to explain fully.”

“I’m listening,” he said, both hands out at his sides.

Hermione put her hands on her head. “Oh goodness, I don’t know where to begin.”

The door of the room suddenly swung open and Draco stood there, his face impassive.

“I thought you locked the door!”

“No just silenced it,” she said, staring at Draco’s face, a wave of anger coursing through her before Draco spoke.

“Sorry, just wanted to let you know the food will be cold soon. But… take your time.”

And then he turned and pulled the door shut behind them, and Hermione felt him re-cast the silencing charm from the other side of the door.

Both Neville and Hermione stared at the door for a few moments.

“Not so jealous anymore, apparently,” muttered Neville.

“Hardly, he could’ve cast a bloody warming charm if he was so concerned, he clearly just wanted to check on us.”

Neville looked significantly cheered by this.

Hermione rounded on him. “Pleased, are we?”
“Honestly? Yea.” he mumbled. Then when she scoffed he added, “Look Hermione, as good as it probably feels for you to have the person who tormented you your entire life suddenly besotted with you, it feels equally good for me to have apparently earned his respect! I’m sorry, I can’t help it.”

Softening, Hermione looked up at him with a smile. “That’s so adorable I could cry, Neville.”

Neville grunted and looked away.

“Yea, well…,” he said, turning back to her, “now you can fill me in on what in the bloody hell is happening here. Did you say he was in your bedroom?”

Hermione turned bright red and held her breath.

“I thought you were going to be careful!”

“I was! I mean I am! I mean… I got some new information and it seems that us being… together… physically… won’t cause the promise to break.”

Neville thought about this for a moment. “Yes I suspected as much but I didn’t want to say so in case I was wrong,” he said, almost to himself.

Hermione straightened up and said with false bravado, “Yes, so… there it is, I’ve decided there’s no harm in having a bit of fun, at least until he’s forced to marry.”

Neville eyed her suspiciously. “So, just fun? You brought him to your personal bedroom and I assume slept next to him and now are having him join you and your very closest friends for a traditional weekly brunch gathering just… for fun?”

“Harry is friends with him too!”

Neville put both hands up. “No need to defend your actions to me, Hermione, I’m merely being curious. It seems a quick romp in a bar bathroom could be fun enough, but-”

“Well we did that first but it was an employee break room not a bathroom, and then we-” she slapped her hand over her mouth, “oh bugger!”

Neville stared at her, mouth agape. “Hermione Jean Granger. I never thought I’d see the day.”

Hermione began pacing the room, shaking both hands nervously. “Oh goodness, that sounded horrible!”

“I’m honestly not judging, Hermione. Hey is that where you disappeared to last night? I thought you were there and then… I can’t remember…”

“That’s because Harry confunded you,” she said, and then slapped her hand over her mouth once again.

“What?!”

“It was a precaution, Neville! To ensure no one called attention to the fact that we’d disappeared. You and Theo were the only ones keeping tabs on us apparently, so…”

Neville grimaced at her. “I didn’t even realize Malfoy was there last night, there were so many people by the time I’d arrived.” He let out a deep sigh, looking around the room, seemingly trying to decide what to do next.
“I’m sorry Neville…”

He didn’t look at her, but suddenly seemed very interested in the floorboards.

“We should get back, you’re hungry and so am I. I can tell you the whole story another time, but the bottom line is…”

Neville looked up and raised his eyebrows. “Yes?”

“Um… well, I suppose it’s that… I’m letting myself enjoy the moment instead of overthinking things. For once.”

Neville allowed a small smile.

“Hermione, that’s what I was trying to tell you to do last week.”

“You were?!”

He nodded. “You were just too stubborn to hear it, as usual.”

Hermione felt warmth flow back into the room and she relaxed, knowing that he wasn’t going to remain cross with her. He walked forward and hugged her, placing a kiss on the top of her head. Then he put both hands on her shoulders and looked sternly into her eyes.

“I’m all for you having fun, just please be careful. You know… with your heart.”

She cocked her head to the side and he continued.

“This whole situation is quite… tenuous, and there’s a lot of room for you to have your heart broken. So, will you promise me you’ll be careful with it?”

She smiled solemnly and nodded. “Thanks, Neville. I needed that reminder, actually. And I promise to answer your letters straight away from now on.”

He gave her shoulders a squeeze. “Better yet, just write to me first, before I have to find out about major developments by walking into Harry Potter’s kitchen and seeing Draco Malfoy holding a knife!”

“It was just a bread knife!”

“Hermione…” he said, in a warning tone.

“Yes okay, I promise.”

Neville turned to head for the door, but then stopped, looking back at Hermione.

“Oh, um… I just remembered something I need to tell you, seeing as it’s honesty hour and all.”

“Okay…”

“Um- well, a short while after you left, I uh- someone else came and took your seat.”

She stared at him, perplexed, but said nothing.

“It- it was Pansy,” he said, and Hermione gasped. “Nothing happened! I mean, Merlin, I hadn’t seen her in years and then suddenly there she was! And she was quite pissed when she arrived so she tried
to hang all over me at first, but I quickly set her straight.”

“I’m shocked she came at all!” Hermione exclaimed, “I didn’t know she was acquainted with Gabrielle.”

“She’s not, I’m sure she was invited by Tracey or Millicent. Probably as an afterthought once the drinks began flowing.”

Hermione thought for a moment, examining Neville’s face, which still looked quite troubled as he got re-interested in the floorboards.

“And what do you need to tell me, Neville? I assume that wasn’t all of it.”

He took a deep breath and cleared his throat.

“Well, you see, she was rather… chatty. Caught me up on lots of things in her life, although I hadn’t asked and then… she mentioned something about the night that, well- the night Ron and Astoria…”

Hermione held up a hand. “Neville, I’m not sure I need to hear about this. I don’t know if you heard, but Ron and I are officially divorced now, we signed the papers yesterday.”

Neville shook his head. “I didn’t expect it to have any bearing on your divorce, really. Well, maybe, but…”

“Fine then tell me.”

“Alright… she- well, she admitted to me that she’d spiked their drinks with amortentia. Both of them.”

Hermione’s mouth dropped to the floor and she felt suddenly faint, her airways seeming to shrink so that breathing became difficult.

“It was... revenge. She’d had a row with Astoria. About Malfoy. You know Pansy was always pining after him and apparently, Astoria had been prattling on about the idea of marrying him once he came back to Britain and was “socially acceptable” again. You see, she’d been unable to find another pureblood wizard to marry after her parents called off their arranged marriage and they’d started putting pressure on her. Pansy felt she was an ungrateful manipulative slag -her words, not mine- who didn’t deserve Malfoy in the first place, so she set out to ruin Astoria’s reputation and make her an unsuitable choice for whenever Malfoy came back.”

Hermione listened to all of this without breathing, her eyes wide, anger bubbling in the pit of her stomach.

“And of course, she’d always hated you, so it had been a bonus to include Ron in the plot. She’d added in some other potion to cause them both to essentially black out and behave completely unlike themselves, I don’t know what it was, she didn’t say.”

“Neville this is…”

“I know.”

“She could be arrested for this!”

“I know.”

“I mean, amortentia alone wouldn’t warrant it, though I still disagree with that law, but Merlin! I’m
sure that other potion is not legal!”

Neville nodded gravely.

“I feel like there’s something I should do about this. It’s sort of my department, after all, but-”

“But there’s no real proof other than my statement, and she’d simply deny it.”

“Exactly,” said Hermione, resignedly, having already thought that through.

“Are you going to tell Ron?”

“I- I don’t know. This is a lot to process, Neville.”

He nodded again as she began to pace around the room, arms crossed and face screwed up with worry. This didn’t change anything regarding her feelings for Ron. As she’d already reasoned out, it wasn’t what he’d done so much as how he’d handled it afterwards and what it had made her realize. She’d been unhappy with him for so long, and if anything, this incident had helped her to come to terms with that truth. Still, she felt a knot in her stomach urging her to take some sort of action. What action, she truly did not know.

“Was this the wrong time to tell you?”

She looked up at him sharply, snapped out of her circular thoughts.

“No, Neville, thank you for being honest with me. Let’s always be this honest, regardless of how bad the timing might be. Okay?”

He smiled sweetly and nodded again.

She ran her hands through her hair. “Merlin, what am I going to do now?”

He took her hand and led her to the door. “We’re going to eat and you’re going to stop thinking about this and go have a lovely day with your git of a boyfriend, and I am going to get my fiancé away from him as soon as possible!”

She pulled on his hand to wrench him back from the door shouting, “He’s not my boyfriend!”

“Ah ah ah, Hermione,” he said, tapping her nose and smiling, “we just agreed to be honest, do you really want to start fresh with a blatant lie?”

“But!”

He grinned and pulled her out of the room.

They re-entered the kitchen to find Draco and Ginny in rapt discussion about Quidditch, while Hannah sulked into her coffee mug and Harry busied himself clearing plates. Hannah looked up in delight as she saw Neville come in.

“Everything alright, darling?”

“Everything but my stomach,” said Neville, as he moved towards her.

“Come sit! I fixed you a plate with a warming charm,” she said, patting the bench next to her.

Hermione exchanged a glance with Draco, not sure if she even had the mental energy to be annoyed
with him for all he’d done after the news she’d just received. He threw her a small smirk and motioned to the plate next to him.

“Darling?”

She couldn’t help but smile back, amidst the storm brewing in her mind. She looked over at Ginny who was giving her a quizzical glare and mouthing the words “What happened?”

Hermione shook her head and mouthed “later” as she took her seat and began to eat her food, which had also been charmed to stay warm.

“Anyway, Malfoy,” continued Ginny, “the Falcons couldn’t win a match fairly if you paid them to. They’re not too unlike your Slytherin team from what I experienced in school. Brawn over brains or sportsmanship, it’s disgusting.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you could have two Broadmoor-worthy beaters on your team. I’m afraid they just don’t make witches that way.”

“Careful Malfoy, your sexist pig is showing, and have you even been to a Harpies game?!”

“Is that an offer for tickets? I thought you’d never ask, I’ll take two please,” he said, and then took a bite of toast, smirking at Ginny proudly.

Ginny glared at him for a moment before turning to Hermione.

“You’d better get him out of here, Hermione, he’s starting to grow on me,” she said, as she rose from her seat to refill her coffee.

Neville finished eating quickly and then rose from his seat, mouth still full.

“Well, we must be off,” he said, pulling Hannah up out of her seat. They kissed and hugged everyone but Draco goodbye, Hannah giving him an obvious snub, having clearly been quite embarrassed by being used to aggravate Neville. Then just as they were headed out the door, Draco was up out of his seat, catching Neville by the arm.

“Hey Longbottom, I have a wizard jeweler that works with goblin made items no questions asked. If you’re able to retrieve your ring, I can get it handled for you.”

Neville looked confused and moved at the same time, and Hannah’s eyes went wide as she held in a squeal.

“Oh uh- th- thanks Malfoy, that uh- would be fantastic, I’ll see what I can do about getting it back.”

They shook hands briefly and Neville’s eyes flitted around to everyone else in the room for a moment before he turned and led Hannah to the floo.

With a woosh they were gone.

“That was decent of you, Malfoy,” Harry said.

Draco shrugged, “I suppose I’m capable of decency now and then. Contrary to popular belief.”

Ginny giggled and Hermione rolled her eyes at her friend.

She supposed Ginny had been right, it was now her turn to be smitten with Draco Malfoy. Hermione wondered if his luck with changing people’s opinions of him would extend further than just the
people in this room.

Then again, if he could change all of their minds, was there really a limit?

Hermione briefly imagined a world in which no Astoria existed, where they simply got to be together like this unencumbered. A sinking feeling in her stomach reminded her that that was not the case. And pretty soon, she wouldn’t be able to keep ignoring it.
Chapter Notes

I realized, hilariously, that I started worrying and overthinking (Hermione-style) about what should happen next. I have the main events for this story all plotted out, but the way to get there is still revealing itself. It wasn't until I found myself making a list of all the "problems to solve" that I thought I should probably stop overthinking and just write :) 

So here we go!

And I'm very happy with the outcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She was walking a few steps ahead of him, her head still in the clouds as it had been since they’d left the Potter’s kitchen at the conclusion of brunch an hour ago. They were walking among a muggle street fair in an area that housed some historical “windmill” which Hermione had mentioned to him before realizing that he had no idea what a windmill was. Assuring her that he didn’t need a muggle studies lesson just then, he’d agreed to go and simply take in a new experience with her.

It was safe enough for them to venture out into muggle London together without attracting attention, yet they really didn’t have much to hide seeing as she was almost ignoring him now. He’d had enough of the crowds of muggles, jostling for position to buy street foods, vegetables, clothing, artwork, and Merlin knew what else.

“Granger!”

She turned, looking surprised to see him there.

“Oh, sorry. I keep drifting off. I’m just… thinking.”

Noting that she hadn’t even bristled at his use of her surname, he moved quickly towards her, keen to end whatever distraction she’d been creating in her mind. She’d been a bit off ever since her conversation with Neville, and he both wanted to know why and wanted her to simply snap out of it and enjoy the day with him.

There was no way of knowing exactly how much alone time like this he would get with her. Astoria should be gone for a full week, yet he knew in the back of his mind that she could be home any day if she’d chosen to cut her trip short for some reason. They weren’t living together yet, but he was sure that the second she arrived home there would be some event or wedding-related activity for him to take part in. Without a day job to speak of as yet, excuses to avoid his compulsory fiancé would be thin on the ground.

Taking Hermione’s hands in his, he pulled her towards him to snap her out of thought and brought his lips inches apart from hers.

“Do I need to bring you back to the break room where we have rules against that?” he asked in a low growl, and was relieved when the corners of her mouth turned upward and she blushed. She shook
her head and took a deep breath, looking up into his eyes. Then she linked arms with him and continued leading them down the bustling street.

“What is it that’s got you all lost in thought then?”

She stared ahead, her jaw tensing.

“Just something Neville told me that I… don’t quite know how to process.”

He grimaced as he shook off the last vestiges of jealousy about her and the bumbling professor. She’d had words with him about his behavior at brunch, of course, and he’d apologized. The fact that he’d offered to help Neville out with his ring situation had helped his case immensely, and he had assured that he’d only been “having a bit of fun” and meant no harm.

It had been a risky move, but he hadn’t been able to resist. Who knew Neville’s fiancé had had a thing for him?

It’d simply been too convenient not to exploit.

And while Hermione had clearly disagreed, he thought he’d seen a note of amusement in her face as he’d defended his actions. Truthfully, it had heartened him to see her be so insistent that there was nothing to be jealous about.

It seemed she cared about him. He hoped.

He’d been hoping a lot in the last 24 hours and he hated himself for it.

Shaking himself back to the present moment, he tried a different tack.

“What will you tell me?” he asked, playfully.

Now it was her turn to grimace. She looked away with a huff. “I don’t know if I can yet.”

He pursed his lips and considered her for a moment. “Not your secret to tell?”

At this, she turned and looked up at him, a sense of relief seeming to come over her. He knew he was being uncharacteristically understanding, and he worried for a moment she’d suspect him of trying to manipulate her, but instead she smiled up at him gratefully and said, “Something like that.”

“Hmm,” he said, “well what if I tell you a secret first? And then after you’ve heard it, if you feel inspired to be just as candid in return... well, so be it.”

This was something he’d gotten from Harry. He was always going on about how if you wanted someone else to open up, you had to open up first.

This was evidenced by the sheer volume of letters written to Draco with none in return, which still resulted in their friendship. For Draco, it had been years of saved up animosity, yet Harry had volunteered to break down the walls one letter at a time... and it had worked.

She raised her eyebrows and said, “you have a secret to offer, huh? Just like that?”

He smirked, “I probably have a lot of secrets, even ones that don’t occur to me as such. Remember you’re talking to a Slytherin. Secrets are part of my nature.”

Smirking and pursing her lips back at him she said, “Alright then, spill. And if I feel so inclined, I’ll share mine as well.”
He took a deep breath, bracing himself for the possibility of this all going very wrong. The secret had been weighing on his mind since that morning and he was sure his intuition was correct on this; he needed to tell her, and there was no time like the present.

“Well first, I’ll say that I’ve wanted to tell you this since yesterday evening, but Potter reckoned I shouldn’t, and while I argued, I sided with him in the end, and here we are. So, if you’re cross with me, can we blame it on him?”

Eyes widening in surprise, she hit him in the arm and said, “absolutely not, Draco Malfoy!”

He whined in protest and rubbed his arm as she continued, “how dare you pre-accuse Harry for YOUR actions. And I thought you’d learned your lesson about taking advice from him after that fiasco of a dinner party on Wednesday night!”

“I thought so too, but he’s pretty persuasive.”

She stopped walking and crossed her arms, squaring her shoulders to him.

“Let’s hear it then.”

Another deep breath, and then he found himself nervously spilling out the information he’d been keeping.

“I lied when I said I’d merely left that bottle of tequila with your secretary. I came to your office and while I did not intend to spy, I caught sight of you… saying goodbye to the Weasel.”

Hermione gasped and put both hands over her mouth before stomping her foot and clenching both hands down by her sides, shouting, “I knew it! Oh I just knew it, as soon as I saw the bottle I just had the worst feeling that you’d shown up at precisely the wrong moment! Ugh!”

Throwing her hands in the air, she turned away from him and paced back and forth, her hands now tangled in her soft curls.

“Why didn’t you tell me?! Why did you act as though you hadn’t seen?! You must have been… well… you must have had some… reaction! Right?” Her voice wobbled on the last word and he felt an odd shimmer of delight come over him as he sensed the hopefulness in her voice.

“Oh I was bloody enraged,” he said, nodding. A smile flickered across her face for the smallest moment before she continued on.

“Well then how- why-” she sputtered.

“I ran into Potter and Blaise on my way out and they talked some sense into me,” he said with a shrug, “Oh, and the run-in we had with the Weasel himself was also quite helpful, if a bit… disturbing.” He grimaced, remembering the rush of pity he’d experienced for the wizard he’d loathed since before the day they’d met.

Her face went white. “You saw Ron? There? At the ministry?!”

He nodded. “Poor sod looked like death warmed over.”

A sudden realization seemed to come over her as she shook her head as if shaking away a fog. “Right, Zabini said he’d seen Ron, I just hadn’t realized you were together at the time.”

“When did you speak to Blaise about it?”
She smiled, and it instantly made Draco’s stomach turn over.

“Last night when he came over to save me from Theo’s advances,” she said, now aiming her grin straight at him.

He raised his eyebrows and she laughed. “Yes he came on pretty strong. Apparently, he’s had a thing for me since 4th year. By the way, is that true or do you think he was just trying to take advantage of my situation?”

“Why? Are you interested?!”

She smirked. “Oh you know, he’s quite handsome…” she said, as she continued to stroll away from the spot where Draco stood frozen.

Turning back and seeing Draco’s look of incredulity, she stepped backwards and smacked his arm again shouting. “I’m bloody joking, Draco! I mean, not about him being handsome, that’s a simple fact, but I’m only interested in one pureblood Slytherin at the moment.”

Feeling a rush of Merlin knows what, he pulled her in for a spontaneous kiss. Relief washed over him as she sunk into it, and he fully appreciated that she’d been toying with him.

And it had worked, she’d gotten a rise out of him.

That was meant to be his role, but she could play his game too.

He really liked that about her.

Noting that the list of things he liked about her had grown immensely in a short time, he released her lips… wondering if she’d been keeping a similar list

“Let’s keep it that way,” he said, with their faces still only an inch apart.

They stood there for a moment, and he could feel a magnetic pull between them. Her eyes searched his, darting back down to his lips a few times before he couldn’t resist. Tangling a hand in her hair, he pulled her in for a much deeper kiss. His knees buckled as she let out a small moan, which reverberated into the back of his throat. Feeling light headed, he unwillingly pushed her away.

“Not here. Can’t here. Need to find somewhere private,” he mumbled almost to himself, barely aware of the giggle she emitted.

He began to walk, pulling her along with him and she followed. They turned down a small side street lined with row houses and after walking for a few blocks, he pulled her into an alleyway. There was a large dumpster that seemed to be steaming with garbage in the afternoon sun.

“Charming,” she said, as a bemused grimace spread across her face.

“Just looking for cover, I’m taking you to my place,” he said, as he held out his arm, giving her a moment to prepare for side-along apparition. She grinned sheepishly as she took it, and with a CRACK, they were gone.

Hermione released her grip on his arm as she opened her eyes and gasped at the view before her. Through floor to ceiling windows, she was gazing down at the heart of London on a beautifully sun-kissed afternoon. Without realizing, she walked slowly forward, completely entranced.
“Draco, this is”

“T’was a bit much, I know.”

She spun around to look at him, incredulous. “It’s incredible!” she said, turning back to the windows. “Oh I’ve always wanted to live in a flat like this, ever since I was a little girl.”

Turning her head to examine the rest of the room, she gasped again upon spotting the tall bookshelves. “My goodness! Look at all the,” she stopped, swallowing hard, “books.”

“Yes, quite a few more than the cottage could house, I brought some over from The Manor.”

She walked slowly toward them, as if she were approaching royalty. Running her hand over the spines, she began quickly taking in titles of ancient potions books and a variety of wizarding history titles she’d never seen before.

He cleared his throat and she looked up sharply, remembering why they’d come there. She laughed, “Sorry, I just… don’t get to any libraries much these days.”

“Sure, you only spent what, five hours in one last weekend?”

She put her hand to her face, “that’s right, I forgot. But that was different.”

They stared at each other, neither one of their faces giving anything away. They were touching again on the topic of the marriage promise, without meaning to.

It seemed it had been a difficult topic to avoid.

And yet, she’d promised herself she’d have a bit of fun this weekend, and that was the only promise she needed to focus on.

“Draco… do you have any rooms in this flat where thinking is not allowed?”

He began casually striding towards her, hands in his pockets, a wry smile spreading across his face.

When he reached her, he cupped her face in both hands and dragged his thumb across her lower lip. She sucked in a quick shuddering breath and closed her eyes as he lowered his lips to hers and said, “only all of them.”

And then her lips were on fire, the magnetic connection coming back just as quickly as it had done in the street, in the shower, in her bed, in the break room…

Merlin, they’d had a lot of sex. More than she’d had in the last year, she was certain, all packed into one day’s time. Now that she thought of it, they hadn’t done a great deal else. All of their alone time had mainly consisted of this, save a bit of pillow talk that morning, which, now that she thought about it, had mainly consisted of a row about Neville. As had their post-brunch conversation.

Surely they’d done more than row and shag?

She searched her memory as he continued to kiss her, but he pulled back suddenly and said, “You’re thinking.”

Remembering the rules that she herself had inquired about, she tore her mind away from that line of thinking and allowed him to steal back her attention.

“Sorry, I’m done now,” she said, locking eyes with him to help keep her present.
Once she’d made the choice to let go, however, it suddenly felt easy.

Whatever happened next was out of her hands… like the moment when you’re suspended in the air, having just taken a leap off the side of a cliff into the waiting waters below.

Her mind went blank as she felt her body crash into his, their lips fusing together.

She wasn’t aware of him picking her up and whisking her to the bedroom. Nor was she aware of their clothes coming off, or of him placing her gingerly on his bed and settling his head between her legs. She would later need to be reminded that he’d removed her knickers with his mouth. That’d he’d brought her to climax no less than three times in quick succession before seeking any pleasure of his own.

And in those moments, she’d been perfectly happy to be completely lost in Draco Malfoy, with not one unpleasant overthinking thought passing through her mind.

Chapter End Notes

1. I love your comments, please leave one!
2. I know we're boycotting tumblr at the moment, but follow me in case we don't abandon ship altogether :) https://liliansilverstuff.tumblr.com
3. I love you again!

Next update Thursday
Ron

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all of your wonderful comments! Some of you are putting an especially large amount of thought into them, and I have to tell you, it is SO helpful! Hearing how the story lands with you, what you’re worried about, what you’re excited about, what your theories are... it is simply delightful. And really, I appreciate ALL of them, no matter how long or short, please keep them coming, it helps me keep writing :)

Ron Weasley sat tucked away in a dark corner of the Leakey Cauldron, fire whiskey in one hand, quill in the other.

He was working on a letter to his parents, and struggling a bit with the wording. It was extremely important to him that they understood Hermione was not to blame for the divorce. He’d put her through enough already, and could not stomach the idea of his mother seeking her out to convince her to reconsider.

And he knew full well that she would, unless he was completely honest.

His stomach turned as he imagined the looks on his parent’s faces.

Telling them in person would, of course, be the braver option. However, he knew himself well enough to know that going in person would result in half-truths, at best. He always lost his nerve in confrontations such as these. Unwilling to risk that, he’d settled on writing it all out in a letter that he could check and re-check to ensure he hadn’t missed a detail.

This, among other things, was why he hadn’t shared what was happening with his parents by the time Gabrielle’s party happened. He knew that his whole family, let alone just his parents, would likely have something to say to Hermione, and he wanted to protect her from that. Of course, she’d seen it as him wanting to save face. He supposed he couldn’t blame her for thinking of him that way, as if he only ever thought of himself. If he was honest, he’d spent the better part of the last five years thinking mostly that way.

First, the auror job became too difficult for him, and with the promise of quidditch fame calling his name, he did not resist. He’d left Harry’s side without very much deliberation. Harry hadn’t fought hard for him to stay, and that had only strengthened his resolve. Hermione tried to tell him that Harry was not being fully honest with him. That Harry had known how much Ron yearned for the spotlight and did not want to be the reason why his friend stayed at the ministry and missed out on quidditch. In truth, however, Harry really did not want to lose his friend to fame.

Hermione had tried to tell him, but Ron hadn’t wanted to hear it, and so he’d gone to accept his new fate. It had been a whirlwind two years playing with his dream team, the Chudley Cannons. When it had started to put a strain on his relationship with Hermione, however, he’d come home for good. He and Harry had already grown apart during that time, and he didn’t want to risk ruining his marriage. Taking a job in the Department of Magical Games and Sports, he settled for working around the world of quidditch rather than being a star player.

It was fine work, and if he was honest, he wasn’t the greatest quidditch player in the world anyway.
The offer to play was really made to bring more fans to games, his war hero status drawing large crowds. He’d done well enough, but he suspected that if he stayed much longer he would wear out his welcome, and Hermione hated how much he needed to be away. No, the quiet life was better for him. Only, in two short years he’d severed most of his close relationships, and didn’t know how to repair the damage.

Even his relationship with Ginny had suffered. They’d both been equally busy with their quidditch teams, but somehow Ginny had made more time to see Hermione then he had. They’d grown close, and he had never been sure how to tell Hermione that it bothered him. He felt like he’d lost his best friend and his little sister, but it was all because of his own doing, so how could he complain?

And this was the unfortunate conclusion he kept coming to in the last few weeks: everything was his fault, so he had no room to be angry.

When he looked around, he noticed that he really had no one to confide in.

Ginny and Harry were on Hermione’s side.

Neville was busy at Hogwarts or with Hannah, and also seemed to be with Hermione on this.

Dean and Seamus worked as liaisons between the American and British ministries and were always out of the country on some auror assignment whenever he reached out. He’d only ever seen them at ministry parties, during which they’d mainly gotten smashed. Not much beyond surface-level in those friendships.

And all of his brothers were busy with their jobs or starting families of their own.

He couldn’t even reach out to looney Luna Lovegood, as she was traveling with that Scamander bloke looking for fantastic beasts, or some such nonsense.

Laughing at his level of desperation for a friendly ear, he shook his head and thought that he might as well owl Zabini and see if he fancied grabbing a pint.

No. He may have very little pride left, but that was going too far.

Besides, even Zabini was now being folded into his set of former friends. He was probably having a drink with Hermione and Gabrielle at some other pub at that very moment!

How had he let it come to this?

Even as he thought it, he knew he had the answer.

He despised himself when he thought back on it now, but the masses of fans wanting photos and autographs had filled the hole for him. He’d fallen quickly into a pattern of feeding off the attention he’d been getting, neglecting Hermione and his other important relationships, and only realizing his error once the attention had died down.

It had become especially acute after the night spent with Astoria, because he then had a secret to keep from his one and only best friend, and no one else to confide in. It had eaten away at him that month. So much so, that when Astoria broke the news of her pregnancy and he realized he would have to come clean, he’d felt a tiny bit relieved.

Somewhere in him, he held on to a desperate hope that he and Hermione could work things out. That, perhaps, this would be the end of their relationship as they knew it, and the beginning of a new one.
That hope consumed him. It caused him to be relentless with her. Today, sitting in the corner of this pub trying to work out how to write this damned letter to his parents… he knew that his hope had been his downfall.

He had pushed too hard, too soon. He had caused the only person he had left to be done with him forever.

She loved him, but not in the way he still loved her, and it was killing him.

Perhaps he should write to his parents simply telling them of the divorce and letting them know he was going abroad for a while. Perhaps he could go to New York and use his connection with Dean and Seamus to find a job at MACUSA. He could start over fresh with people who didn’t know about all of his misdeeds.

The idea made him feel empty, and he dismissed it just as soon as it crossed his mind.

Finishing his whiskey in one gulp and signaling the bartender for more, he thought of the baby Astoria was carrying.

More emptiness.

She had made it clear he would not be allowed near it. But perhaps if he was still in the country he’d have the chance to reason with her?

He stared down at the empty page. His mother and father would be devastated to learn that their grandchild was to be estranged from them. He should leave that part out, he didn’t want to cause them undue pain. It was his to bear.

He made a mental note to tell Hermione not to let it get back to them, and hoped idly that the French party-goers who overheard would keep it to themselves. At least many of them hadn’t spoken English.

It’d been true, what he had told Hermione about blacking out at the party and waking up with Astoria. He still had no idea how that had happened. However, his conscience hadn’t been completely clean, which was why he hadn’t shared it with her. Had he done so, he knew it would lead to questions. Questions that he did not want to answer.

He had never crossed any lines with other witches, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t gotten himself into a number of precarious situations before. Being a war hero and a quidditch star meant a lot of attention from a great number of women who would have let him have his way with them in an instant. There had been a few times when traveling with the Canons where he’d ended up back at a flat or hotel room belonging to one such fan, and had to wrench himself away before anything happened.

And he always had. He’d never let anything happen.

But that didn’t mean he hadn’t wanted to.

As much as he loved Hermione, their sex life wasn’t exactly… fulfilling.

The passion that had built up over the years had not translated well into married life. He suspected she felt the same way, but they were fairly crap at communicating about it.

With Hermione it was always… nice, but it was missing a sense of passion. Urgency. Intrigue.
Again, he felt unable to complain about this, assuming it was due to his own inadequacy in the bedroom. So, he simply said nothing and carried a sense of dissatisfaction and yearning around with him everywhere he went.

He wondered if it would be different with another witch. Sometimes he really believed it would be.

The grass had always seemed greener...

Oh, the irony of that turn of phrase now.

Astoria Greengrass had looked gorgeous that evening, even despite her haughty, holier-than-though presence. He’d only ever met her sister Daphne before, who had been in their year at Hogwarts, and hadn’t given her a second glance. The younger sister, however, was elegant in a way he wasn’t used to.

Astoria held herself with a polished elegance that Ron found to be extraordinarily intriguing, again, despite her horrible personality.

Her family was part of the “sacred twenty-eight” which was comprised of all the oldest pureblood wizarding names, which included the Weasley family. Only, the Weasleys were the odd ones out, never conforming to the notion of pureblood supremacy, and being widely known as traitors to the other 27 families.

Consequently, Astoria had hated him as much as Daphne Greengrass or Pansy Parkinson had in their school years.

And that was why he’d been so befuddled by their interaction on the night of the party. Not the one at the end of the evening, which he couldn’t recall.

No, he was befuddled by what had taken place at the start of the evening.

He’d told no one this, but prior to any drinks being served, they had… an interaction.

He had gone up to his office to retrieve his wand, having foolishly left it on his desk, a habit Hermione always chided him for. Upon exiting, he’d run straight into her.

*The Night of the party*

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going, Weasley?!” shouted Astoria, brushing off her black satin dress as though she’d just been covered in a cloud of dirt.

“S-Sorry, I just-”

“You just what, exactly? Make it a habit to charge around corners without simply opening your eyes, you barbaric brute?!” she shouted as she strode forward menacingly, causing him to back up in equal measure.

“I know blood traitors are a rough sort, but I’d heard rumors that some of you have brains and a basic sense of balance, allowing you to at least play the part of a functioning wizard in the world!”

He had backed into a desk during this speech, but she’d continued advancing on him until their faces were only a few inches apart, the proximity taking Ron by surprise.
What was she doing so close to him? And what was she doing up on this floor in the first place? There was no one else around and he was quite sure that she didn’t work at the ministry, let alone in his department.

These questions were pushed from his mind, however, as he took in her appearance. Her dark eyes were burning with fury, and her cheeks were flushed.

She looked quite pretty with some color in her cheeks; it was a welcome departure from the near-porcelain complexion she shared with her sister.

“What are you looking at?!”

Shaking himself, he realized that he’d been staring. He needed to get back to the party, but he also didn’t want to let her get away with her rude comments. Running into her had been an accident, and he did not deserve her verbal onslaught.

Knowing it would annoy her to no end, he simply shrugged and said, “not much,” and then turned to walk away from her.

She grabbed his arm roughly and pulled him back towards her. Much, much too close to her.

“Excuse me?! What did you just say to me?”

“I said I’m not looking at much. Just a pureblood bitch with a stick up her arse who could probably use a stiff drink and a good lay before she keels over of a heart attack due to all the disappointment this world has wrought on her ridiculously high expectations!”

Ron wasn’t typically this quick with retorts during arguments. However, a combination of sparring with Hermione over the years, and the fact that his upbringing had given him a personal vendetta against the witch before him meant that his tongue was much faster than usual.

Her eyes widened dangerously as he finished speaking, and they stood there staring at each other, both their tempers blazing in earnest.

“Do you kiss your filthy blood-traitor mother with that mouth?” she spat back.

“Oh you are truly pathetic, having a go at my mum, a war heroine who saved your neutral arse while you sat at home, doing what? Cataloguing pureblood wizards who could make suitable husbands and crossing off the ones The Order took out of commission? Sorry about Malfoy, by the way, he would have been your ticket to paradise, wouldn’t he? Then you could spend all your remaining years being just as useless as—”

He was cut off as she slapped him hard across the face, letting out a small shriek as she did so. His face burned and tingled with pain and he reached his hand up to soothe it. She pointed a slender finger at him.

“Shut your mouth before I make you.” Her chest heaved and the pink in her cheeks had spread to her neck and shoulders.

“And how were you planning to do that?” he said, taking a small step towards her. He expected her to back up, but she did not falter. She continued to stare him down, until her eyes dropped to his lips for a fraction of a second.

He raised his eyebrows, a feeling of triumph spreading through his chest. “Now who’s looking?” he said, tauntingly.
Knowing he had won, he smirked and made to walk away, but she grabbed his arm again and pulled him back.

Their lips met violently, and she wrapped her arms around his neck with a level of enthusiasm he could not remember experiencing.

Before he knew it, he was being pushed backward into his office by her insistence. Just as they crossed the threshold, however, he managed to wrench her away.

“Wait, stop,” he said dazedly as he wrenched himself from her, “I can’t do this.”

“What?” she whimpered.

“I’m- I’m married, Astoria.”

She stood staring at him, and he was startled to see that the look on her face was that of a small girl being punished. Then suddenly, the look washed away in an instant and she glared at him, one eyebrow raised.

“Fine,” she said, as she straightened out her dress and smoothed out her hair. Then she lunged forward suddenly, making him grasp for his wand, but she was much faster, withdrawing hers from an arm holster and pointing it at his throat in one swift movement.

“But if you speak of this to anyone, I will end you.”

He swallowed hard, a small frantic nod was all he could muster before she withdrew from him, and in one sweeping motion, disappeared through his office door. He listened to her heels clicking all the way to the lifts and waited for the sound of the doors closing before he dared to release his breath.

*Present Day*

And so, he had not spoken of it. To anyone.

Not that there had been anyone he could tell. Aside from the fact that he had no close friends, he quite believed her when she said she would… end him. From his view, he hadn’t crossed a line, and telling Hermione about it seemed like it would only confuse the other issue.

The fact remained, he had no idea how he’d ended up with Astoria that night. Once they had rejoined the party, she had betrayed not even a hint of interest in him. She’d even joked with her Slytherin schoolmates about him and his friends in that haughty manner of hers. He’d only even been near her because Neville had inexplicably become friendly with Pansy Parkinson, a phenomenon he still didn’t have full details on.

When they awoke the next morning in the conjured bed on his office floor, she had immediately accused him of somehow conspiring to get her there. He had vehemently denied it, and reminded her in no uncertain terms that he was the one who had rejected her the previous night. Between their splitting headaches and their inability to recall any details of what had happened, they’d agreed to call it even just to be done with the conversation. Then they’d parted ways and that had been that.

He had only communicated with her since then by owl, and he wasn’t eager for any face-to-face interactions.

Hermione’s suggestion that he try and “make it work” with Astoria floated into his mind and made him bristle. Even if that was something her family would ever allow, he didn’t think he could bring himself to propose it to her… not even for the sake of their child.
Their child.

What a foreign and surreal concept.

Again, he marveled at the ridiculous reality of his situation as he finished his second firewhiskey and looked up to signal the bartender once again. When he did so, however, someone was blocking his view.

“Parkinson?”

“Lovely to see you too, Weasel. Mind if I have a seat?”

Pansy Parkinson entered the pub a while after the time when her informant said she could expect to find him there. She was hoping he’d be a few drinks in already, and he did not disappoint. He looked to be writing a letter, only the parchment in front of him was completely empty and looked lost in thought.

She scoffed, thinking that he was probably composing some sappy love letter to his now ex-wife. A final plea to have her reconsider. How pathetic.

“…mind if I have a seat?” she asked, with no intention of waiting for an answer.

She strode forward, tugged the empty chair out from under his table and sat herself down before he’d had a chance to say a word in reply. Then she turned to the bartender and snapped her fingers.

The bartender nodded, and as if being able to read her mind, poured two firewhiskeys which were quickly levitated over to their table. Pansy snatched them out of the air, and took care to spill a bit of his onto his blank parchment, causing him to stand up in alarm. Grabbing up the wet parchment and slinging a few choice words her way, he didn’t notice when she slipped the contents of a small vial into her own drink.

“Clumsy me!” she trilled, “but it’s not as if I spoiled some great piece of writing, it didn’t look as though you were getting anywhere with you letter to…?”

“None of your business,” he snapped back, crumpling the pages and slamming his ink bottle back down on the table after wiping it off.

“Oooh, not very friendly tonight are we? Here, you can have mine. As a peace offering, I insist.”

And she reached forward and swapped her drink with his. He did not object as he slammed his chair back into place and sat down begrudgingly.

“Tell me, Parkinson, why in the world would you be coming to me in peace?”

Adopting a look of affronted innocence, she said, “Now now, Weasley, let’s not let old prejudices get in the way of new friendship.”

He screwed up his face at her use of the word friendship. “I don’t understand.”

Looking down, she noticed that he wasn’t touching his drink, still too on guard to relax and take a sip. She needed to be more convincing. Placing her drink down, she took a different tack.
“Okay fine,” she said, throwing up her hands, “you want the truth?”

“Er- …sure?”

He clearly didn’t care what she had to say either way, but she would change that shortly.

“The truth is… I heard about your divorce and your impending,” she leaned in to whisper, “fatherhood.”

His eyes went wide. Clearly, he hadn’t expected Astoria to share this information with anyone beyond her family members.

“Y- you know abou-”

She waved her hand casually, “Yes of course, Astoria tells me everything!”

In truth, Astoria had told her nothing, but she’d had her ways. After that night at the party, she’d gotten very interested in Astoria’s life and choices. The sabotage she had attempted had not gone off quite as planned.

For one thing, the potion should not have been quite so effective.

Pansy had become quite a master of potions over the years, inventing a few of her own, including a version of amorntentia that had about 1/32 the efficacy of the real thing. She’d first needed it after Draco had been branded a Death Eater. He’d been so distracted that year that she’d found herself quite alone and lonely. Companionship from other wizards had been thin on the ground, seeing as she’d been known throughout the school as Draco’s girlfriend, and anyone else she propositioned had been too frightened of him to take a chance on her. She’d gotten so desperate, she’d even gone outside of her own house once or twice, but to no avail. On one occasion, she’d tried her luck with another Slytherin girl, but again found herself rejected and humiliated in the process.

Not wanting to cause the full-blown lust that resulted from amorntentia, she’d purchased the love potion from Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes by mail order, and worked to create a weakened version that would do just enough to get someone past their initial fear and open to having a bit of fun.

She’d only achieved this about a year after the war, following a number of disastrous experiments. For example, she’d made the error of spiking the wrong wizard’s drink. That wizard happened to be one who she was not interested in in the slightest, but who had been hitting on her pretty aggressively earlier that evening. Apparently, if given to someone whose attraction levels were already high, the potion acted almost like the real thing. That was one flaw of many, and she grew tired of having to work all the kinks out.

She’d had to keep trying, though, as even after the fall of the dark lord and Draco’s imprisonment, most wizards still wanted nothing to do with her.

Sure, she could have tried a muggle pub, but the thought still disgusted her, and she was already too far into her experiments to give up now.

How wonderful and simple life would be when she could simply select a wizard of her choosing and cause him to be just attracted enough to come on to her. The rest would flow easily, and if paired with drinks, could always be blamed on the alcohol. Better still, she never had to deal with anyone getting attached. She could live her life as a free witch, but rarely have to go to bed alone.

She had to admit, however, she was growing tired of the deceit. Not for moral reasons, but for all the work it took. When Draco got out of Azkaban, she had really hoped to rekindle their relationship.
But then, he’d disappeared, and all of her owls had returned without delivering her letters. When she heard Astoria casually discussing “taking him back” were he to return to society, it had made her blood boil.

Astoria did not deserve him. Pansy had always been good friends with Daphne, and so her sister came along as a package deal, but she’d never much cared for the witch.

Alright, perhaps it was partially due to the fact that that one Slytherin girl Pansy had come onto had been Daphne… and Astoria had known all about it and teased her relentlessly for it. The cow.

Still, even without that bit of vindictiveness, she didn’t have much patience for Astoria Greengrass. Her plan had been to humiliate her at the party by having everyone see her leave with Ron. Instead, the pair hadn’t even had time to make their way back into the main area of the party before they were dashing off to a lift mid-snog. She hadn’t been able to understand it, but the potion had acted on them like it was full-strength.

And that was when she knew. Astoria had had a thing for Ron Weasley. It simply had to be the case. Ron was a man and could likely be persuaded to act regardless of their history, but Astoria… well she should have hated him so strongly that she wouldn’t dare to go anywhere near him, especially with that snobbish attitude of hers. Pansy had been quite worried the potion would not work at all.

Quite the opposite had taken place, which meant that her plans to humiliate Astoria had needed some… revising.

Bringing her mind back to the present moment and the wizard in front of her, she saw that he’d been lost in thought, slowly turning his drink glass in small circles.

He still had not taken a sip.

“So, um… I just wondered how- how you’re doing?”

He looked up, stunned. “YOU care how I’M doing?”

“Is that so difficult to believe?” she said, leaning in a bit flirtatiously. He recoiled, a look of terror washing over his face.

Easy, Pans, not so fast. Remember he scares easily.

“Y- yes. It is,” he mumbled.

“Oh relax, Ron, I just figured you probably have no one to talk to and when I saw you sitting here I took pity on you and came over to bring you a drink, there’s no sinister plot afoot!”

“D- did you just call me Ron?” he said, in a bit of a higher pitch.

She rolled her eyes and stood up.

“Look, I get that we have been more like enemies than friends for most of our lives, but I thought that under the current circumstances you might want some company and possibly a drink, but obviously I was wrong, so I’ll get out of your way and leave you to your,” she looked down at his crumpled parchment, “love letters to your ex-wife.”

Then she turned on her heel and made to storm away.

“I am not writing to Hermione, for your information!”
She stopped walking and spun around.

“Oh really?”

“Yea… really.”

“Well then what were you writing?”

“I said it’s none of your business, Parkinson.”

She let out a small laugh and smiled coyly, biting her lip as she looked back at him. Then she strolled over making sure to let her hips sway seductively from side to side and approaching him with fire in her eyes.

“Call my Pansy, please.”

Downing her drink in one, she placed the empty glass on the table, motioning towards his with her eyes.

As if accepting a challenge, he grabbed it and imitated her swift movement, emptying the contents of the glass down his throat.

She grinned broadly and took his hand in hers. He did not flinch, but stared at their hands in wonder as she grazed his with her thumb.

“Would you like to buy me a refill, then?”

He stared at her quizzically, yet a small smile was now playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Uh… yea, okay,” he said, and looked over to the bartender to signal for another drink.
Posting a bit off schedule since I’m off work for the holidays. Not sure how many
chapters I’ll post this week or exactly when, so we shall see!

And we’ll be getting back to our favorite lovebirds soon. They're having a rather lovely
time together while we’re off in Ron and Pansy land. Mostly fluff that doesn't move the
plot forward :P but they will be back very soon.

She lay in bed next to him with her eyes wide, staring at the ceiling. His light snores weren’t even
annoying her, which was surprising considering she typically loathed those sorts of bodily functions.
It was 3am and she would have been out the door by now, but for some reason she couldn’t bring
herself to get dressed and go.

Instead she lay there deep in thought, wondering why it had felt so… different. She’d been used to
being ravaged by any man doused with her potions, but Ron had been… sweet. Gentle and caring.
To the point where she’d begun to think that perhaps something beyond the effects of the elixir were
motivating him. Or perhaps he was just different than most men she’d selected. He was heartbroken,
and probably as lonely as she.

As for her, she had found him repellant her whole life up until tonight. Then again, she hadn’t seen
him properly since the party at which she’d pushed him unwillingly to bed with Astoria, and before
that not since the war. He had grown into his features quite well, and unlike the doughy, unkempt
Hogwarts student she remembered him to be, he now took rather good care of himself. He was all
broad shoulders and muscles and his freckles suited him rather than looking like dirt he hadn’t
washed off his skin.

Similar to that fated party, this night had started out with one goal in mind, and abruptly been
changed by fate. She had thought that if she could spark something up with him, she could slowly
convince him to assert himself into Astoria’s life, rather than giving up and acquiescing to Astoria’s
demands. Perhaps she could even get him to publicly claim that Astoria was having his child.

Now that she was in his bed, however, she wasn’t so sure that she wanted him to do all of that.

Glancing over at his sleeping form, she noticed an urge to lay her head on his bare chest. To be close
to him. To feel his arms wrapped around her again.

She forced her eyes away from him at the thought.

“Fucks sake!” she whispered to herself, “I want to fucking cuddle?!”

Just as she rubbed a hand across her forehead in dismay, he started and opened his eyes, squinting at
her through the darkness.

“What- what you doing?” he mumbled, incoherently.

Pansy froze. She did not reply, but stared at him with her eyes wide, her heart pounding in her chest.
Then he reached up and grabbed her into a warm embrace, his arms wrapping perfectly around her
torso, his face nuzzled along her neckline. She could feel his warm lips caress the skin of her neck.
She shivered.

The breath she’d been holding was released in a long sigh, just as the words, “night ‘mione” left his
lips. Pansy, lost in her own sigh of bliss, could not make out what he’d said, but drifted straight off to
sleep with a contented smile across her face.

At 8am, Ron awoke to a splitting headache and immediately yearned for one of his hangover
draughts. Grabbing his wand from the bedside table of his room at the Leaky Cauldron he muttered,
“accio potions.”

To his surprise, more than one item came soaring towards him. He saw his hangover droughts, of
which there were five, tucked securely in his leather-bound potions travel case. However, a second
case flew onto his lap, seemingly coming from a different part of the room. After staring at it
confusedly for a few moments, he twisted his head in the direction it had come and his breath caught
in his chest.

Pansy Parkinson was splayed across the bed, wearing a pair of black boy-short knickers with lace
edging, and Ron’s white under-shirt. He looked down and saw that he was only wearing boxers, and
the night came swimming back into his mind like sea sickness.

She had appeared in the bar and taunted him. No, she had offered him her friendship. And she’d
been flirtatious… but it had felt like a scheme, it had to have been one. Then, he had wanted her. He
had always found Pansy Parkinson oddly attractive, even though he’d called her “pug nose” along
with everyone else, but this feeling ventured beyond basic attraction and into the realm of desire.

His head throbbed and he pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose in an attempt to relieve the
pressure. This was one too many occurrences of waking up next to a Slytherin girl with little
recollection of how he’d gotten there. What in the name of Salazar was going on?

Sliding one of the vials out of his potions case, he popped the cork and downed it in one.

Relief instantly washed over him and his mind became clear. He had slept with Pansy Parkinson, that
much was obvious. But what had motivated him to do so? Or her, for that matter?!

He looked down at the additional case of potions. Two small pink vials were tucked alongside three
black ones.

Running his finger along one of the pink vials, he was reminded of the display he’d once seen in
Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes.

Amortentia.

And one of them seemed to be missing from the case.

Just then, Pansy jolted out of her previously sound sleep and gasped when she saw him staring back
at her.
“Weasley,” she said, breathlessly.

He glared back at her, comprehension dawning over him. And the thing he’d forgotten to ask the last time he’d been in this situation rushed into his mind.

“Did you use a contraceptive spell?”

“W-What?”

“DID YOU USE A CONTRACEPTIVE SPELL, PARKINSON?” he shouted.

She winced at the volume and tenor of his voice, clearly feeling the same hangover effects that he had. He considered offering her one of his hangover draughts, but thought better of it. He would likely need those for himself in the coming week, and she wasn’t worth it.

“I... yes, yes I did,” she stammered.

His face went stony as he scanned hers.

“And why should I believe the woman who clearly slipped me a love potion?” he asked, holding up her potions case.

Her eyes went wide and she flew forward grasping for it, but he pulled it out of her reach before she could lay her hands on it. She let out a frustrated grunt.

“That’s mine, give it here, Weasley!”

“Again, not sure why I should.”

“It wasn’t a love potion! Well, not exactly!”

He raised his eyebrows, and waited for her to explain.

“It’s a weakened version of my own creation. I... just use it to tip the scales in my favor... from time to time.”

Anger burned in his stomach and chest. He felt used, which was certainly not the worst thing he’d felt in the last week or so, but still an unwelcome addition to his current list of grievances.

“And what the fuck gives you the right to do that? Exactly how many men have you fucked against their will, Parkinson?” he asked, but then held up a hand, “No wait, I don’t want to know the answer to that question.”

“But that’s the thing! It doesn’t... affect free will. Not exactly. It just, hightens whatever attraction is already there! I should know, having had a few unsuccessful attempts with it,” she said, looking sheepishly down at her wringing hands.

He was surprised to hear the note of sincerity in her voice. She was either an incredibly good actress or this whole situation was actually causing her distress.

“But... Parkinson... why?”

“Why what?”

“Why... I don’t know, all of it! Why make and use this potion? Why... me?”
Her face flushed and she became even more interested in her hands.

“I just... I don’t know, it’s a lot to explain.”

He sat back against the headboard and raised both hands.

“Well, get on with it then.”

Pansy had told him everything. Once she’d begun explaining, she found it to be an immense relief after years of scheming and plotting on her own. It was probably a horrible idea, but once she’d gotten going she’d found it impossible to stop.

Before she knew it, she was spilling secrets she had never intended to, including the rather important fact of her involvement in his blacked-out night with Astoria.

Upon making that particular admission, he’d glared at her with unbridled rage.

“YOU WHAT?!”

“I know! It was wrong! But you must listen to me, there was something so odd about the way it affected you both!”

“To hell with your potions theories, YOU BROKE UP MY FUCKING MARRIAGE!? BECAUSE OF SOME PETTY FUCKING NONSENSE!? BECAUSE YOU WANTED TO IMPROVE YOUR CHANCES WITH DRACO MALFOY?!”

She put her hands over her face and yelled, “I know! I know! It was a horrible, senseless, selfish thing to do!” He was panting with rage and seemed to be restraining himself from hexing her, his wand clutched tightly in his hand, the tip emitting small sparks.

She continued on, “…and I know it means nothing to you but I AM sorry… Ron.”

Using his name in this context felt oddly intimate, whereas shouting it as he’d brought her to climax the night before had felt easier than casting lumos. All three times.

“YOU’RE SORRY! Oh that’s great, everything is alright then! Apology accepted, let’s go have brunch!”

She winced, hating the sound of sarcasm on anyone’s voice but her own.

She wasn’t sure why she was still sitting there, telling him everything, but for some reason she couldn’t bring herself to simply make an exit just yet. She also wasn’t sure why he hadn’t cast her out of the room on her arse.

They sat in silence for quite some time before he spoke again.

“You know, the fucked up thing is that… I didn’t have much of a marriage to break up.”

She looked at him perplexedly. What was he on about? Surely he had had one of the great love stories of their time. Two war heroes, friends since year one and in love just as long, fated to save the world with Harry Potter and to be together for all eternity. It was a dream scenario. One that Pansy,
admittedly, had been jealous of.

Not sure what to say in response, she went with, “Oh?”

He shook his head. “I think we were both unhappy in our own way. This… incident,” he said, shooting her another glare, “was a catalyst in having it all come to a head.”

Nodding, she said, “I see.”

“It doesn’t make what you did okay by any stretch of the imagination, you know that right?” he snapped.

“I know.”

“I’m to have a fucking child with that woman. One whom I will never be permitted to see. Who will not know the true identity of its father.”

“Yes, I know.”

More silence. It stretched on forever.

He seemed to be struggling with something. Every few moments, she would get the feeling that he was about to throw her out, but then something would shift and it would seem as though he wanted her to stay there. She rolled with it, as the sheer volume of her own lies coming undone was making her dizzy.

It was a strange thing, lying. After a while, you began not to remember what was real anymore.

It was also incredibly lonely, having no one around who knew the whole truth about you. In fact, Pansy had recently begun to notice things that she herself was unsure the validity of. Making up so many stories… the details became difficult to keep track of.

Perhaps she needed to cut herself off. To get sober from it, so to speak. Given the current circumstances, she wondered if her own sanity would give eventually if she continued down this path of cruel deceit.

She wasn’t sure, but all she knew in this moment was that coming clean, and with a man to whom she had done direct harm, was having a significant cleansing effect on her soul. Her heart felt light, but at the same time heavy. As though she was feeling it properly for the first time.

Was this remorse?

If so, it was painful. As though her heart had to break in order to mend again.

“I do not expect you to forgive me, Ron. Even I don’t forgive myself,” she said quietly, hanging her head, “I have been inexcusably horrid for so long, and to so many.”

She could feel his eyes on her, but did not look up.

“And there’s more… if you care to hear it,” she offered, finally chancing a glance up at him. He gave a non-committal shrug in response.

“We’ve gotten this far,” he said, motioning for her to continue. She took a deep breath.

“I found out on Friday evening that Astoria was carrying your baby. Neville Longbottom told me.”
“Wait, I thought you said Astoria told you everything?”

“I- I lied…”

“Right. Seems to be the theme of the day,” he said, looking around the room in annoyance, “and I forgot you’re friendly with Neville. Do I want to know how that came to be the case?”

She looked down, shaking her head a bit.

“Right,” he said in the same clipped tone.

“Anyway, I... was angry with her. She’d rejected Draco once, I didn’t see why she should get to take that back and require him to enter into a marriage he never wanted in the first place.”

“So you were still intent on sabotaging it?”

She nodded.

“But how do I factor into it? I mean, what possible benefit could be gained from tricking me into sleeping with you?”

“It’s not really a trick if you’re already attracted-”

“Pansy...”

She felt something shimmer through her body at the use of her given name.

“Alright fine! I thought if I could... get in your good graces, maybe I could... convince you to go public about Astoria’s pregnancy.”

Ron stared at her menacingly and she immediately regretted her admission. He took a few deep breaths, seeming to be steadying himself.

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

She gazed into his eyes and felt hot tears beginning to prickle behind hers.

“Because I’m tired of all the lying!”

The words had left her mouth even before she’d consciously thought them. She felt tears begin to fall in earnest.

“I’m tired of sneaking around and plotting and I didn’t realize it until... well I’m just now realizing it.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes and...” her breath caught in her chest, “after last night I, rather hoped that this... that we... maybe we could be…”

He raised his eyebrows as high as they could go and she stopped speaking as she took in his reaction.

“Never mind, stupid thing to think,” she said as she got up and began gathering her things off the floor.
“Maybe we could be what, Pansy? Together?!”

She ignored him and continued looking around the room for her things and muttering to herself, “never should have said... ridiculous idea...”

“Blimey, are you sure you haven’t been taking some potions yourself? Your brains seem a bit addled if you actually thought there could be a chance of something real happening between us after you had used and deceived me on multiple occasions for your own gain! Not to mention the havoc you’ve wrought upon my life!”

Dropping her things violently to the ground she shouted, “I know! I hear how crazy I sound, but I’m just saying what’s true! I’m saying what I feel!” Tears had been streaming down her face for some time, but they were just now beginning to affect her ability to speak clearly. She let out a wail and collapsed onto the floor sobbing.

Dimly aware of the fact that he was staring at her but not moving forward to comfort her, she cried even harder.

After some time, she caught her breath and began to come down from the worst of it.

“I’m... I’m sorry it’s just... this may be the first honest conversation I’ve had with anyone for nearly five years. Maybe longer. Maybe... ever.”

Staring pointedly at the floor for several minutes, she could still feel his eyes on her. Looking up at him, she saw that the anger previously plastered across his face was now replaced by pity.

She would have preferred the anger, resentment, or even hatred. Anything but pity.

She’d never been so exposed in her life. Shame stole over her whole body in a wild rush and her need to be out of his presence grew to gargantuan heights. How could she have told him all of that? How could she have allowed herself to be this careless with her secrets? With her feelings?

“I’ll just... be going,” she said, pulling herself up to standing and haphazardly wiping her face with the sleeve of her blouse. Foregoing her potions case which was still on the bed with Ron, she shoved on her high heeled boots, regathered her things, and made her way to the door. Just as she reached for the handle, however, she heard his voice.

“Pansy wait.”

She turned sharply and looked over at him. He’d risen from the bed and was staring at her with an unreadable expression on his face.

He walked over to her slowly until they were nearly nose to nose.

“You,” he said, taking her hand in his, “are a bloody disaster of a person.”

“Hey! I hardly think that you-” she began, but he put a finger over her lips.

“And so am I,” he said. She took a deep shuddering breath.

“I’m still in love with my ex-wife, I’m having a baby with a woman who refuses to speak to me, and I’ve lost every close friend that ever mattered to me.”

The last bit was a new piece of information, and she inhaled sharply upon hearing it, but chose not to inquire further.
“And?” she asked, with far too much hopefulness in her voice for her own liking.

“And since you had quite a hand in the undoing of my marriage, the least you could do is stay and keep me company for a while.”

His face was set, not giving away any particular emotion. It sounded like a business proposal more so than a romantic gesture, but she found that in her current emotional state, staying there with him in any capacity was preferable to leaving. To being alone once again.

Nodding subtly, she whispered, “Alright.”

They stared at one another for a long moment before his eyes dropped down to her lips.

Yes, she wanted that comfort. She did not, however, want to be the first to move. She had already done quite enough damage by being the one to take control of a situation, and thought that for once she would allow something to occur without her direct influence.

Thankfully, he did not hesitate long, but leaned in and captured her lips in an exploratory kiss, as if it was their first one.

With a wave of shame, she recognized that it was, essentially, their first real kiss.

She did not feel the same passion from him now as she had the previous evening.

And yet, it had been so long since she’d kissed anyone without them being under the influence of a potion that his lips felt to her like the oasis in a dessert. She decided in that moment that the previous night would be the last in which she used her personal concoction on anyone.

Even if he was still in love with Granger, and even though he probably still hated her more than ever… for now she’d settle for what she could get.

At the very least, it was honest.
Astoria

Chapter Notes

Lots of writing time today and I'm feeling the need to post this so I can move on to the next.

I was sweating a lot when I finished writing this, so I hope it has the same effect on you to read :D

Honestly, the nerve of some people.

She’d traveled thousands of miles to make in-person invitations to her extended family members, and what thanks had she gotten? Doors slammed in her face and refusals to attend from nearly half of the Greengrass guest list! And surely the rest would follow once they’d caught wind of the news.

Astoria had just arrived back in her Grandmother’s sitting room, her feet aching and her stomach churning. Morning sickness certainly wasn’t restricting itself to mornings alone, it was after 10pm. Then again, with the time change her body was likely confused, it was morning in Britain. She slumped un-ladylike into an armchair, not giving a damn how it would look if anyone walked in.

Somehow, word of the identity of her unborn child’s true father had reached her relatives in New Zealand. One distant cousin who had been in attendance at the Delacour party had overheard the argument between the blood-traitor and his muggle born bitch, and the rumor had been enough for her aunts and uncles to glom onto as absolute truth.

It had, in reality, been accurate... but the fact that they’d been so quick to believe such gossip had been utterly insulting!

Apparently, they didn’t care who she was intending to marry, not that they found Draco to be a particularly suitable choice either. Regardless, they simply would not be party to her having any connection with the Weasley family.

She was doomed.

If this was how her blood relatives would react, what of the greater wizarding world? True, this gossip had not yet been revealed on a large scale, yet it could only be a matter of time before someone blabbed.

Draco had taken measures to get Rita Skeeter under his control, or so it’d seemed. She still hadn’t been clear on the details of the bargain he’d struck with the nosey upstart, as it had begun prior to their engagement. Perhaps he could re-negotiate to include a flat refusal of her connection to Ron Weasley. Better yet, they could bribe a healer to falsify the results of a paternity test, and shut the world up for good.

Then again, rumors were going to happen. The Malfoys alone had more money than Merlin and could easily pay off anyone... a fact which everyone in the wider wizarding world knew full well. People were bound to believe the rumors.

Placing her hand on her stomach, she gave it a small squeeze and felt hot tears prickling in the
This was a new occurrence for her. Tears had always been a sign of weakness, and yet for the past month she’d been wholly unable to contain them. Every little thing set her off, but especially the topic of her unborn child’s fate.

By all accounts, she should hate the thing. A parasitic un-wanted growth, and nothing more.

But she didn’t. She didn’t hate it.

On some strange level, she had never felt more whole in her life than she had after finding out that she was pregnant.

Was she terrified? Absolutely. Was she mortified that she was having a baby out of traditional wedlock? Yes of course.

And yet... she was jubilant inside. She felt a new sense of purpose in the world, after years of not understanding what the point of her was.

She had been all silly games and intrigues to win a husband. Shallow plots to find a way to merely exist in the world and never work a difficult day in her life.

Ron Weasley had called it accurately. She had, in fact, spent most of the war fretting about what would become of her and who would be left for her to marry.

The thought of it sickened her now.

Because having a baby in your belly brought forward a startling realization: you are here for a reason. Your existence serves a profound purpose. You are now responsible for a life.

The world will be different because of you.

These were things she’d never been able to think of herself and her life, yet they were suddenly incontrovertible.

Even if the baby was technically a bastard.
Even though it joined her with the most hated of the sacred twenty-eight.
Even if half of her family and who knows how many else would shun her...

She was a mother now, and that meant something.

Wiping her eyes for the millionth time, she wondered whether she’d be able to keep up her act.

To anyone witnessing her, she would have seemed entirely indifferent about her pregnancy, not to mention about the identity of the father. In truth, she was gut-wrenched about the whole affair. This was not at all how things were supposed to play out.

On the night of the party, she’d been gloating to Pansy about her plot to re-engage Draco in their marriage promise. She’d actually had no intentions of doing so, but Pansy had said something to annoy her and she’d just wanted to get under her skin.

In actuality, she had written Draco off as a lost cause. They had been connected since infancy and spent much of their childhoods together. She wasn’t sure what he was going through that would have him flee Britain and remain in hiding, but she was quite sure he wouldn’t be easily persuaded to return. Aside from that, she also didn’t believe society would be overly accepting of their union, not
to mention Draco himself. Therefore she couldn’t see how pursuing him would end well for her.

Her other choices had become quite thin, however, as most of the pureblood wizards around her age were already paired off. She’d begun to think that she would have to find someone quite a bit younger or older. Younger was really out of the question, thought, as she herself was only twenty-one and she was not about to be courted by a teenager.

When she’d spotted Ron at the start of the party, she’d made her decision. He was taken, but he had older brothers and she had not heard news of all of them pairing off. She knew that one of the older ones had married Fleur Delacour, and if the ginger-haired blood-traitors were good enough for that family, how unacceptable could they really be?

When he broke away from his friends and made his way to the lifts, she had followed closely behind with the intention to get a private audience with him in which she could inquire about the marital status of his kin. She’d wandered the halls of the floor he’d gone to, frustrated by the fact that she hadn’t immediately found him. Storming around the place frantically, she’d just about decided to give up on the entire idea when she’d crashed into him.

Habitual venom had immediately spewed from her mouth, assuring that her original intention would no longer be plausible.

Putting her foot in her mouth was a great pastime of hers, and she’d had no choice after that but to redouble her efforts to repel him.

During their argument, however, she couldn’t help but feel a spark ignite between them. He had studied her a moment too long, seemingly drinking her in. And before breaking that spell, she had done the same in return.

Though she’d been loath to admit it, she’d always had a penchant for freckles and ginger hair.

And then he’d tried to walk away, but she hadn’t been done with him yet. She’d discovered that he had a sharp tongue, just like her, and wondered if he also found his foot in his mouth on a regular basis. Probably so.

And he’d been right, she did need a good lay. It’d sounded vaguely like an invitation.

In her state of desperation, as well as confusion about her sudden feelings, she quite forgotten that he was a married man.

And then, shame. Embarrassment beyond anything she could imagine as he pulled away and told her he couldn’t go through with it.

That had been it. She’d snapped her mask of cruel indifference back on and retreated to rejoin her friends and attempt to gain back some of her pride.

When she’d woken up next to him, having no recollection of ending up there, she had panicked. Even now, she couldn’t remember what she’d said to him, but she was certain it had been vile. In retrospect, he had sincerely seemed just as confused as she, and yet her own guilty conscience had caused her to lash out. Again.

Many weeks later, once she had discovered her pregnancy, she could not face him. She’d settled for writing him letters. It was the only way she could ensure her message to be on point.

If she had to see him again in person, she wasn’t sure what she’d do.
After a week, she’d gone to her parents and confessed to her “drunken mistake,” which had predictably sent them into a tailspin of problem solving and scheming. Draco’s article ran the very next morning, and her Father had latched on to the idea of re-instating the promise in an instant.

She’d watched it all happen, zombie-like, a renewed sense of woe about her life settling into the pit of her stomach.

But then… she’d sensed the presence of her child. It could not be larger than a grain of rice, and yet its presence in her was incontrovertible. And she knew…

She would do whatever it bloody took to ensure that her child would be accepted in this world.

She’d written to Draco and gone to see him, putting on an act of desperation around the idea of being connected with Ron Weasley, when in reality she’d been holding on to a bitter regret that she couldn’t explore the possibility of that relationship working. He was a married man, and under the circumstances, her family would never allow it even if he were single, war hero or no.

No, she was thinking of her child first and foremost, and whoever she needed to manipulate along the way to promising the baby a bright future… so be it.

Rushing off to New Zealand to ensure face-to-face contact with her relatives seemed the next obvious task, after securing the marriage paperwork of course.

Now that she was done with it, however, she realized that sending owls would have been about as effective. She regretted the useless trip and cursed her relatives for being so incredibly stubborn. All of this traveling was wearing her thin, especially because portkeys were not recommended during pregnancy, and so she’d had to perform a combination of apparition and floo-networking to get there. Her journey back would take a few days once she factored in resting and recharging, and she would begin first thing Monday morning.

She retired to her room, and performed her usual nighttime routine. Slipping under the satin covers of her Grandmother’s guest bed, she drifted off quickly, completely forgetting the dreamless sleep potion she’d been taking nightly since finding out she was pregnant.

She walked into the pub and spotted him right away, his red hair beacon-like in the darkened room. Their eyes met, as if her entrance into the room had caused a magical disturbance only he could sense. He stood.

As they walked toward each other, every head in the pub turned in their direction, anxiously awaiting the moment they would meet almost as much as they both were.

Finally, they were in front of one another, and they both instinctively reached down to interlace their fingers without even having to look. He pulled her close, clutching her hands to his chest.

“I’ve missed you,” he said, speaking directly onto her lips, his eyes blazing into hers.

A number of patrons began to wolf whistle and jeer at them, but neither cared.

“I’ve missed you too, darling,” she said with a tear in her eye. He reached up and brushed it away, looking concerned. She laughed softly.

“I’m sorry, everything makes me cry now, even happiness.”

He smiled lovingly at her. “You never need to apologize to me for being happy, love.”
A tearful grin up at him, and another soft laugh as she pressed her face against his chest and breathed him in. He wrapped his arms tightly around her and said into her ear, “can I take you home now?”

She pulled back and looked at him in surprise. “Home? As in?”

He grinned down at her. “As in I found us a place!”

She squealed and wrapped her arms around his neck, jumping up and down as he laughed. A great deal of chatter was now happening in the pub, and he looked around the room with a grimace before bringing his attention back to her.

“Shall we?”

She grinned appreciatively and nodded her agreement. They turned and quickly made their way out of the pub. A few men applauded as they went by.

Once outside, he apparated them and they were instantly in a dark bedroom. A cherry wood four poster king sized bed stood in the center of the room. With a wave of his wand, Ron lit the room with candlelight, clearly having prepared this beforehand. She gasped.

“Ron it’s,” she looked up at him, “it’s perfect.”

“You mean it’s just like you?”

She hit him in the chest playfully. “Oh stop with the cheesy nonsense and ravish me please.”

Instantly, he picked her up and spun her around, tossing her onto the edge of the bed as she squealed. He stood between her thighs, which she clenched tightly around him, grinding forward into his hardness as he removed her cloak. The rest of their clothes were off and onto the floor in a flash, and as their chests pressed together she devoured his mouth hungrily.

He laid her back onto the bed and began kissing slowly down her neck, then to her chest, and as he made to keep going she grabbed him by the shoulders.

“No need, I’m more than ready after a week away, darling.”

With no interest in arguing, he let out a low growl and returned his lips to hers, thrusting himself inside her in one swift movement. She cried out, relishing the feeling of him inside of her that she’d been imagining every night for the past week. He began to pump into her slowly and she let out a frustrated moan.

“Much. Harder.” she said through gritted teeth, “Now.”

All too happy to oblige, he shifted both of her legs up onto her shoulders and slammed into her at a rapid pace. She screamed.

“Oh yes! Like that! Please yes more!”

He groaned as he gripped her creamy thighs so tightly he’d surely leave bruises.

“mmmm yes make it hurt! Please!”

Staring deeply into her eyes, he trailed his hand down the outside of her thigh and onto her arse. She was panting heavily and having trouble keeping her eyes from rolling back, but she looked back at him as best she could and whispered, “do it.”
He lifted his hand and brought it back down in a sharp spank, which made her squeal with delight. Then again. And again. With every other thrust into her slick warmth, he brought his hand down to spank her.

“Tell me. Tell me why I deserve it,” she breathed between gasps and moans.


This sent her over the edge screaming one long, “Aaaaaaah!” as she came hard and long. Long enough for him to go right over the edge with her.

Her body was convulsing with her orgasm, and she struggled to draw breath.

Just then…

She awoke. Sweat dripping down his chest. Her hand between her legs. Coming down from the most incredible release she’d felt in years.
Lucius

Chapter Notes

A short but important one. Enjoy!

Lucius heard a faint knock on the door and spun around quickly, eager to receive the report on his son’s activities.

“Enter, Corbyn,” he called, as he strode towards the door of his stately flat.

A stooped man entered looking careworn. He was dressed in black robes that looked as though they’d seen better days. Lucius grimaced as he took in Corbyn’s appearance, noticing less his garment, more his expression.

“My lord,” said Corbyn, dipping himself further forward into a bow.

Lucius scowled, “What did I tell you about this Lord business? I have no interest in being your savior, Corbyn, now stand up and give your report. What news?”

“S- sorry, Sir, f- force of habit still, I ‘spose,” he said, and bowed again. Lucius rolled his eyes and looked away, waiting for the man to deliver his information.

“I’ve been following him carefully, as you requested Sir, and he did indeed go to the Ministry to get the marriage paperwork prior to Ms. Greengrass’s leave for her family’s foreign estate.”

Giving Corbyn a frustrated frown, he said, “That I knew, her Father confirmed it with me of course, now what new and/or useful information do you have for me?”

Corbyn looked down at his feet, clearly ashamed, but recovered quickly.

“He left the Ministry that evening with Potter, I don’t know where they went but they were discussing dinner, so I assume-”

“Yes, I’m well aware they’ve struck up a friendship, though I can’t imagine why Potter made such concessions, now do go on.”

“Yes, Sir, well I imagine it will only be to our advantage if the Malfoy name becomes synonymous with Potter. Considering all we’re- you’re planning, Sir, it would be useful to have someone so high up and respected on our side.”

“I don’t pay you for advice, Corbyn,” he hissed, “I pay you to spy and sneak and REPORT!”

Corbyn whimpered slightly, as Lucius turned and strode toward the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the North Sea.

“Although… you do make a good point, I can’t deny it. When I make my move to have the International Statute of Secrecy revoked under my new proposed order, it would be sensible to have some influential names on our side. I admit that Potter had been, in my mind, a non-starter, but perhaps if we had Draco work him on it from an inside track… over time…”
“Draco would do so splendidly, my L- Sir!” Corbyn added, excitedly, “he’s managed to shift the opinions of so many who reviled him in the past already, I’m confident he’d be-”

Lucius wasn’t listening but still talking, mostly to himself.

“I’d need to get the right leverage over Draco, of course, to get him to act for me. At present, he’s still quite angry with me, especially with this marriage promise business, even though I am doing this for his own good. Every unattached witch in Britain will soon be after his money, and this way he can have that part secured and take up with anyone he pleases, what young man wouldn’t want that? I still can’t understand his disapproval-”

“-take for example the mudblood girl,” Corbyn said, as he’d continued to talk over Lucius’ mutterings. It was the use of the derogatory term that caught Lucius’s ear.

Lucius drew his wand and pointed it at Corbyn, sending him flying and pinning him against the far wall. “DO NOT USE THAT WORD!” he shouted as he stalked menacingly toward him.

“You don’t listen very well, do you Corbyn?”

“S- Sir?”

“I’ve told you time and again, it will not help our efforts to appear prejudiced against those of inferior blood. Ours is a plan to unite with them, to have our magic out in the open, but to keep them controlled this time. Don’t you remember?”

“Y- yes, Sir, I do now Sir, my apologies, just another s- slip of the tongue.”

Lucius leaned in close, his face inches from the man’s nose.

“Then you will do well to keep it steady, lest you lose it by some unfortunate accident.”

Corbyn who had been panting heavily, snapped his mouth closed and nodded vigorously. Lucius turned and began striding away, releasing the hex that was pinning his man to the wall. Then he stopped and turned to look over his shoulder at him.

“What were you saying about… which girl?”

“The, uh- muggle born girl, Sir. Grant, no no… Graham, no that’s not it…”

Lucius titled his head quizzically. “Granger?”

Corbyn clapped his hands together once and pointed eagerly at Lucius.

“That’s the one Sir! Just divorced from that Weasley scum, I overheard, not that she ever took the poor sod’s name it seems. Why, I had it from Witch Weekly that she-”

Lucius held up a hand fiercely. “Spare me your gossip magazine summaries, why were you speaking of Miss Granger just now?”

“Well because, Sir, she’s one of the ones Draco’s been able to charm! Like I said, he’s changed many minds as of late, and if Potter-”

“Charm? What do you mean? How do you know this?”

Corbyn chuckled and his cheeks flushed a bit. “Caught em snogging in the street, didn’t I? Well not caught, since they didn’t see me see them, but I saw em!”
Repeating his earlier motion, Lucius again sent the pinning hex at Corbyn and walked swiftly over to the man.

“Why did you not begin with this information, you absolute halfwit,” he growled, “did you not think it important that my son, recently promised to wed a Greengrass and under strict and ancient marriage promise clauses, showing up in a street having relations with another witch was the most vital piece of information to convey?”

“I, I’m sorry Sir it, it slipped my mind at first!”

Lucius scoffed and stormed away, releasing the hex and causing Corbyn to drop to the ground.

“Tell me what you saw, all that you saw, now.”

Corbyn massaged his neck and groaned. “It’s like I said, Sir, I tracked him to a muggle street and saw him walking along with that m- Granger girl. They looked quite familiar with one another, and then they stopped for a moment and had a snog before rushing off to an alley and disapparating together. My trace said back to his flat, but I didn’t dare follow. It was pretty obvious what they were going there to do.”

Lucius cursed violently and overturned his glass coffee table, causing it to shatter into pieces which scattered across the marble floor, along with his restraint. Corbyn was now pinning himself against the far wall.

Remaining with his back to Corbyn, Lucius took a few long, deep breaths. So, this was why his son had been so reluctant to take on the union. How in the world had he turned that muggle-born swot to his side? And what in the fucking hell had he been thinking, out there in public like that with her when it’s become common knowledge he is to wed another? What if Mr. Greengrass found out and chose to terminate the promise a second time?

They had already created it on such raw terms, Lucius was sure that one wrong move from the Malfoy side and the Greengrass family would not hesitate to back down. Of course, it wasn’t common knowledge that the two Fathers hadn’t put any clauses on the promise, but Mr. Greengrass knew that no harm would befall his daughter if she suddenly refused the engagement. Well, except the one involving her unwanted spawn, and that was only of benefit to her. As physically taxing as it would be when she lost the child, it would not be fatal to her.

Yes, it had been quite clever of the two heads of family to institute the one and only clause, making it so that the pregnancy would terminate whether the promise was refused or fulfilled. Mr. Greengrass wanted no connection with that family, and Lucius had been able to deliver the solution. It required dark magic, to be sure, but Lucius had been equal to that task.

Only the two of them knew that the baby would not survive either way. It would be dealt with in just three weeks’ time, if not sooner, which was apparently a possibility.

Lucius did not want a scandal. He’d promised Mr. Greengrass good press all around, and he did not want to default upon his word.

The man wanted nothing more than to escape the embarrassment of a connection with the Weasley family.

Well… with Miss Granger in the picture, here was a completely different and unexpected connection to them, even if she’d never taken the name.

Unfathomable. Draco had to be doing this on purpose. Angry for his father’s interference and
wanting revenge.

Lucius supposed it didn’t matter if his son wanted to fuck the muggle born, but Draco mustn’t try anything foolish or idiotic like running away with her and attempting to fake their disappearances.

Miss Granger, were she aware of the marriage promise, would surely have studied up on them and know enough not to attempt it. Draco surely would know, too. Still, Lucius would need to make sure. For good measure, he’d need to forbid Draco from seeing her, at least for the time being. He could take her up as his mistress once the promise was sealed, but not before.

“Corbyn!” he shouted suddenly, and the man jolted to attention. “Please send word to my son immediately that I require an audience with him. Say nothing else.”

“Yes Sir!” he bowed and moved hastily towards the door, clearly keen to be out of his master’s presence.

“And Corbyn,” Lucius called before the man had shut the door. He peered back in.

“Never bow to me again, I am not now nor shall I ever be The Dark Lord, and I do not require such exultations.”

Corbyn made a strange flinching motion with his head, obviously about to bow again, but caught himself and simply slammed the door shut behind him.

Lucius flicked his wand casually and the shattered coffee table was back to one piece, the sharp ends glinting in the sunlight cascading through the high clear windows.
Chapter Summary

Draco visits Lucius and we finally get to see their interaction. Hermione and Ginny meet up for a shopping date, which takes a very unexpected turn.

Chapter Notes

Well here we go! Super big chapter because I just wasn't satisfied ending it at 5k words.

I can't wait to hear what you think :)

The familiar acrid scent of the prison filled Draco’s nostrils as he stepped down the dark corridor. He’d been summoned there rather abruptly and hadn’t had time to mentally prepare for being back, not that it would have helped much.

The guard opened the door of the visitation room and motioned for Draco to enter. It was odd, normally they gave instructions first about the time limit. He stepped in and was further confused to see the guard follow him inside. Looking up into the dark-eyed hollow face of the prison staffer, Draco made his face impassive even though he was highly on guard.

Flicking a wand at the door, the guard silenced the room and turned to Draco.

“I’ve been instructed to bring you directly to your father. He’s ready to reveal to you his secret, so if you’ll take my arm I will apparate us to his lodgings.”

The man held out his arm, but Draco just stared, incredulous.

“His lodgings?”

“You will see in due course,” the guard said with a nod, still having extended his arm.

With a deep sense of foreboding, Draco took it and was instantly squeezed into the black hole of time and space for mere seconds before appearing in a different corridor. It still had the air of the prison he knew, and yet it took on the appearance of a stately manor house. Closed double doors stood directly before him.

“I will go in ahead to introduce you,” said the guard, and he disentangled his arm from Draco’s with some difficulty, as the latter was standing in awed shock, peering around as though he were a first-year entering the Great Hall on night one.

Draco heard the guard’s distant voice on the other side of the large door announcing his name. Then the door was pulled fully open and sunlight hit his face as he strode hesitantly forward and across the threshold.
There was Lucius, not in prison rags, but fully clothed in wizard’s robes and standing in the middle of a sun-drenched, glass-walled room. His black attire made him stand out like an ink stain on a white shirt as he hovered amidst a living room set adorned in white leather with carpets of the same color. The furniture and rugs were clearly charmed to allow nary a stain, as they were all clearly impeccable. A glass coffee table and a chandelier reminiscent of the one that used to hang in the drawing room at Malfoy manor glinted in the steady beams of light. Draco squinted and held up a hand to block the bright light.

“Father?”

“Thank you for coming, Draco. Do sit down, I believe an explanation is in order.” Draco walked forward and took a seat, keen to hear whatever explanation his Father was about to give him, caring little about his usual rebellion against following any orders from the man. When Lucius sat opposite him but did not speak, Draco took it as a sign that he was meant to ask questions.

“Where are we right now?”

“In a hidden extension of the prison,” said Lucius, motioning to the windows, “out there is the North Sea, with the view of the sky charmed to look like a sunny day, I do detest the constant dreary weather here.”

“How… how?” Draco choked.

“How else?” he said lightly, and then gave a small eye roll at his son before continuing, “tsk tsk Draco, I should have thought I’d taught you well enough to know that anyone and anything can be bought.”

“But then, where is the Governor? Surely she wouldn’t-”

“Madam Parmal retains her role as Governor, though, for all intents and purposes I may as well wear the title. May I offer you refreshment?” he asked with an air of such causality that Draco felt anger flare within him. He ignored the question.

“But when did you set this all up? Surely not once you’d been imprisoned.”

Lucius tilted his head and inspected Draco as if his son were a curious bit of fuzz plucked off his robes.

“Come now, Draco, you do recall the week-long delay before the aurors came to seize our family? Oh, but of course,” he said, clearly putting on a show of sarcasm, “you were off with your dear Mother in France by then, doing whatever you both could to distance yourself from my wretched fate.”

Draco scoffed. “Yea… well… a lot of good it did us.”

“Yes I made sure of that,” Lucius said, without skipping a beat.

Draco’s stared, his mouth agape, hardly able to process what his Father had just said.

“That’s right, Draco. You were going to find out eventually so it might as well be now.”

“Y- you… ordered me to be arrested? And Mother?”

“Well I couldn’t very well have either of you out there roaming free, believing that you could simply walk away from your family name.”
Draco stood and reached for his wand before realizing it had been taken by the guards when he’d arrived.

“Now now, son,” Lucius said, taking out his own wand and giving it a flick. Draco was forced magically back into his seat with a painful smack. “Let’s not let tempers flare and have this turn ugly.”

Draco was panting hard through gritted teeth, his mind a seething blur of thoughts and feelings. His Father had had him imprisoned for two years, and was still holding his Mother there. It was so much to take in and all he wanted to do was lash out, but he had no wand and now could not stand from the couch. He knew the spell his father had used, he could sense the dark magic radiating around him.

“Does Mother know?” was all he could manage.

“No,” Lucius said in the same light manner he’d been affecting all along, “and we shall keep it that way. Your betrayal was far more forgivable than hers, having been so young and under the influence of your Mother. I don’t believe her punishment has quite reached its conclusion as of yet.”

Draco was now fighting off angry tears. He would not fall to pieces in front of his Father, and yet the torture he was experiencing in that moment was the psychological equivalent of the cruciatus. Unable to take in a full breath, and powerless to do anything but ask further questions, he thought of another.

“Why? Why do this? Was it just to imprison us?”

Draco was startled as his Father let out a booming laugh.

“Oh my dear son, do you really think I would arrange all of this merely to hold you both here? No, I needed a plan to get back to holding a position of power and I was clear that my media image would only allow me to do so in the shadows. It’s not ideal, perhaps, given that I can’t risk being seen. I am mostly confined to being here, but until I’m ready to stage my release I will continue to build my new empire from within.”

Draco was shaking his head subtly during this little speech.

“Do we really mean that little to you?”

Lucius raised his eyebrows and his tone shifted to one of mild agitation. “Don’t tell me you’re going to get sentimental, son. You and your Mother were prepared to leave me for dead and yet you sit there and question me about my loyalties?” he shouted, “You deserved to be punished!”

“We deserved freedom! We were both pawns in your wretched plans!”

“I didn’t hear you complaining when you were selected by the Dark Lord himself for the most important task possible!”

“I was young! And an idiot! Properly trained by the man who sits before me to be so!”

Lucius lunged forward and grabbed Draco by the collar, lifting him up to meet his face. Draco’s body was still bound in a sitting position, unable to move from the neck down.

“You will watch your tongue if you want to keep it when you leave here today,” he hissed, and then dropped Draco back down and strode a few steps away.
Draco tried desperately to steady his breathing and to keep from letting any tears fall. He was used to this behavior from his Father, but it had been a while since he’d been subjected to it, and the sheer contrast between this moment and his quiet life of solitude was overwhelming. He cursed himself for accepting the summons, even though he knew he couldn’t have avoided it. He’d made an agreement with his Father the weekend prior when he’d come to see him about the marriage promise that he would come back weekly, and here they were. Only now, the circumstances could not be more different.

Last time, he’d still been under the impression that his Father was a prisoner.

“Why did you allow me to flee to France the second time? It seems it would have been in your power to keep me in Britain. To force me to work for you, as you requested many times.”

Lucius turned around slowly and glared at his son. “You were of little use to me then. Recently imprisoned and having already tried to denounce your family name once. Living in a muggle dwelling, skulking in the shadows. I regarded you as a lost cause.”

“And now?”

A light grin crossed Lucius’s face.

“And now it seems you’ve brokered yourself the perfect position to be of great advantage to me.”

“Oh really?” Draco said with a scoff, “and what is it that you’re planning, exactly, that I’m supposed to help with?”

“It is not yet the time for you to know all of that, I have a more urgent matter to discuss with you.”

Draco recognized that he was completely at a loss for control in this conversation. He would not get what he wanted from it, that much was clear. He couldn’t harm his Father the way he wanted to, the way he was fantasizing about in his mind. He couldn’t somehow go and free his Mother. Lucius was playing an extraordinarily calculating game, and had been for some years now. Draco needed to slow down in order to catch up.

Taking a deep breath, he employed his occlumency, shoving away his anger and hurt into a far corner of his mind and staying present to the current reality. He couldn’t entirely lose his bite, however. He must put on his own version of a show…

“Well will you remove this bloody spell first you-” Draco pretended to catch himself and then ended with, “please, Father?”

Lucius glared down at him for several seconds before casually waving his wand and releasing the spell. Draco noted that there was still a small part of his Father that had trouble being completely ruthless when they were face-to-face. He could use that in future.

“Thank you,” he said, through gritted teeth.

Lucius took his seat across from Draco and looked his son directly in the eye.

“You will now tell me the exact nature of your relationship with Hermione Granger.”

Draco’s jaw dropped. All thought of occlumency and gaining control of the conversation flooded out of him.

“How did you-”
“I have eyes everywhere, now tell me. What is the manner of your relationship?”

“I am not talking to you about her.”

“Oh you will. If I have to force veritaserum down your throat today, you will. Do you realize what jeopardy you are putting our family in? We’ve already been marked as untrustworthy, and you go and chance a scandal by appearing publicly with that- that-”

“Go on, say it, Father!”

“I will not say it! I do not use that word any longer!”

Draco scoffed, “Only to save your own arse! You may not use the word but you think it, you feel it. Everything else is just covering up for appearances. There is no way you no longer believe in blood purity, only a fool would believe you capable of changing your mind on that score.”

“And yet the fools believe you have… including Ms. Granger herself, it seems.”

“I have never been more than a parrot of yours, Father.”

“And yet you do not grant me the same consideration, knowing who my own Father was!”

“I DO NOT!” Draco spat, “You have acted clearly of your own accord and continue to do so, Father. You have tortured muggles and muggle borns while I have never been able to.”

“Oh but you could stand idly by as the muggle born in question was tortured in your own home by your aunt!”

“Had I done anything differently we would have all died!”

“Oh is that what you tell yourself to ease your guilty conscience, Draco?”

“I imagine I have a much better case for my innocence than you could possibly fabricate for yourself.”

Lucius stared wide-eyed at his son, taking deep, steadying breaths.

“What is the manner of your relation-”

“We’ve been seeing each other for a week. That’s all.”

Lucius sat back in his chair, seeming to relax at this news.

“Ah, well then it will be much simpler than I expected for you to break it off.”

Draco looked up at his Father, aghast.

“What do you-”

“You will break it off immediately, Draco. Oh, have your little fun with the muggle born after you’re wed, I’ve heard that such women make wonderful concubines, and at least that one has a brain, never failing to beat you in every subject. But you will not be parading around with anyone other than your betrothed until after the marriage promise is sealed, am I understood?”

“And what if I refuse?”
Lucius stood slowly and stalked over to Draco, bending down and bringing their noses inches away.

“I made this very clear to you when we spoke last week and I will do so again, even more clearly this time. You will not interfere with this arrangement. You will follow orders like the good boy you once were. And should I hear even a murmur of your descent… your Mother shall suffer for it.”

Draco went cold. Every cell in his body began to shut down. He could no longer feel his legs.

“Oh, and you shall speak of my… living situation to no one. I have ways of knowing if you do.”

“But how could you-”

Lucius lifted his wand and cast a spell directly at Draco’s mouth. His tongue seized up painfully and he gasped and choked in response before whatever spell Lucius had cast was complete.

“I’ve done you the favor of making you unable to speak of it, should you feel tempted.”

Draco put a hand to his mouth and dread washed over him. He would have to keep this secret, he had no choice. He would have to stop seeing Hermione, and he couldn’t give her the real reason why.

“You are dismissed,” Lucius said, in the same light tone he had used earlier. The guard then opened the door on cue and stood waiting to escort Draco out.

He stood, horrified. And even though he knew his Father to be dark, prideful, and cunning, he was at a complete loss as to what the man before him had become.

Lucius was a monster. Draco was his minion.

And his Mother needed to be protected at all costs.

Hermione appeared back at her flat after staying the night at Draco’s.

And what a night it had been.

They’d stayed up for most of it, taking small breaks to sleep or have a snack, but they’d had a fairly singular focus the entire evening.

Hermione was certain that she’d had more orgasms in the last two days than she’d had in the last year.

The thought would have made her sad if it weren’t for the fact that she was so blissfully satisfied.

She was still reeling from the dramatic turn of events in her life in the past week, not least of which was that her once surly, antagonistic, bigoted school bully was now her kind, gentle, attentive, and caring... lover.

How long would it take for this to stop feeling like a surprise?

Probably quite a while, she thought. Certainly, longer than the three weeks left before Draco would be forced to marry.
“Sodding promise,” she grumbled as she loaded her washer with dirty clothes, her Saturday morning laundry routine having been interrupted the day prior.

She felt a bit silly feeling sorry for herself when it was really Draco being given the short end of the stick.

For her part, she was getting to experience life as a free agent for the first time.

It was all just good fun, right? She’d never been in a casual relationship before, but supposed that lots of sex without a lot of talking was probably the norm, and she definitely was not complaining.

Draco, however, was not free by any means, and as much as they were conspiring not to speak of it, he would need to pull back from Hermione soon and focus on the wedding.

Just that morning he’d gotten an urgent owl and needed to rush off to handle some wedding business, otherwise Hermione would likely still be on his bed.

Or on his living room rug.

Or on the black leather couch.

Or... out on his balcony overlooking London.

They’d cast charms to ensure they wouldn’t be seen! But still... the sensation of being out in the open and having him just... take her like that. The mere memory now sent shivers down her spine. She and Ron had never done anything so adventurous.

With a sudden gasp, she realized that she’d been pouring the entire container of washing liquid squarely into the machine. The bottle was now empty.

“Bollocks!”

She switched it off and continued to swear before remembering that she was a witch. Slapping palm to forehead, she reached for her wand and banished the unneeded detergent from the jumper on which it had pooled, shut the lid, and restarted the machine.

A familiar voice sounded from the living room, though this time, Hermione had been expecting her.

“In here, Gin!” she called as she grabbed the empty container and tossed it in the bin.

Ginny rounded the corner of the tiny washroom and leaned against the doorframe.

“Well, hello Mistress Malfoy, have we run out of fresh knickers then?”

Hermione slapped her friend on the arm with a scoff. “How dare you, I own plenty more pairs of knickers then would be used over a two-day time frame.”

“Oh sure, the boring kind, but I happen to know you are severely lacking in the lingerie department. I assume you’ve already used your Slytherin green set?”

Hermione’s cheeks flushed violently and she walked past Ginny into the living room with a muttered “yes” as she went.

“Ah hah! So, I’m right. Which I already knew, but it does feel good to have it confirmed every now and again, does it not?”
Hermione slumped onto the sofa.

“Fine Ginny, we can go lingerie shopping while we’re out today.”

Ginny jumped up and down clapping and squealing.

“But don’t call me Mistress Malfoy ever again. It’s a title I hope never to achieve.”

Ginny’s glee disappeared and she looked at her friend in concern.

“I thought you were having fun!”

“I was! I am! But that’s just the trouble isn’t it? It’s just fun, and no long-term plan attached. In fact, when his fiancé returns from her trip abroad this week, I expect our time for fun will become quite limited.”

“Oh to hell with her! If he wants to see you, he will. This is Draco bloody Malfoy we’re talking about. He’s a conniving sneak when he wants something, and he always gets it.”

Hermione stared up at Ginny with a sullen expression.

“Why does that suddenly make me feel worse?”

Ginny rolled her eyes and said, “okay!” Then lunged forward, grabbing both of Hermione’s hands and pulling to stand her upright.

“We’ve got to get you out of here. This will not be sulky Sunday on the couch watching DVVs”

“It’s DVDs, Gin.”

“Oh whatever! Sassy muggle born know it all.”

Hermione smiled and choked on a laugh. After a moment, however, her smile evaporated again.

“Gin... what am I going to do?”

“Hadn’t we decided this? That you owed it to yourself to enjoy some fun wild times with the formerly dark and angsty Mr Malfoy, and sod the promise because it won’t really matter anyway? What’s the problem?”

Hermione stared off at the far corner of the room. Her side table held photos of her parents, of her with the Weasleys, of she Harry and Ron in their first year at school.

“It’s just hard to be so involved knowing it can’t... lead anywhere. And don’t give me that speech again about how it will be okay to be with him after he’s married, you know perfectly well I could never allow such a thing. I just... wish things were different.”

Ginny eyed her suspiciously.

“Hermione... are you perhaps feeling more for Malfoy than a bit of fun alone would satisfy?”

“What? No! No I... we hardly even talk... it’s mostly rows... and sex. A lot of sex.”

“Angry sex,” Ginny said, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Ginny stop!” Hermione cried, hitting her again.
“What?! Ow! I’m just saying, it sounds hot. And so you’re... what? Disappointed by knowing that the outcome will be that he’ll have to legally marry that cow?”

Hermione gave a noncommittal shrug.

“I guess I’d just... like the chance to see if it could go anywhere. Beyond just the sex.”

“But I bet that’s been pretty spectacular yeah? From what you told me yesterday I can only imagine how it went from there, you have to give me all the details while we shop.”

“No way, I am not-”

“Oh come on Hermione, I am so starved for sharing stories having been unable to hear a thing about your love life ever since you took up with my stupid brother. Nor can I share mine with you seeing as my husband may as well be your stupid brother!”

Hermione grimaced. “I still want to hear nothing about Harry in the bedroom.”

“Exactly my point! So, let’s go buy you some new lingerie and you can lavish me with tales of Draco Malfoy’s exceedingly capable hands... among other things.”

“Ginnyyyyy.”

“What?! No one will know who we’re talking about! Look, we’ll give him a code name, alright? How about Bob?”

Hermione stared, and a small grin played at her lips.

“Bob?”

“Yes! We’ll say he’s American! An exotic stranger, oohh maybe that rag Witch Weekly will pick it up, they love a good rebound tale!”

“Americans... exotic? Yea that rag would write that for sure.”

“Come on, let’s go before you talk yourself out of new lacy knickers!”

Hermione shrugged as if to say “you win.”

They gathered their things and apparated out of Hermione’s quaint little flat.

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Hermione insisted on doing their usual rounds at the muggle street fairs before heading to any stuffy lingerie boutiques. She’d been to a fair with Draco the day before but hadn’t been able to get much shopping done, her mind having been flooded with thoughts about what Neville had told her.

“Oh my god, Ginny!” she said as she stopped walking, causing Ginny to plow right into her.

After righting themselves and exchanging apologies, Ginny asked, “now what was all that about?!”

“I’ve just remembered something that I didn’t have a chance to tell you about yet!”

Ginny eyed her quizzically.

“Am I about to discover whatever it was Neville said to you when you went to cool him off about
“Malfoy?”

“How did you—”

“Oh come off it, Hermione, you were a complete weirdo after that conversation. Harry chalked it up to Malfoy’s arrogant behavior but I knew better.”

Hermione looked impressed. She knew Ginny was sharp, but there didn’t seem to be much the girl missed.

The future Potter children would not stand a chance.

“Yes well... um... you were correct,” she said, and then proceeded to relay the entire tale to Ginny. All she had heard from Neville about Pansy’s drunken confession poured out of her in a rushed whisper.

Ginny’s jaw had dropped to the floor long ago, yet seemed to be remaining there.

“That absolute and utter bloody COW!” Ginny exclaimed, causing many heads to turn in their direction. Hermione linked arms with her friend and began walking her quickly down the street.

“I’m going to kill her, Hermione. I’m going to flay her within an inch of her life. I won’t even use magic. I’ll go in Dad’s shed and steal some of his muggle torture devices. Whimps, I believe they’re called.”

“Whips, actually, but—”

“Well whips it is then!” Ginny was wide eyed and more furious than Hermione could ever remember seeing her. Clearly, she could think her brother a complete idiot, but when someone else harmed him, she would go for blood.

Hermione privately felt gratitude for not having been the one to cheat.

If they could actually call it cheating now, given this new information.

“What does that little bitch even do now? Does she work? Or just live off of Daddy’s vault?”

“I’m- I’m not sure, but... Gin, don’t you think Ron should know before either of us goes to avenge him?”

Ginny grumbled. Hermione knew that that would slow her friend down.

It wasn’t that Hermione didn’t want revenge, she absolutely did. It was just that, at the moment, this wasn’t her top priority. Just then, she remembered something.

“Oh fuck!” she said a bit too loudly. More stares from passers by.

“I forgot to tell Draco!”

“What?”

“This thing about Pansy, I was supposed to tell him. It was this little... sort of... game I suppose, where he shared something with me so that I would feel comfortable sharing something with him.”

Ginny grinned and Hermione looked at her perplexedly.
“He got that from Harry.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“Did he?”

Ginny nodded. “Something he learned after the war. Make people feel comfortable talking out their problems by offering some of yours. He uses it on me every time I’m sullen and closed off. It always bloody works, too, the brilliant git.”

Hermione smiled, wondering about just how much of Draco’s change in character could be attributed to his friendship with Harry Potter. She was impressed with Harry’s ability to be a positive influence.

“Isn’t it cute how my guy rubs off on your guy?” Ginny said, and then stifled a laugh by throwing her hand over her mouth and mumbling, “I mean, in a strictly non-sexual way, of course!”

Both women fell into fits of giggles now.

“But anyway you were saying about the secrets?”

“Yes! I was going to share with him about Pansy, but then... well we got a bit caught up with other things.”

“Other things like a balcony and a Zouwu rug in front of his fireplace with the floo OPEN!”

“Oh it was not a Zouwu rug, that’s ridiculous! And we merely forgot to close off the floo!”

Ginny was ignoring her. “Hey do you think Draco could give Harry some pointers? Maybe to spice things up a bit?”

“Ginny.”

“Oh! I’m sorry!” Ginny looked around frantically before turning back to Hermione, “Bob! Do you think Bob could talk to Harry?”

Hermione was instantly doubled over in another fit of giggles.

Once she had fully recovered she said, “seriously though, someone needs to tell Ron and it’s not going to be me, Ginny.”

“You expect me to deliver this horrifying news to my brother who I have not spoken to properly in months?! Pardon my quoting your own expression back at you, Hermione, but I am not an owl!”

“Fair point. Well played,” Hermione said lightly before letting out a small gasp and turning back to Ginny.

Grins spread across both of their faces as they said in unison, “Harry.”

———

“Ginny are you sure he’ll be here? Only I’m not really keen on showing my face at wizarding establishments at present. The press always seem to be lurking.”

“Oh you can steal his cloak from him if so, he has it minimized and stored on him at all times.”
All thoughts of lingerie and vintage clothing having evaporated long ago, the two women pushed open the front door of the Leaky Cauldron with equal eagerness. Glancing around, it didn’t take long to spot him sitting at the bar alone, his drinking partner clearly running late. They approached swiftly, Hermione surreptitiously glancing around for any sign of a reporter.

Then again, if the reporters weren’t hounding Harry, they probably were not in the bar.

He looked up, shocked to see them both there.

“Were the street fairs crap today?”

“No silly,” Ginny said, leaning over to give him a kiss of greeting, which turned a bit more sensual than Hermione would have liked to be witnessing. They broke apart and Ginny finished with, “I missed you.”

Harry’s face turned quickly from delighted to suspicious.

“What do you want?”

Ginny scoffed and let out a small laugh, “you’re accusing me, your doting wife, of kissing you and telling you that I miss you just so that I can get something from you?”

Without flinching Harry simply said, “yes,” and began sipping his fire whiskey.

“Alright fine,” Ginny stage-whispered, “we want you to tell Ron that Pansy Parkinson drugged him with some love and memory loss potions and that’s really why he shagged Astoria Greengrass but doesn’t remember.”

Harry spit fire whiskey all over the floor directly between Hermione and Ginny.

“Oi, is that how he won you over in the first place, Ginevra?”

Blaise was suddenly filling the space between them, standing atop Harry’s lost liquor, which had quickly sunk into the unstained wooden floorboards.

“Yes, Blaise, I find it terribly charming when a man can’t hold his liquor.”

“I can hold it just fine, only you could’ve warned me that you were about to reveal something shocking before allowing me to take a drink.”

Ginny turned to her husband with a smirk and said, “oops.”

Blaise had already turned to address Hermione. “Nice to see you again, Granger, glad to know you’ve finally come up for air. Where’s Draco?”

“Oh no,” Ginny said as she put a hand on Blaise’s shoulder and leaned in seriously, “Bob, we’re calling him Bob.”

“Ginny stop it!” Hermione said with a giggle, and then turned back to Blaise, “He received an urgent owl and had to go handle some... something to do with the... wedding.”

“An owl? From whom?”

Blaise and Harry spoke in unison.

“Yep, everyone is besotted with Bob around here but me, though he is starting to grow on me.”
They ignored her, except Hermione who threw her an amused glare.

“I... I don’t know I didn’t ask... I didn’t want to pry.”

“Gryffindors,” Blaise muttered, and then turned to Harry. “Hey gorgeous, order us two more of those since the floor stole most of yours.”

Hermione did have to see this to believe it. Blaise and Harry got on just as well as Draco and Harry. The sight caused a warm feeling to spread through her chest, before it was quickly replaced by a hollow sensation.

She and Draco were just having fun; it didn’t matter if their friends got along. She needed to stop her mind from making these connections, which would only matter in a world where she and Draco could have some future together.

“Isn’t it a bit early for fire whiskey, boys?” asked Ginny.

“And where is there a rule written about appropriate times to drink, Ginevra?”

“It’s just common knowledge, it doesn’t need to be written. By the way, will you stop using my full name? It’s creepy.”

Blaise put his hands out to the side.

“I can’t help it, I was taught pureblood family trees.”

“Yes but my family are blood traitors and are burned off pureblood family trees.”

Blaise shook his head.

“Not my mum’s. She was never a pureblood extremist. Hell, she would have tried to marry me off to you if Potter hadn’t snapped you up,” he growled, looking Ginny up and down.

To Hermione’s surprise, Ginny flushed and became a bit flustered.

“Oi! Aim that flirtatious nonsense at me like you always do, will you?”

“Jealous, Potter?”

“You wish.”

“Um, excuse me, I think we’ve gotten away from the matter at hand?” Hermione said, raising her hand in the air as she did so.

Harry shook himself. “Yes of course, now what in the bloody hell were you saying about”

“Parkinson,” Blaise said.

“Yes Parkinson!”

“No, look,” Blaise commanded, staring across the bar at the far staircase, “it’s Parkinson.”

The whole group looked up to see none other than Pansy Parkinson in the flesh, with her arm intertwined around-

“Ron?” Hermione gasped.
They were too far out of earshot to be heard by the pair, who then descended the rickety staircase and walked out the front door together, arm in arm.

Blaise turned to look at Harry.

“What in the name of Slytherin’s saggy old tit is going on here?!”

“You’re asking me? It’s these two who seem to know all the gossip of the day,” he said, motioning to Hermione and Ginny.

Both women had gone rigid, mouths agape, staring unflinchingly at the door of the pub.

Harry and Blaise tried to rouse them, but they seemed stuck in stasis. After several long moments, Ginny spoke.

“She’s used it on him.”

This seemed to snap Hermione out of her own trance, though she still stared at the door.

“But for her this time.”

“Hermione, you need to take my wand from me before I get thrown in Azkaban for committing murder,” Ginny said, holding out her wand. Harry grabbed it with a frustrated scoff.

“What are you saying? That Parkinson used a love potion on Ron?”

“What?! Why?!” exclaimed Blaise.

“Yes and for the second time. The first was when she made him crawl into bed with Astoria Greengrass,” said Hermione.

“She’s barmy!” shouted Blaise, “bloody hell I’ve known the girl since we were children, I had no idea she was this badly off! I’m going to go stop her,” he said, charging towards the door.

Ginny snapped her head towards her husband.

“Harry please go with him. If I go I may strangle her, I am not exaggerating.”

Ginny’s voice was firm, and yet she seemed to be shaking with rage, her chest heaving. Harry slammed down his glass and groaned with annoyance as he made to follow Blaise. Before he got by her, Ginny stopped him and grabbed something out of his cloak. Hermione assumed it had been her wand.

Harry threw her a brief nod of understanding before hurrying to the door.

Once he had disappeared, Ginny did indeed pull out her wand, but also held up a second small folded cloth. Pointing her wand at it, the piece of fabric was enlarged and Hermione recognized Harry’s cloak. She gasped.

“I don’t want either of them seeing us. Let’s go,” Ginny said, and without a moment’s hesitation, Hermione joined her under the cloak and they sped to the door, hunching over to ensure their feet were covered.

Once outside, it wasn’t difficult to locate their quarry. It seemed as though Ron and Pansy had stopped outside a nearby shop and had been looking in when Blaise and Harry caught up with them. Hermione and Ginny found a small alcove in the brick wall nearby where they could stay out of the
“He is under the influence of no potion at present, I assure you,” Pansy was saying.

“I’ll hear it from him, thanks Parkinson, I hardly think your word on the matter should mean much,” spat Harry.

“She’s telling the truth, Harry, I’m not with her under the influence of anything. She’s just here to... keep me company.”

“And how do we verify that, Weasley? If you were under a love potion you would protect her when questioned,” Blaise interjected.

Ron and Pansy both let out frustrated sighs, but Harry cut back in.

“No, I believe him, Blaise. I saw Ron under the influence of a love potion at school once, and it was nothing like this.”

Blaise looked between Ron and Harry, scrutinizing them carefully. Ron was nodding.

“Well alright fine, Weasley, but that doesn’t change the fact that she once did douse you with love potion, which had you sleep with Astoria,” Blaise said, pointing an accusatory finger at Pansy.

Hermione was shocked to see that Ron didn’t flinch at all upon hearing this. He had known? But why hadn’t he told her? And why was he still there with that evil witch?!

“How do you know about that?!” Pansy roared.

Blaise shook his head, “You must have blabbed to someone, because both Granger and Ginevra just told us.”

“Hermione’s here?!” Ron nearly shouted, looking around.

Hermione jerked herself back, forgetting she was under the cloak, but Ginny steadied her and whispered, “you’re fine, don’t move.” Hermione took a few deep breaths. She absolutely did not want to be discovered looking in on this scene.

“Not anymore, since she saw you two lovebirds leave the pub together.”

Ron groaned and put his hands over his face.

“Seriously, Blaise, who told them?!” Pansy demanded.

“How should I know? I only had it from them about five minutes ago, literally just before you two came flouncing down the steps. So what is this, then? Are you two an item now?”

“No!” Pansy and Ron shouted in unison.

“We’re just...”

“We’re... friends,” Pansy finished lamely.

“Oh I see, and friends are those who slip illicit potions to one another in order to break up their marriages, is that it?” Harry interjected, starring daggers at both of them.

“That’s not why I- that’s not what happened!” Pansy said, with a quaver in her voice.
Hermione had never seen the witch this unnerved. It was strange. Pansy seemed to have come undone at the seams over the years. She had a distinct air of someone who'd been treated rather unkindly by life.

Still, any amount of empathy or compassion for the witch was but a passing inclination for Hermione. Pansy was still the one responsible for Ron’s night with Astoria… for the pregnancy… and indirectly for the marriage promise.

Heat built inside of Hermione and she could feel magic surging within her, threatening to explode out unintentionally. Ginny could sense this and laid a calming hand over Hermione’s, which was now clutching her wand, her knuckles white.

“Unless you want to become a part of this confrontation, you’d do well to calm that anger. Try your occlumency.”

Hermione indeed did not want to be a part of it, but she was never fantastic at occlumency. She doubted that she could instantly be better at it in this moment when her temper was already through the roof. Still, she gave Ginny a nod of thanks and loosened her grip on her wand.

She’d missed the last thing said in the conversation while she’d been trying to calm herself.

“The bottom line is, I’ve forgiven Pansy for what she did. It may have led to my sleeping with Astoria, but considering how unhappy Hermione already was with me, it seems it was meant to be. Massively fucked up as it is.”

Blaise looked incredulously over at Harry.

“He’s Barmy too! They bloody hell deserve each other!”

“We already said, we’re not together!” Ron shouted.

“Then why are you holding hands??!” Blaise retorted.

Ron and Pansy looked down and were both startled to notice that they were indeed, holding hands. They let go sharply and shot guilty looks up at Blaise and Harry.

“Look, are we done here?” asked Ron, miserably.

“One more thing, Weasley,” said Blaise, “are you going to tell the future Mother of your child?”

Ron looked at Pansy who had a morose grimace across her face. “She’s going to find out somehow, apparently I run my mouth without even remembering I’ve done so.”

Ron nodded in reply, then looked up at Blaise.

“Astoria has made it quite clear that she does not want to hear from me ever again. One of you tell her, you’re the ones who are best mates with her future husband,” Ron said with great disdain.

“Hey, wasn’t it you who sought the man out to shake his hand not two mornings ago?” asked Blaise.

“Yea, well… he was owed my gratitude but I doubt I’ll be asked around for tea at the Manor any time soon, nor am I interested in his friendship,” Ron said. The last word had a bite to it, and he turned his eyes on Harry when he said it.

Hermione felt tears welling up in her eyes.
How had this happened to the three of them? She thought back to the picture in her living room she’d been staring at just a few hours ago.

First year. Pure. Unfettered friendship.

How was it that you could go from being the most important person in someone’s life, to being a mere afterthought? Sending obligatory birthday wishes and Christmas cards each year. Eventually referring to one another as someone you used to know.

A stranger whose laugh you could recognize anywhere…*

“Let’s go, Ron,” Pansy said quietly, taking his arm in hers again and leading him away. Harry and Blaise stood quietly, watching them go. Once they’d rounded the corner, Harry looked around and quietly said, “Ginny?”

Hermione and Ginny pulled the cloak off and Blaise jumped back, “Holy Merlin’s ballsack!”

“Charming as always, Zabini,” said Ginny, as she moved forward to hand the cloak back to Harry, placing a chaste kiss on his cheek.

“So it’s true you own an invisibility cloak, Potter.”

Harry nodded. “Old family heirloom, don’t go shouting about it, eh?”

“I won’t, so long as you let me give it a go some day,” Blaise said, eyeing the cloak longingly and reaching out a hand to touch it, which Harry promptly smacked.

“Maybe if you behave,” Harry said, and threw Blaise a wink.

A broad grin spread over Blaise’s face and he turned to look at Ginny.

“Watch out, Ginevra, I’ve got your man sparring with me now, it’s only a matter of time.”

Ginny rolled her eyes but then looked over and noticed Hermione who was standing stock still, tears rolling down her face.

“Hermione, are you all right?” she asked hurriedly, lunging forward to put her hands on Hermione’s shoulders and get her to snap out of her trance. Blaise and Harry stepped towards her as well, both looking concerned.

Hermione let out a small sob and let a few more tears fall before speaking.

“It’s just… why is everything so… so inconceivably fucked up?”

A low laugh from Blaise had them all turn towards him angrily. He held up both hands.

“I’m sorry it’s just… this from the girl who had mudblood carved into her arm and rode a dragon out of Gringotts? I’m quite sure the world has been more fucked up than it is at present, though I do agree with your assessment.”

Hermione echoed his laugh and said, “Well, let’s just hope it doesn’t get that much worse, then.”

Chapter End Notes
Comments make me write sooner. Especially when I have time off work in the next few days. Just sayin :) 

Pardon any typos, I wrote the latter half of this chapter in the car and was starting to feel sick, but didn’t want to wait to post it. Hopefully there’s nothing too terrible!

*I included a line from Taylor Swift’s “New Years Day” which is a lovely song and the last one on her latest album. I reblogged a crossover Dramione/Taylor post the other day and it popped into my head when I was writing this. It’s one of my favorite lyrics of hers. Hope any Swifties reading this picked up on it ;)

Come play on tumblr... liliansilverstuff
Hermione sat slumped at her desk in the DMLE offices staring at her overflowing inbox of letters from everyone but the one person she wanted to hear from. It was Wednesday morning and it had been three days since she’d last seen or heard from Draco.

He had sent her an owl letting her know that Astoria’s family in New Zealand requested his presence there and that he needed to leave immediately.

It had certainly put a damper on what had otherwise been an incredible weekend. Well, almost. There was a part of her that had been grateful for a moment to breathe after the revelations of Sunday morning. She didn’t quite know how to feel about any of it, especially in regard to Ron.

She didn’t love him in that way anymore, but she still cared for him, and he truly seemed to be going off the deep end.

Pansy Parkinson was using him; she was sure of it. Maybe it wasn’t her business anymore, but thinking back on the memory of him standing in the street outside the Leakey… gaunt, resigned, empty… it made her heart ache. She had fought herself hard under that cloak to resist charging forward and dragging him off to talk some sense into him.

It was no longer her place to do so, however. By her own choice, she had made it so.

She needed to let him go, and she supposed that ruminating over this whole debacle would not aid her in that need.

If only Draco were around to distract from her brooding. So far, everything had been so hot and cold with him; she was beginning to feel physically affected by the changing weather patterns. Just this time last week she had also suffered three days of no contact after a passionate interaction.
Two kisses and a row, to be exact. This past weekend, however, had included quite a few more of both, and a number of other things. And then just like that, he’d been gone.

Then again it was, by and large, what she’d signed up for. She let out a long, coarse sigh, feeling her hopefulness for the future leave her body along with the carbon dioxide.

Though it hadn’t been printed in the papers, everyone at her office seemed to know about her divorce, and she’d noticed as much upon her arrival Monday morning. People weren’t staring, rather, they seemed to be averting their eyes altogether. Their feigned ignorance to her presence was somehow worse than a barrage of apologies and offerings of supportive advice.

It’d been unsettling, though. What did it say about her that her colleagues were too timid to even acknowledge her?

She shuddered as she noticed that it startlingly resembled the way Ron had felt unable to go to her after the incident with Astoria, and who knows how many other things. Some she knew about, once she thought back on it. Small, stupid things like staining the couch cushion with spaghetti sauce and then buying a completely new couch just to avoid telling her he’d done it. Too bad for him that Ginny missed nothing and clued Hermione in.

Too bad for her that she’d made it a habit of alienating the people around her.

Unable to deal with her co-worker’s behavior, she’d spent the week so far hiding in her office. She arrived before anyone else had arrived, and left after everyone else had left. People were steering clear of her, and sending copious memos rather than dropping by.

If she saw one more enchanted paper airplane today…

On cue, one such tiny plane zoomed in through the transom above her door and landed in front of her. She unfurled the note and saw her secretary’s handwriting.

*Luna Lovegood here to see you – shall I send her in or tell her you’re occupied?*

Luna! She must be back in Britain to visit with her Father!

Hermione quickly scribbled back a note, but then balled it up and stood from her chair. “Blast all these damn memos,” she muttered as she strode quickly to her door as if charging to an oasis she’d spotted after days in the desert.

She prayed Luna would not turn out to be a mirage.

Of all the people she could speak to now, someone as caring and compassionate as Luna Lovegood was suddenly her best and only option. It wasn’t that Harry, Ginny, Neville, or even Blaise Zabini, strange as it were to say, were not caring… they all just had a lot of opinions, and Hermione was having trouble understanding what her own were at the moment. She’d been keeping them posted (read: at bay) for the past few days, but used the excuse of being busy at work to avoid any more conversations about Ron, Pansy, or Draco. Which is why Luna would be such a breath of fresh air… she’d know nothing about any of it.

Rounding the corner of the hall leading from her office, she spotted that familiar shade of white-blond hair. It was not quite as white as Draco’s, she noted, before brushing the wizard from her mind for the moment.

“Luna!” she cried, and saw her friend spin around with that dazed air she always seemed to carry with her everywhere she went.
“Oh hello, Hermione! Does this mean you’re free?” said the blue-eyed witch with a large grin.

“Oh! Well it’s probably closer to supper time now isn’t it? Shall we say a spot of lupper, then?”

Hermione snorted. She had missed Luna without even realizing it. And the witch was correct, it was already half three, and though Hermione had been working until past eight so far this week, she thought she might call it an early night today instead.

“Lupper it is,” she said with a grin, “let me just go grab my things, I’ll meet you at the lifts.”

After retrieving her bag and letting her secretary know she was done for the day, all while enduring the massive wave of averted eyes across the room, Hermione met Luna at the lifts and then ventured down to the atrium and out the floos into wizarding London.

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Luna selected their “lupper” spot, which was a small pub called The Jobberknoll. Hermione had never noticed the place before, as it was off the beaten path of Diagon Alley. She was, however, happy to be out of the way and free from prying (or averted, as it were) eyes. They sat together in a blue booth with an odd speckled pattern.

“It’s made to look like Jobberknoll feathers, isn’t that lovely?” said Luna, delightedly.

Hermione looked down, not really feeling one way or the other about the décor, but agreeing anyway.

With Luna, you often had to nod along rather than get into a sprawling conversation about magical beast facts, though Hermione imagined she would be treated to at least some of that today.

A waiter came by to hand them menus and both witches began perusing the fare.

“One of the reasons I love coming here is because they feature a drink that induces truth-telling. I’m sure you know the connection between Jobberknoll feathers and the potion…?”

“Veritaserum!”

Hermione knew that the name of the pub had sounded familiar. She hadn’t done extensive research on magical creatures, having forgone Hagrid’s class in her 5th year, but she’d brewed the potion a number of times.

Luna smiled gratefully. “You certainly are a clever witch, Hermione. It’s a wonder you weren’t in my house. Why do you think that was?”

Hermione thought for a moment, having pondered this topic many times before without ever voicing her thoughts.

“Well, I suppose any of us could have been placed in another house,” Hermione said with a small smile, “the hat wanted to put Harry in Slytherin, and he’s cunning and ambitious enough to have fit well there, for example.”

“Mmm, yes, that’s true. And most anyone would have placed Neville in Hufflepuff, with his
astounding loyalty and patience.”

Hermione lit up. “That’s very true, Luna! I hadn’t actually thought of that, but Neville is one of my most loyal friends, for sure.”

“Still, I suppose bravery weaves us all together, what with the DA and all…”

Hermione thought back on their time at Hogwarts and her wan smile faded to a slight grimace.

“Oh dear, did that bring up a bad memory? I saw the light leave your eyes just then.”

Hermione shook herself and plastered a smile on her face. “No it’s fine, Luna I just… have been thinking a lot lately on what we’ve all lost… since then.”

Luna cocked her head. “I hope you don’t mind my saying so, but that seems an odd thing to focus on.”

Hermione felt a familiar tinge of annoyance. It was something she’d grown used to, being around Luna. The girl tended to say the thing that struck a nerve without any intent to harm, which made it harder to hear because you really couldn’t be mad at her for it, so instead you were left to be annoyed at yourself for whatever truth you’d picked up on in her words.

“Oh my, I’ve said the wrong thing again.”

Hermione reached across the table and took Luna’s hand. “No, no Luna, I promise you’ve said nothing wrong, I just… have a lot going on right now that you are none the wiser about. I shall fill you in in due course, but perhaps we should decide on our orders first.”

Luna nodded, and when the waiter came back they both placed their orders.

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After a bit of idle chit chat about Hermione’s work at the ministry, their pumpkin juice was on the table; it had been a bit too early to start drinking.

“This is where Rolf and I first met, so I’m partial to coming back whenever I’m in Britain.”

“Oh that’s lovely, Luna, please tell me all about it. I would be so happy to talk about anything other than my own life at the moment.”

Luna put down her spoon after only a few slurps of her plumpy soup and smiled wanly.

“Of course! I’d be delighted,” she said, and then put a finger to her chin in a thinking pose, “Let’s see, I’d just begun work at the ministry in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures after the year I took off to spend with Dad. We worked in the same offices, Rolf and I, though he was further along than I was of course, due not only to his name but his level of experience and passion.”

Hermione grinned. It was so wonderful that Luna had met someone who was enthusiastic about the same things she was. A thought about how Ron never did fit that description floated into her mind, but she shooed it away and continued to listen to Luna’s story.

“Funny enough, we didn’t meet at the ministry. We’d both come here separately one Friday after work after hearing that The Jobberknoll was going to debut a series of cocktails containing truth serums, a variety of kinds, not just veritaserum. There are many less-potent varieties which don’t
have such brutal effects, but still sway a person to reveal what they otherwise might not, but you probably knew that. It all has to do with the manner I which the bird is treated prior to retrieving a feather. It was a topic which fascinated both of us. Anyway, we both tried a cocktail designed to have the drinker expose their deepest desires.”

“Oh my! Speaking of Gryffindor courage, Luna, that takes some guts. And with a total stranger!”

Luna blushed. “Well, if I’m being honest, I did have my eye on him for a while before our serendipitous meeting here,” she said quite quickly before taking a deep sip of her pumpkin juice.

“Luna Lovegood! What was that look in your eye I just saw?”

Luna shot her protuberant eyes up at Hermione as she sipped her drink and shook her head slightly.

“Hmm… If I didn’t know any better, I’d accuse you of planning the whole thing!”

To Hermione’s surprise, Luna blushed even deeper and let out a small giggle. “Well alright, you would be correct. I even had his secretary “accidentally” include a leaflet advertising the event with his mail a few days prior. When he added it to his calendar, she sent me a confirmation memo and that was that. But you can’t tell him that if you should meet him! I’m saving the telling of that secret for our wedding night.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped and she looked down at Luna’s hand to see if there was a ring.

“Oh we’re not engaged yet. That won’t happen for, mmm… about another year or so when he works up the courage.”

“And did the hall of prophecy tell you that, Luna?” Hermione asked with a playful bite to her question, as was custom when faced with this particular witch and her wild beliefs.

She shrugged with a smile. “Just a sense I get.”

Luna was also used to Hermione’s characteristic skepticism, and never let it throw her, a trait Hermione loved about the witch. Thick skin. Always up to spar.

“I also think we’ll have twins someday,” she said, taking a sip of her drink but then stopping mid-sip to say, “boys.”

“But how could you possibly know that, Luna?!!”

“I don’t know, Hermione, I think. I just choose to believe a lot of the things I think… to be truths,” she leaned in to whisper, “I only pick the good ones though, otherwise I get into trouble.” Then she smirked conspiratorially and picked her spoon back up after casting a re-warming charm on her Plimpy soup.

“How are you, Hermione? I noticed an awful lot of wrackspurts in your brain when I first saw you.”

Hermione looked up, confused. “You weren’t wearing Spectrespecs, Luna.”

Merlin, what was she even saying! Wrackspurts didn’t exist!

She shook away her usual reaction; she was enjoying Luna’s company far too much to muck it up with her need for logic.

Luna, who had just taken a gulp of soup, widened her eyes and made to swallow quickly. “Oh but I haven’t shown you!”
She reached into her bag, which was next to her on her seat, and pulled out a small purple case with two round compartments. Hermione recognized it as a muggle contact lens case.

“Daddy and I worked together to create these from a muggle technology called-”

“Contact lenses.”

“Yes! It seems they take well to magical amplifications. Once the lens is applied, one need only tap their temple with their wand tip to cycle between options. Currently we only have Spectrespecs, but Daddy is in talks with the Auror office to include what muggles call “night vision,” and who knows what else will be possible!”

“Luna that is… amazing.”

She gave Hermione a sweet smile. “Thank you. Daddy is very pleased. While The Quibbler is doing well, it never was a cash cow, as the muggles say. So, this new venture into magical eyewear is quite exciting!” She took a few more spoonfuls of soup while Hermione returned to her salad.

She really wished she were one of those witches who could go through a breakup and then subsequently eat her feelings, but her logical mind had been winning that argument as well.

“Hermione,” Luna said, questioningly, “you seem to have dodged my earlier inquiry.”

Hermione’s smile faded abruptly, but Luna did not falter.

“I heard about Ron, and the divorce.”

Hermione’s eyes filled with tears faster than she expected them to. Something about being in Luna’s loving presence made her feel safe to let go. And she did. Suddenly, crying was all she could do. She’d been so distracted all weekend, and subsequently numb, that she hadn’t really had a chance to mourn the end of her marriage properly.

After a while, she realized that Luna had moved to her side of the booth and was quietly holding her, arms wrapped fully around Hermione’s shaking torso. Luna said nothing, but merely bore witness to Hermione’s pain.

It was precisely what she needed.

As she cried over Ron, she added in the loss of her trio-friendship. Once the grief-crying began, it was sort of like a bonfire. You had to take advantage of the moment and get anything in there that needed to go.

She thought of Molly and Arthur, her surrogate family who she’d never be able to be with in the same way again.

She thought of her parents, of the time they’d spent in France having fun, laughing, being ridiculous. How they could never look upon her as their daughter ever again.

That thought naturally led her to Draco. What she had with him couldn’t really be. There was no way to break the marriage promise. It settled over her like a dark cloud as she allowed tears and sobs to pour from her.

It was mostly rows and sex. Yet she missed him terribly. This seemed to mean something.

He wasn’t just a distraction, she truly enjoyed being with him. He was sweet to her… attentive
beyond reason. He’d made her feel alive again, after not realizing her spirit had been deadened for years.

On Saturday evening, she’d discovered a number of things they had in common. Things she had already known, but somehow hadn’t connected the dots on; their shared love of reading being one of the highest on the list. And oh, how the man had a way with words, both spoken and written. That he could take her apart with a simple letter was a dizzying fact.

There was no lack of passion between them. She didn’t think that would ever go away. She knew that so many couples said as much at the onset of a relationship, but with him she just could not imagine ever losing that spark. A spark she’d never truly had with Ron.

But she couldn’t have him, not really, and the truth of it shot through her like ice.

Suddenly she realized that she’d been mumbling a lot of this out loud. She gasped and looked up at Luna who simply smiled kindly at her and offered a handkerchief from her pocket.

“Thanks,” she sputtered, taking it and beginning to wipe her face while saying, “L- Luna, I’m not sure what you just heard me say, but-”

“It’s alright, Hermione,” Luna said with a smile, “Ginny filled me in this morning, but swore me to secrecy unless you brought any of it up first.”

Hermione looked like she’s just been stunned. “So you- you know.”

Luna nodded serenely. “Mmm hmm.”

Hermione took a long deep breath and closed her eyes. “Oh thank Merlin, I don’t think I could bear retelling it.”

Luna giggled. “That’s what Ginny thought. I must say, Hermione, I’ve been waiting for the day when he’d come back and you two would realize your connection.”

“You what?!?”

“Oh I saw it back in school. The way he was always so focused on you, even and especially when you weren’t looking. It wasn’t hatred, more like captivation. Being mean-spirited towards you was just something of a habit he’d developed, probably to keep from outright throwing himself at you, given his pureblood upbringing and all. His Father would certainly have heard about it if he had, don’t you think?” Luna smirked wickedly, far too proud of what she’d just said.

“Luna what in the world are you-”

“He studied you. I think you were his favorite subject and he would have received an Outstanding on all exams!”

Hermione stared at her, unblinking and entirely thunderstruck.

“You look so surprised! Maybe you don’t belong in my house after all, Hermione. Wisdom doesn’t exclusively involve books, you know. Why, Professor Trelawney herself was a Ravenclaw, did you know that?”

Hermione, in fact, did not know that, but she couldn’t be bothered with trivia at the moment.

Her brain had stopped working now. What was this wacky witch talking about? Draco had loathed her, plain and simple. He’d insulted everything about her, including her appearance. Sure, he’d
suddenly seemed to find her attractive now, but she had quite grown into her looks, as had he.

When he was young, he’d spent a seemingly inordinate amount of time finding ways to terrorized she, Harry, and Ron… but that was just because of his dislike for Harry.

“You can disagree with me, but it won’t change the fact that I’m right. Draco has been in love with you for a very long time, I’m afraid. Only he doesn’t know it.”

“In- in love? With me?!”

“Mmm hmm,” Luna said, nodding, “only, like I said… he’s none the wiser. I’m afraid the poor bloke thinks himself incapable of love. Such a shame he didn’t grow up in a different setting. I expect he would have been quite wonderful to be in school with. I bet you two would have been close friends from the start. You’re both so competitive about academics, yet so respectful of other brilliant minds… in your own ways.”

The waiter came to the table to see if they would need anything else.

“I think we require some stronger drinks, pumpkin juice isn’t going to suffice for this conversation,” Luna said, selecting two cocktails from the menu. “Don’t worry, I didn’t pick any of the truth-telling ones, I don’t think we’ll need them as we’re both already being rather forthcoming, with the exclusion of your understandable denial of course.”

Hermione bristled at this while Luna hummed happily to herself.

When their drinks arrived, Luna leaned in with a level of presence and intention that startled Hermione. Her friend’s typical demeanor was that of a schoolgirl wandering through the posies on her way home, so to see the fire in her eyes now was quite an odd occurrence.

“Hermione, I didn’t want to alarm you when I first appeared so I’ve been waiting to reveal the true intention of my visit to see you.”

“O-kay, you’re scaring me a bit, Luna.”

“Oh no need to be frightened, at least I don’t think, I just have some information for you that I think you may be missing. You see, when Ginny told me about the marriage promise, I noticed that she didn’t mention the path to breaking it, wholly and completely. I didn’t share it with her, because I didn’t know if you’d want everyone to know…”

“Ginny, there are only three loopholes to a marriage promise, and even when the circumstances do align, one of more of the parents need to enact the severing of the contract. It’s how Astoria’s Father got her out of the promise the first time around.”

“Yes Hermione, I can see you’ve done your book research. To be honest, I’m shocked that both Ginny and Neville didn’t know what I’m about to tell you, having been raised in pureblood families. Then again, oral traditions do tend to get twisted…”

“Lune will you please tell me whatever you’re on about?!”

“Yes, sorry! True love.”

Hermione stared at her, waiting for Luna to say more.

“True love?”
Luna nodded once, as if that put paid to it. Hermione motioned with her hand for Luna to continue.

“Oh! Right. Well… true love is the way to dissolve a marriage promise. It’s not a loophole, it’s a much more powerful force. It would require no-one’s consent, but it would have to be mutual, with you and Draco both sharing the same feelings and expressing it in some way. Meaning it’s not always enough to say the words. It’s not even enough, I believe, for Draco to have loved you most of his life if he can’t see that for himself, he’d have to see it, accept it. And like I said, it would have to be mutual.”

Hermione was reeling from this information; it could not possibly be true.

“But Luna… you don’t know-”

“Hermione Granger!” Luna shouted suddenly, banging her fist on the table, “you listen to me, this is not a matter of cold hard fact, but one of oral folklore which has its roots in something stronger than research and academia. That’s why you haven’t found it in all of your BOOKS!”

Stunned, Hermione had shot back in her seat, pinning herself against the blue speckled booth seat. It was so jarring to see Luna Lovegood enraged.

“Oh- okay Luna, I’m sorry, I’m listening.”

Luna shook herself slightly. She had leaned forward, her face flushed and her face set, but she loosened her features and sat back casually.

“My point is… if you are interested in getting Draco out of his mess… I think you stand a chance at it.”

Hermione still could not get on board with much of anything Luna had just told her, but she found that she wasn’t 100% averse to it. There seemed to be at least a tiny glimmer of truth to what Luna was saying. She’d read a lot about the power of love in the magical world. She’d studied it profusely once she’d learned about Lily Potter’s magical protection of her son. Ancient branches of magic were so fascinating, and little had been written about them, so she’d taken great pride in being that close to the subject of a protection charm based solely upon love and sacrifice.

Professor Snape, too, had been turned from the darkness due to his love of Lily. He’d even sacrificed his life protecting her son, who looked so much like James, a man he loathed.

Then she remembered something Neville had said.

“Luna… I just remembered… Neville actually mentioned something about this to me.”

Luna did not look surprised, but relieved. “I thought he must know! Did you merely refuse to listen?”

Hermione thought back with some difficulty. What had Neville said?

“It’s difficult to recall, but I believe he said that a marriage promise can’t get in the way of true love.”

“And he would be correct!” Luna said, with a flourish of her arm, and then took another sip of her cocktail.

“Yes but then he began prattling on about muggle romance novels in an effort to give me examples, he didn’t exactly spell it out for me the way you just did!”
“Ah… then perhaps he doesn’t know the full implications, but just heard the axiom growing up. Still, he’s correct! Merlin, I’m glad I stopped home in my travels, Hermione.”

“Yes, it appears I’ve needed you desperately all this time without knowing it.”

Luna wiggled her eyebrows and said, “Much like your young Mr. Malfoy has needed you.”

“Luna!”

Luna shrugged, “I’m just saying, you two are soulmates. Look how circumstance has conspired to bring you together! How extraordinary that the very vineyard you chose to visit was the one in which he was taking refuge. The room you chose to escape your ex-husband the same one he was, again, taking refuge in. Don’t you see, Hermione? You ARE his refuge! You bear the soul that will save his! It’s always been this way, I am sure of it. Loving you has, and always will be, the polar opposite of what the darkness would have him choose. You are his salvation.”

Hermione listened to this speech, a single tear falling down her cheek at Luna’s final words. When she spoke, it was almost in a whisper.

“But Luna, he will be married in less than three weeks, I- I can’t possibly both fall in love with him and have him realize his apparent love for me in that amount of time.”

“Well, Hermione… you don’t know that.”
Draco had a headache.

Cracks of sunlight shone past the edges of the curtains covering his floor to ceiling windows.

Through his haze he remembered that he was in the living room of his flat; he’d spent the past few nights passing out on the couch. This was due to the fact that his bed still smelled like Hermione, and he did not want to be surrounded by her scent… nor was he ready to wash it away.

Wandlessly summoning the vial of potion he’d placed on his coffee table in advance the night before, he popped the cork and downed it in one.

How fucking pathetic, he thought.

He’d had the same thought when he’d brewed a vat of hangover potion somewhere between arriving back to his flat after Azkaban, and forcing himself to write that owl full of lies to Hermione.

Convenient excuses always ran out eventually, and his time was running short.

He was at a complete loss as to what to do. He didn’t want to alert Blaise or Harry to the fact that he had to break things off with Hermione.

They would ask questions.

“What are you gonna do, just ignore her full stop?” (Blaise)

He didn’t know what he was going to do.
“Why are you letting your Father’s opinion affect your life when he’s in prison?” (Harry)

It wasn’t that simple.

And they would have opinions.

“I can’t believe you still care what your sodding father thinks of you.” (Blaise)

He didn’t. Truly. Or rather… he couldn’t. Too painful.

“You’re giving up awfully quick, Draco, maybe you prefer being miserable.” (Harry)

He hadn’t given up, he just had no idea what to do yet. Though, the misery thing struck a chord.

They would want to get more involved, and that was a fact he couldn’t hold at bay much longer.

Insufferable bastards. Already owling him five times a day. Each.

He’d blocked his floo and warded his flat against apparition. He’d made the concession of allowing owls in case his Father decided to send him more soul-crushing directives. Couldn’t miss those.

However, Harry and Blaise would surely not stand another full day of this.

Then there was Hermione…

Merlin knew what was going through her mind. He was so hopeful that she believed his New Zealand story, because Harry and Blaise had not, and they’d owl’d him to tell him so on Sunday evening after hearing it from Hermione… because of course the two of them had been together. He wondered if Ginny was getting jealous yet.

They hadn’t blown his cover, but they were impatient for explanations, and Draco was sure that Harry would send the Aurors hunting for him if he waited much longer.

He had wanted so badly to ask them how Hermione was doing, but didn’t think he’d get much response without providing some information to them in return. Information he wasn’t ready for them to have. Who knew what they’d do. Whether he mentioned his Father or not, they would suspect his involvement, and then what? They’d probably try to visit the prison. He couldn’t have either of them getting tangled up in his mess.

After all, he had no way of warning them of what his Father had become.

Besides, if he was to keep up the ruse that he was out of the country, he couldn’t very well start a paper trail.

Merlin, he hated this.

Webs of lies were sticky and inconvenient at the best of times.

His mind was a disaster area. What he wouldn’t give for a penseive.

In lieu of one, however… firewhiskey.

Indeed, he had whiled away three long days in a row, thoroughly pissed and unfeeling, avoiding processing anything his Father had said or done. Reading Harry and Blaise’s owls and responding verbally to them as if his friends were sat on the black leather couches, but not writing back. He’d alphabetized his book collection for something to do. The memory was haze, but he thought that at
one point he’d written poetry.

This was confirmed by glancing over to the fireplace and seeing the charred remains of what had surely been works to rival Byron. He scoffed at the thought.

Deciding it was time to come out of his stupor, he removed the wards and unlocked the floo before forcing himself up off the couch and over to his writing desk. Penning two brief notes to each of his friends, even though they were probably somehow in each other’s company, he sent Ptolemy off to break his silence.

Just after the handsome eagle owl had disappeared through the hatch, his floo chime sounded and Astoria’s voice filled his living room. Merlin, what timing this woman had.

“Draco are you home yet? I- I’d like to drop by if so.”

There was something in the tone of her voice. A vulnerability he was unfamiliar with of late.

The last time he could remember hearing it was the day she’d chopped the heads off all of his Mother’s red roses and came to beg his help hiding it.

Merlin, he had enough of his own problems at the moment, he hoped she wouldn’t be adding more to the pile. Still, best not to ignore her and risk angering Daddy.

“I’m here, feel free,” he called back lazily.

A moment later she stood before him. A moment after that she was plugging her nose as if he’d just set off a pound of dung bombs.

“What in the blazes have you been doing in here?!”

He shrugged. “Not much. Can I help you with something, Astoria?”

She’d been scrutinizing the room, but now snapped her gaze back and took him in. He was wearing a pair of black trousers with a number of stains on them, most of which even he could not have identified. His white t-shirt was stained in the armpits and he’d singed a few holes in it while drunkenly chain smoking on Sunday. He rarely smoked, but had gone through two full packs that day before running out.

Astoria leaned in towards his chest and sniffed once before recoiling in horror.

“When was the last time you bathed, Draco!?”

He shrugged again. He hadn’t actually considered his appearance prior to agreeing to have her over, which, in retrospect, had been a mistake. However, he still had a fairly thick layer of resignation shrouded over him, and it was thicker than the amount of grime soiling his person.

Nose pinched between her thumb and forefinger in disgust, she walked forward, her face carrying as much concern as was possible while grimacing.

“What the hell has happened to you?” she asked in a nasal voice as she scanned his face, attempting to read anything through the grim expression he was holding firmly to.

He turned and strode over to his small at-home bar as he muttered, “My Father.”

Whatever reaction she had to this, he couldn’t see, as he had his face buried in the cabinet, scavenging for another bottle of Ogden’s Best.
“What’s the problem now?” she called, "Has he demanded that you unwillingly marry another witch you don’t even fancy, in addition to myself?"

He stood and spun around, eyeing her cautiously. They hadn’t spoken this directly about the situation before. Last week, prior to leaving on her trip, she had been all propriety and refinement; a shell of a woman moving imperiously through the setting up of wedding plans. Now that he really looked at her, she seemed… shattered, somehow. He remembered the vulnerability he’d heard in her voice only moments ago, and promptly lost interest in finding a new bottle.

“What the hell has happened to you?”

She stared at him for a moment before turning and walking over to sit on the couch without giving any answer. Taking out her wand, she began wordlessly casting spells around the room, and Draco noted that the air cleared. He’d gotten so used to the smell in the room that the difference made him gasp in surprise.

Ignoring him, she said, “I will finish cleaning. You will go and bathe before we speak at length, I have the nose of a bloodhound at present.”

Not sure what she meant by that, but also agreeing that he needed to wash, he left the room without argument.

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When he returned, she had made tea and was lounging in one of the armchairs reading a small piece of parchment with charred edges. Abruptly realizing what it must be, he stalked forward and attempted to grab it from her, but she was too quick.

“My my my, someone was feeling a bit sentimental. Sonnets, Draco, really?!”

He nearly growled at her. “Give that to me. Now.”

She smirked at him. “No, thank you.”

“Accio!” He had whipped out his wand in record time, and yet she had been ready.

“Protego,” she said, just before him.

Damn her.

He knew a spell. Knew he could cast it wandlessly and wordlessly, forcing her hand to fall limp… but it was as close to dark magic as could be, if one believed in the spectrum. It was something his Father had taught him. Before he allowed his hand to move, however, he recalled the baby currently residing inside of the witch before him and chose to restrain himself. Even slightly dark magic could harm the child.

Then again, the child wasn’t long for this world… he’d been desperately trying not to think about that part.

“Who is she, Draco?” Astoria asked with a playful bite, leaning more towards the bite than the play, “This lucky witch who has clearly stolen your heart, who ever could she be?”

Draco’s heart rate went through the roof; his mind was doing somersaults.

“Please don’t tell your Father,” was the first thing to erupt from his mouth.
Her eyes shot open wide.

“Why in the world would I do that?” she asked, her tone shifting abruptly to severity and annoyance.

“He’s already given me enough grief about having the spawn of Weasley in my womb, and you believe I’d give him more fuel to light his fire?” she scoffed, “the man already chastises me for whatever it is I’ve done to be seemingly unappealing to you. He blames it on my dress, my personality, or apparent lack thereof, really anything he can think of to- to,” she choked on a sob and raised the back of her hand to her mouth, still clutching the charred parchment. “But of course, I could only ever be married off out of obligation. Clearly! Or so he says,” she added before doubling over and beginning to cry in earnest.

Draco was at a loss for words. He’d had an idea of what type of man her Father was, cut from a similar cloth as Lucius, but he hadn’t heard a first-hand account such as this since they were young. Her father had been extraordinarily cruel to her. He had made her apologize for cutting the roses by forcing her to prick her fingers on each stem she’d cut until they bled, and refused to heal her for a week. She was six years old at the time. His Mother had known nothing about it, as she’d arrived home much later and had been utterly horrified by what Mr. Greengrass had done, and that Lucius had condoned it. Draco’s parents had had quite a row after that. He’d hidden in his room, out of the crossfire.

It all came back to him as he watched her sob. There had been many other similar instances. Physical cruelty had been her father’s bread and butter, second only to emotional manipulation, and Draco could well relate.

He moved to kneel beside her and put a consoling hand on her back. when he spoke, it was in a forceful yet loving tone.


The use of her childhood nickname had a calming effect on her, and she took more elongated breaths as she looked up at him through watery eyes. He placed his other hand on her cheek.

“You are lovely,” he stated firmly.

She scoffed and pushed him away instantly.

“I don’t need your pity, Draco!”

Undeterred, he reached out and brought her face right back to where it had been.

“Your Father, like mine, is a cruel self-serving bastard who uses his children for little more than achieving his own ends. He is not a man. Men do not use their children. Men do not chastise and belittle their children, or force them to harm themselves. And you,” he took both her hands and placed a chaste kiss on them, “are not deserving of any of it.”

She was continuing to whimper, but had mostly calmed her sobs, taking in his soothing words like drink. She nodded her understanding and he leaned in, pulling her into a tight hug.

With his face squished against her neck and shoulder blade he said, “and be honest, you regard me more as a brother than a romantic interest, I know you do.”

She pulled back to look him in the eyes and nodded solemnly.

“So who bloody cares if I don’t fancy you when you don’t fancy me?”
Taking a deep breath, Astoria let it out on a long sigh as she shook her head and looked at Draco with bleary eyes.

“I’m just so tired.”

He nodded slowly and glanced down at her stomach. “I can only imagine.”

Her bitter, biting tone returned. “My Father has been so…. and… New Zealand was… a mistake.”

“What happened in-”

“They knew, Draco, about the… baby’s Father.”

“And?”

“And… they refused the wedding invitation outright, didn’t they?! Not all, but most. Father blames me of course. It’s all I heard about all evening upon my return home from that oppressive journey. I tried to come here but your floo was closed.”

“Er yes, I was…”

“Drinking and smoking yourself into oblivion and burning holes in your clothing from the angst with which you penned dramatic poetry to a mystery witch?”

He dropped his surly demeanor and cracked a smile. Astoria started laughing the way one might when up late at night… and every minor thing suddenly becomes height of hilarity.

“Yes, apparently,” he said, in a second show of chivalry. It wasn’t really that funny, but laughter was preferable to sobbing and tears, so he allowed himself to be the butt of her joke. Besides, it felt better to laugh than to mourn what a sad act he’d been these last three days.

Once her laughter died down, Astoria’s smile shifted to a perplexed scowl.

“Draco, do you love her? This witch?”

“No.”

Her eyebrows rose. “That was a fast answer. I would have bet my galleons on a different reply judging by this,” she said as she held up the parchment. He reached his hand out gently.

“May I see it, please?”

She regarded him skeptically before handing it over. As soon as it was in his hand he jumped up and tossed it into the fireplace without glancing at it.

“Draco!”

“You’ll speak of that to no one, Stori, do you hear me?”

She sat back and regained some of the haughty stature that had been absent for most of her visit.

“So, that’s how it will be? You shall never reveal the best of you, Draco?”

He scoffed, “I hardly think whatever was on that page could be termed the best of me.”

She shook her head and smiled slightly, gazing around the room and let out a short quiet laugh.
“What?”

“Oh nothing,” she said, playing with an imagined thread on the armrest of her chair.

“I won’t let you bait me, Astoria. I won’t grovel. Just be straight with me.”

Turning her gaze quickly back to him she said, “It just, in all the time I’ve known you I’ve watched you protect the very best things about you. Your love of writing and literature and learning. Your ambition to achieve greatness, and not for notoriety or fame, but because you actually give a shit that your life matters. But probably the best thing about you is how you care. You were always there to pick up the pieces when my Father hurt me. You were always there for your Mother as well. I suspect that’s still the case even when she’s trapped in that hell hole.”

At this, Draco had to look away. It hurt too much to think of the things he was NOT there for with regard to his Mother.

“You can disagree with me all you want, Draco, but it looks as though you’re determined to ignore the best of you. I may not be the witch you’re passionate about, but I am going to be your wife whether we like it or not, and I refuse to watch you get away with this. You’ll help me, but you won’t help yourself, it’s ridiculous. This WILL be a two-way street, and I should hope you know enough not to argue with a pregnant woman.”

He scowled at the mention of the pregnancy, suddenly remembering the worst of what his Father had told him on Sunday morning.

The pregnancy would terminate either way.

The only way to dissolve the promise was through… love.

Something he thought himself incapable of. Something that was impossible now he was forbidden to see Hermione. Perhaps, though… there could be another option.

“Stori… is there… is there someone else that you…” he wanted to say love, but couldn’t form the word. Instead he glanced to the fireplace where his parchment had turned fully to ash, “would write poetry for?”

“Oh Gods no, I’m an awful writer, let alone poet!”

“You get my meaning though. You didn’t choose this marriage any more than I did, it seems. So. Is there someone you would rather…”

“No.”

He raised his eyebrows, a sly smile crossing his lips.

“Ah hah,” he said slowly, “fast answer. I see.”

“What? What are you looking at?” she said quickly as he grinned down at her, pushing his hands casually into his pockets.

Having regained his pompous swagger in full, he bounced on the balls of his feet and asked, “Who is he, Stori? Anyone I know?”

“There isn’t anyone!” she shouted, “And even if there was, why would I tell you when you won’t tell me yours?!”
“Hermione Granger,” he said casually, “we ran into one another last week and there was a spark, one thing led to another, leave the rest to your imagination. Now your turn.”

Astoria sat with her jaw as low as it could go.

“But that’s- there’s no way- couldn’t possibly- such coincidence-”

She mumbled all of this almost incoherently to herself in breathy tones. She sat staring off into the corner looking comatose. Draco waved his hand in front of her face.

“Stori… Earth to Astoria… Hello in there…”

After a few more moments of staring she said, “but that’s his wife.”

“Ex-wife actually, they finalized the divorce on Friday.”

“They did!!” she gasped, and Draco was confused to see her light up with a relieved smile.

He grimaced at her, his face threatening to stay stuck that way.

Then through gritted teeth he said, “yes… why is that such happy news to you?”

Astoria’s eyes went wide as her eyebrows shot up, “well because you said you love Hermione Granger of course, that’s what you just told me-”

“I never said I loved her, we’ve been shagging but I never said… hey! Don’t distract from the point, what was that mirthful gaze about? Are you- do you…”

He stopped to study her face. She wore the same expression he’d seen on her the day with the roses. Guilt.

Caught in the act.

It was unmistakable, but it couldn’t be…

“Astoria… was there… is there actually something between you and Weasley??”

She let out a frustrated growl and then yelled, “No!”

“Well then what in the world-”

“But I wanted there to be!” she cried, and then smacked both hands over her mouth and a muffled slew of expletives were violently shouted into her hands.

Draco stood frozen on the spot. He felt as though he were not actually there, but witnessing the scene as a third party, it was just that bizarre. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that Astoria could have anything other than spiteful hatred for Ron Weasley.

Abruptly, Astoria stood and began walking toward the floo. Drawing his wand quickly, Draco closed the floo and re-warded the loft.

“Oh no you don’t, I want the full story and I’m not lifting the wards until I get it. Two way street, right Stori? I am, after all, going to be your husband.” Not that she could see it, but he was flashing the most pompous grin possible.

Astoria was still facing the fire with her back to Draco. She dropped both fists into balls at her sides.
and let out a long, frustrated scream. Once she was done, she slowly turned around and strode back to her seat, sitting demurely with her hands in her lap, clearly grasping for any shred of dignity she possibly could.

She spent about five minutes stalling and trying to talk Draco into letting her go before she resigned herself to the fact that he was not going to budge, and her only choice was to tell him everything.

Calmly, she relayed the entire story of what had happened at the start of the party as if she were reading out of a history of magic textbook, determinedly avoiding taking in any of Draco’s reactions.

“And ever since then, I’ve found myself having… dreams. About him. About us being… being together.”

“Well,” Draco said, folding his right ankle of his left knee and clasping his hands together over his knee, and grinning ear to ear. “Please, spare me no detail.”

“I will not! My dreams are private! That’s where I draw the line.”

Fingering his wand, Draco slyly said, “you know… I’m quite an accomplished legilimens. If I wanted to I could…”

She stood, “Draco Lucius Malfoy you put that wand away this instant!”

It was the use of his middle name that gave him pause, and it only took him a beat to compose himself.

He put the wand away, stood up, and approached her. Gently, he took both of her hands in his.

“I’m sorry, Astoria, I won’t invade your thoughts, I promise. I am not interested in you being fearful of me, Husband or no.”

She let out a low laugh, “As if “no” is an actual option.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Well… as a matter of fact, with this new development of yours, it just might be.”
Hermione sat, once again, at her desk at the Ministry with a vacant expression on her face. It was Thursday morning and nothing much was being accomplished where her work duties were concerned. In fact, she couldn’t remember the last time she had had a truly successful day at work in the last few weeks. The drama of her life had been taking precedence over anything DMLE related, and she could feel multiple deadlines beginning to creep up on her.

Having said that, nothing much was being accomplished where her personal life was concerned either. She had skipped the usual dinner at Harry’s after her meeting with Luna, and had gone home to think instead. All the thinking in the world, however, had not calmed her tumultuous mind.

Draco Malfoy had been in love with her since they were young? It was a claim she could not lay any evidence to. All of her evidence proved the opposite, in fact, and yet Luna had been sure.

Luna Lovegood… a witch famous for being sure of fantasies.

“Nonsense. Utter nonsense,” Hermione tried to tell herself for the millionth time, ignoring the sense of hope that had been bubbling up inside her ever since that conversation. Shaking her head, she began shuffling through the paperwork on her desk, grasping for something concrete to ground her.

The transom above her door opened to admit a flying memo, and Hermione looked up with a grimace.

What now?

She unfolded the paper and her eyes nearly fell out of her skull.

*Astoria Greengrass here to see you, shall I send her back?*


Hermione’s heart started pounding as a mixture of hatred and guilt washed over her.

Suddenly, there was a commotion out in the hall.

“*Ms. Greengrass I must insist that you wait until I receive a response from Ms. Granger!*”

“And what are you? Her personal guard? I won’t be long, and I suspect that if we wait for a reply it shall never come, don’t you know who I am? Now, are you going to physically restrain me or shall I
simply knock on her door and ask her myself if she’ll permit me inside?”

“No need to point your wand at me, madam, I am simply doing my job!”

At this, Hermione walked quickly to the door and wrenched it open. Both women were staring daggers at one another, though Astoria looked far more menacing and in control of herself than her secretary did.

“Artemis! It’s fine, I am available,” Hermione said in a shaky voice, not yet looking at Astoria directly and trying desperately to steady her breathing. The harassed witch tugged her robes down angrily in an effort to straighten them, and with a grunt, turned on her heel and strode back to her desk.

“H- hello Astoria, please come in,” Hermione said, standing back to allow the witch entry. Her mind was spinning.

Was she about to be confronted about her relationship with Draco? Had he told Astoria? Hermione shook with anticipation, feeling as though she might lose what little breakfast she’d eaten.

“Thank you, Hermione,” Astoria said cordially as she floated gracefully into the room and seated herself in the chair across from Hermione’s desk. Hermione shut the door and crossed back to sit in her own chair.

“I’m sure I’m the last person you expected to see, however, I have a few matters to discuss with you and after multiple attempts at drafting owls to you, I determined it would be best if we spoke in person.”

Astoria had been drafting letters to her? Not howlers, then?

“Oh- ah- alright,” she managed feebly, still bracing for impact.

“First and most importantly I would like to apologize.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. For a moment, she was confused, before remembering that this was the woman who had slept with her husband. Her affair with Draco had been so top of mind…

“Regardless of the fact that neither of us remember what happened, I did wake up in a bed next to your husband, resulting in the fact that I am now carrying his child.” She put a hand to her stomach and Hermione looked down at it. A confusing mixture of things surfaced, from anger to jealousy to guilt. She couldn’t quite settle on any one emotion.

“Ex-husband,” Hermione said, with a slight edge of contempt in her voice.

Astoria bowed her head and spoke quietly.

“I did hear that, and I am dreadfully sorry. Truly. Not that I expect your forgiveness.”

She looked up at Hermione and her expression read as genuine. Hermione was quite sure now that Astoria had no idea what Pansy had done. Should she tell her? No, it wasn’t her place. Blaise and Harry had agreed to tell Draco, and really, Draco should tell Astoria; he was, after all, going to… be her husband.

If she was honest with herself, there was nothing much she liked about the woman before her. However, as a victim of circumstance, she really couldn’t blame Astoria for her actions. Being pregnant with a child she did not plan couldn’t be easy…
Hermione swallowed.

“It might surprise you to hear this, Astoria, but… apology accepted.”

Astoria’s eyes brightened, and a smile crossed her face for the first time since arriving there.

“Thank you, Hermione. I confess I did not expect you to say that and I daresay I do not deserve your kindness; however, I am grateful for it.”

Hermione nodded and allowed a small smile.

She felt her body begin to calm. So, this was not going to be some ugly scene, and clearly Astoria could not know about she and Draco or there would likely be yelling.

“It actually… the incident, well… it led to my realizing that Ron and I were never quite happy with one another,” she said, looking wistfully over at her window, “Not for a while, actually, which is difficult to realize after so much time. I… I think that perhaps we were together more because we thought we should be than because we actually wanted to be. What with the whole world watching, it just seemed…”

Hermione trailed off when she realized she was beginning to pour her heart out to a woman she neither knew nor trusted completely. She put a hand over her mouth.

“Oh I’m sorry, you don’t need to hear my whole sad tale, I’m sure you have better things to do than listen to me prattle on about my failed marriage.” Plus, I am shagging your future husband and I’m quite sure you’d have me through the window if you knew.

“Actually, I don’t mind at all,” Astoria said warmly, “the least I could do is be an ear…”

“It’s fine,” Hermione said, with a wave of her hand, “I have plenty of eager ears in my life, but you said you had multiple things to discuss with me?”

Astoria perked up, “Yes! Well that bit was most important, otherwise I couldn’t move on to any of the rest. My other reason for coming today was to invite you to a party. An engagement party for Draco and I. It will be small and casual, no family, just friends. This Saturday at his new flat here in London, I can leave you the address. Will you come?”

Mouth agape, Hermione made a small, strangled noise in lieu of a response.

Would she come? Heavens no! How mortifying, she’d have to watch Draco be together with Astoria all evening. It sounded like torture, but not the kind she had so thoroughly enjoyed only one week ago. Why in the world was Astoria asking her to be there?! Sensing her discomfort, Astoria went on…

“Look, you are far too clever to trifle with, Hermione. If you don’t see through this request already then you soon will. You see, we are attempting to dispel the rumor that my child is, in fact, a Weasley. It mercifully has not been reported, and yet the rumor has spread all the way to New Zealand, it seems. Now, the majority of my family is refusing to attend my wedding.”

Astoria swallowed, and Hermione was surprised to see that her cheeks were becoming flushed. Her words had a steady and practiced air, and yet Hermione could tell that admitting all of this was distinctly uncomfortable. Astoria stared off at the window just as Hermione had done.

“It’s an absolute nightmare, actually,” she said, before snapping her attention back to Hermione, “However, if you were in attendance on Saturday, and perhaps the press got a photo of you there...
well you can see where I’m going, people would hardly believe that you would agree to attend my engagement party if I had indeed slept with and was carrying your former husband’s child.”

Ah. Well that was much clearer. She knew at once that this could only be Astoria’s plan, Draco must know nothing about it, because he would never ask this of her. Would he?

“I realize that I am making a blatant request to use you for your public image, but I pray that my candor in doing so will make up for the reprehensible nature of the request itself. So... will you... will you help us?”

Us? Did that mean…

“Does… er- is your um- does Draco know about this plan?”

“Hey does!” she replied brightly, “In fact, it was his idea. I wouldn’t have thought it possible, knowing your history with him, but he informed me that in addition to befriending Harry Potter, you and he have also put the past behind you and are even friendly.”

Hermione did everything she could to keep her face impassive.

“Oh,” she said, as her heart sank. Was she just a pawn for Draco? A convenient image booster? She caught herself, however, and played along, “well alright then, I suppose I could make an appearance.”

Astoria put a hand to her chest and gave a sincere, “Thank you, Hermione, you have no idea how much this will help us.”

Us. Us. She could go choke on her us. There was no way Hermione would actually be attending, she’d rather kiss a skrewt. Did Draco really think that she would agree to this? Had he lost his mind? And why hadn’t he contacted her himself?

She could feign agreement now, but would have to suddenly contract spattergroit come Saturday.

Astoria stood and took a piece of parchment out of her purse, handing it to Hermione.

“Here is the address, you can floo in. Starts at seven.”

“Alright,” Hermione said, also standing and leading Astoria to the door, holding the slip of paper with an address she already knew. Rather well, in fact. Had shagged all over, in fact.

Before Hermione had opened the door, Astoria turned back to face her.

“I really can’t tell you how much this means to me,” she said, putting a hand on her stomach, “this has all been so stressful with my family in New Zealand, on top of the unplanned pregnancy, and my Father being so… so…”

Hermione was surprised again to see the witch showing emotion, but Astoria had raised her fist to her mouth and seemed to be quelling tears. Hermione’s anger at Draco, which was previously twisting her stomach into a knot, began to loosen and slip away.

“Well, never mind, you don’t need to hear about my problems,” Astoria said as she turned to leave.

Hermione wasn’t sure if it was fueled more by pity for the Astoria’s condition or curiosity about what possible problems a perfect pureblood princess could have, but she found herself saying, “no, what is it?”
Astoria spun back around, hesitating on the verge of speech.

“Only... you offered to be an ear for me...” Hermione explained, already regretting her decision to pry. It felt so awkward to be asking, and she should have just let Astoria leave, but she couldn’t take it back now.

Astoria nodded, and seemed to be willing herself to speak.

“Well, you see... my Father blames me for the fact that... that Draco isn’t over the moon about this wedding. Every time I am with my Father he makes the most dreadful comments. About my appearance, about what I must be doing wrong to be so... repellant to a man. He observed us together last week when we came to get our paperwork and says it was clear to him that Draco is entirely uninterested in the union.”

Oh. Hermione had assumed as much, but she and Draco hadn’t really discussed this. That Astoria’s Father would blame her for it, however, was appalling. What a cruel thing to do to your own daughter.

“That’s why we’re not having family this weekend, I can’t bear to be around him, I am slowly losing my mind. You would think that as my Father he would recognize that for one thing, I am pregnant and in a constant state of hormonal imbalance, but also that I will not benefit from being belittled for things I cannot control, pregnant or no! He’s always been this way, though, I don’t know why I had any hope that with the pregnancy he might be different. Then again he blames me for that too. Basically, I can do no right! Ugh. Do you have a good relationship with your Father, Hermione? Please tell me you do and restore some of my faith in wizard kind.”

Hermione bristled at this.

“I uh- that is- I did once...”

“Oh! I’m sorry, is it a sore subject for you as well?”

Hermione could not help it, her eyes filled with tears at the thought of her Father and how wonderful their relationship had been. She’d been keeping memories of her parents at bay until the previous evening with Luna, and it seemed she had opened a dam.

“Oh you poor thing!” Astoria said, and before she knew it, Hermione was pulled into a tight hug.

Astoria smelled like fancy vanilla soaps you were only supposed to put on display.

Hermione was entirely aware of how bizarre this all was, and yet her need for physical comfort was so high that she could not tear herself away, especially after what she’d just learned. She relaxed into the hug.

Astoria hadn’t wanted Draco any more than he’d wanted her. This was a marriage of convenience and nothing more. The thought was both comforting and devastating all at once. It was unfair. To all involved, really.

She pulled back from Astoria and brushed tears away from her face.

“Sorry, I just... I don’t see either of my parents anymore.”

Astoria stared at her quizzically. “Why ever not?” she asked, before almost immediately shaking herself and pulling both hands up as she said, “sorry, what an impertinent question, you don’t need to answer-”
“I had to modify their memories during the war… to ensure they wouldn’t be captured or killed. They- they don’t remember me now.”

Hermione had said it robotically, without thinking. It just felt so good to admit out loud, there were so few who knew. Admittedly, Astoria Greengrass had been the last person alive who she thought she’d tell, but there it was.

Astoria was holding her hand over her mouth in shock.

“Oh my goodness, that’s… but… but can’t it be reversed?”

Hermione shook her head as fresh tears fell from her eyes.

“I- I’ve tried.”

Astoria gaped at her as Hermione attempted to steady her breathing.

“Hermione, I am so sorry. I had no idea.”

Hermione shrugged. “I haven’t really told anyone. It is what it is.”

“But that was a huge sacrifice! I know it’s painful, but that’s something that people should know about!”

Hermione shook her head and mumbled, “People are already congratulatory enough for my role in the war, they don’t need to know what I’ve done in regard to my parents.”

Astoria stared at her, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

“What is it?” Hermione asked, noticing that Astoria looked vaguely amused about something.

Astoria shook herself and smiled, “Nothing! I was just thinking of something… unrelated.”

Hermione eyed her suspiciously, and Astoria cleared her throat and took a deep breath, looking oddly uncomfortable.

“I’m so sorry Hermione, but I’m afraid I need to get going. I’ll see you Saturday, yes?”

“Oh! Okay, yes.”

“Wonderful, thank you again, Hermione. Truly.”

And with a gentle squeeze of her hand, Astoria turned and left the office, leaving a rather exhausted Hermione in her wake.
The One Where Everyone Gets a Say

Chapter Notes

This one took a long time to come out of me, so it's a bit late but I'm very happy with it!

Hope you enjoy :)

Also, I just started a YouTube channel to talk about HP FanFic, and specifically Dramione! My first video is posted to my tumblr: liliansilverstuff

Hope to see you there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Hermione

It was Friday morning, and Hermione was feeling more conflicted than ever. Still no word from Draco, and she knew he was back in Britain for certain. For one thing, he’d been traveling with Astoria, and she knew full well that Astoria had returned home. For another, she’d opened the Daily Prophet that morning to find photos of Draco and Astoria out and about in London looking quite cozy as they made preparations for their imminent wedding.

One photo showed them arm in arm leaving a shop in Diagon Alley, leaning in close with conspiratorial smiles on their faces. Another showed them stopped on a street corner in a passionate embrace. Hermione winced upon seeing it.

Even though she knew it was a marriage of convenience, and that apparently, Draco was not all that enthusiastic about it, it still made her nauseous to see. She wondered how long she’d be able to stand it if she actually went to the party. She’d been back and forth on the issue more times than she could count.

Still, she’d given her word, and though the photographs made her insides burn with jealousy… she’d felt an affinity for the witch on the arm of her… oh Gods what was he to her?

He was someone. He was something. He was special.

He was impossible to label accurately.

She let out a long sigh, folding up the paper and shoving it neatly into the bin in her office. Who could she turn to for support?

Ginny was away with the Harpies.
Neville was in the midst of end of year exams at Hogwarts.
Harry was inexplicably busy with confidential auror business.
Luna had gone to see her Father before heading back out with Rolf.
She felt quite confused, and quite alone. She wanted to be angry with Draco, but that only made her feel lonelier still.

Shaking herself, she resolved to put her head down and get some work done. Work was her constant companion, always there when she needed it.

And yet… she could not ignore the hollow feeling in her chest as she sifted through paperwork on her desk, the Saturday night even looming in her mind.

The idea of skipping it felt almost as bad as the idea of going.

* * *

Draco

Draco looked over the top of The Prophet as he heard the signature WHOOSH of the floo.

“Stori, how’d it go?”

The witch grinned broadly.

“That was perhaps the most pleasant visit I’ve ever had with my Father. He bought it completely.”

Draco grinned back.

“Wonderful. Where’s Blaise?”

They didn’t need to wonder for long, as the familiar WHOOSH sounded a moment later and into the apartment stepped…

“Bloody hell, Blaise, that polyjuice should have worn off by now.”

Blaise stood there, the perfect double of Draco Malfoy, grinning mischievously. With a shrug, he said, “wasn’t sure we were going to get out of there by the hour mark so I took another swig. Mind if I just use the loo?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Draco raised his wand and performed a nonverbal finite incantatem. His polyjuiced friend bent over in agony as his transformation was reversed by force. Within a few moments, he was back to himself, staring daggers at Draco.

“Fuck, Draco! I was only joking!”

Draco smirked and shrugged back. “I didn’t find it funny, you know the ground rules.”

“No peeking at your naughty bits, yea I got it,” he said, rubbing at various parts of his body to soothe himself from the painful transformation.

“Are you two quite finished? We have much more to discuss and not a lot of time.”

They both nodded.

“Right then,” Astoria said, turning to Draco, “We’re quite certain that your Father’s man put the trace on Blaise, just as we were hoping.”

Draco’s eyes lit up. It was more than he could have hoped for… such a longshot.
“Yea mate, you were right to stay hidden for a few days, presumably his previous trace had worn off and he needed to recast. It was the same bloke I saw when Stori and I were out in Diagon Alley yesterday; he appeared at her family home shortly after we arrived. He had some nonsense excuse for his presence that Greengrass dismissed in favor of interrogating us about our budding romance. Corbyn is his name, I believe. He made another excuse and left before we were done. Probably off to report to Lucius.”

Draco nodded, taking it all in. His Father’s calculated treachery swept through his body, a rush of pain he was still trying to reconcile. It was still difficult to accept this as his current reality.

He turned to Astoria. “And your Father just… believed that I was suddenly besotted with you?”

Astoria gave a sad smile, “people believe what they want to believe. Plus,” she said, looking over to Blaise, “this one laid on it on quite thick.”

“What can I say,” Blaise said with a smirk, “I’m a romantic bloke.”

“Romance I’m all for, Zabini, but could you please keep your tongue out of my throat tomorrow evening?”

“Hey, you wanted it to be convincing!” he said defensively, looking between the two of them.

Draco shook his head. “Just don’t overdo it, mate, you need to be convincing as me, and I’m not much for public displays of affection.”

“Fine I hear you! I’ll keep my tongue to myself,” he said, winking at Astoria.

She scoffed and shook her head, turning to Draco.

“I need to speak with you alone, Draco.”

Draco snapped his attention to Blaise, “I don’t think we need you again today, you can retire to the manor, I’ve had Wumply getting everything ready.”

Blaise gave an ironic bow, “whatever you wish, Sire, I am at your disposal.”

Draco scowled at his friend, something just now occurring to him.

“Hey, where is your witch while we’re doing all of this scheming? Surely she’d notice that you’re not as available by now?”

Blaise shifted his feet uncomfortably. “Let’s just say she got the sudden idea to go and visit her parents in France... for a few weeks.”

The two wizards regarded one another silently for a long moment.

“Thank you, Blaise.”

He nodded before turning to the floo, tossing in some power and shouting, “Malfoy Manor!”

* * *

Astoria
“What’s up, Stori?” Draco asked once Blaise had left.

Astoria took a deep breath, suddenly extremely nervous.

“I just wondered if- maybe… could you tell me how you and Hermione… got started?”

Draco stared at her, puzzled, as she wrung her hands. Oh, this had been a terrible idea, she instantly wanted to take it all back.

“Umm, sure, I can explain it but I’m not sure it will… what’s this about, Stori?” he asked, and then paused, looking pained, “is this about Weasley?”

“Well, yes!” she shouted, “you said there might be more than one course of action we could take to break the promise, and while I realize it’s quite a longshot, I do want to… to try.”

Draco nodded, and seemed to be making a great effort to be supportive.

“Alright… well how can I help?”

Astoria took a deep breath. She’d just have to say all she was thinking, there was no getting around it, Draco was far too shrewd to feign casualty with.

“It’s just that… I’ve behaved so badly. We already have a history of our families hating one another. Then, I had a shouting match with him at that party, followed promptly by blaming him for something that both of us seem to have been innocents in, and finishing it all off with agreeing with my Father that he should have no contact with his own child!”

Draco nodded once in agreement with her summation of events. It made her feel worse, even though she knew it was all true. Some part of her wanted him to say it wasn’t that bad…

“So… how do I come back from that? How do I approach him in any way now? How could he… ever forgive me? That’s what I’m struggling with, and I figured you’d know something about this given… your history… with…”

Draco put up a hand. “I’m well aware of my history with Hermione, Astoria, as is she.”

“Yes so how… how did you overcome it?”

Draco became pensive for a moment, while Astoria waited nervously, hoping he would have something useful for her. She truly did not know how to go about this, and she dearly hated feeling foolish.

“I don’t really know, Stori. To be honest, I still can’t quite believe she spoke at my trial. I can’t account for her change of attitude towards me at all.”

Astoria covered her face with her hands and let out a long groan.

“Stori look at me,” Draco commanded, and she did so, begrudgingly.

“What you’ve done to Ron Weasley is nothing in comparison to what I have done to Hermione Granger. By all accounts she should want me dead, and yet…”

He stared off, deep in thought for a moment before speaking again.
“She’s got a better heart than anyone I’ve met. At first, I thought I was something like her charity case, but… I don’t know… there’s just something between us that I can’t put words to.”

Astoria smiled in spite of herself. He was so clearly in love with the witch. If only she felt the same…

Somehow, Astoria suspected that Hermione did feel the same way. Perhaps they both just needed to admit it. Their pride was likely the only thing in the way.

And then it hit her… she was faced with the same affliction. She merely had to get over her own pride.

“Thank you, Draco. I know what I need to do,” she said, standing.

Draco looked up, surprised at this sudden change in attitude.

“Oh… alright, what is it then?”

She took another deep breath, steeling herself. “I’ll tell you about it after, if I stay here much longer I will talk myself out of it.”

And with that, she turned to the floo, grabbed a handful of powder and shouted, “Ministry of Magic!”

* * *

Pansy

She was shaking as she approached Ron’s office door. They’d been together every night since Sunday, but since then had come to the conclusion that they both needed a friend and confidant more than a love interest. This had become clear on Sunday evening when their snogging session had ended abruptly, both of them finding that their hearts weren’t in it, or perhaps… their hearts were too broken from a sober awareness of their current life circumstances to be truly in it. Without the influence of alcohol or potions, it just hadn’t felt right.

They had agreed instead to be friends. After all, neither had anyone else to turn to who knew the whole truth of their lives.

Today, however, Pansy would end it all.

While she was grateful for his apparent forgiveness, she could not get past the part where she had essentially ruined his life. The fact that he was willing to look past it, when examined in the cold sober light of day, was incredibly sad. As his friend, she simply couldn’t allow him to continue to be so blind.

His door was slightly ajar, but she knocked anyway.

“C’mon in,” he called from the other side, and she pushed the door open.

“Pansy? What are you-”

“I need to speak with you, it won’t take long,” she rushed out.
“Okay... but aren’t we getting together tonight? What’s so urgent that-”

“I don’t think we are, actually.”

Ron’s face went white, mouth agape.

“Pansy, what’s happened?”

She looked down at her feet, shuffling nervously.

“Nothing yet,” then her voice broke as tears began to sting her eyes and a lump formed in her throat.

She looked at him through a watery grimace. “I can’t do this anymore, I need to come clean about what I’ve done.”

He eyed her warily.

“What exactly do you mean?”

“I mean!” she shouted, now becoming rather hysterical, “that I have single handedly ruined your life, and yet you are letting yourself become close with me! You’re apparently wholly unconcerned with the fact that you will soon have a child that you’ll never be able to know, and all because of me! Not to mention the fact that I manipulated you into sleeping with two women you wouldn’t have chosen of your own accord!”

“Pans, that’s-”

“Please let me finish! You deserve so much better than me, Ron. I deserve none of your forgiveness, I’m disgusted with myself that I even let you think you could forgive me. I’m seeing clearly now, and for once in my horrid life I’m going to do the right thing and turn myself in.”

“Turn yourself in? To who?!?”

“Well I thought I’d start with the DMLE considering I’ve tampered with potions and used them on unsuspecting people, all without registering them.”

“Those potions aren’t illegal, Pans, they’ll laugh you right out of the office.”

“You don’t know that! I’ve read up on the laws, there’s at least a penalty for failure to register a new potion prior to use, and I’ll likely have to go before the Wizenegamot. Then there’s the matter of the Greengrass family...”

Ron’s eyes widened.

“Pans... what good will come of this?”

She was crying in earnest now.

“I only hoped that if Astoria... and if her parents... knew... if they knew you’d done nothing wrong then perhaps they’d allow you to be part of your child’s life in... in some way.”

Ron sat back to take this in. He seemed to drop his guard, realizing the truth of what she was saying.

“At the very least I need to try!”

He nodded slowly. “I won’t stop you doing what you need to do, Pansy... but, why should that mean
we can’t be friends?”

“Because you dolt! You should not even be okay with being in the same room with me, let alone being my best mate!”

Ron stood and walked over to her, and she backed away stubbornly.

“Pansy, I’ve spent most of my life not wanting to be in a room with you, trust me I know what I’m doing.”

She choked back a sob. “Then what are you doing?!”

“I’m being fucking forgiving! Not just because you’re the only person I have left who even wants to be in the same room as me, but because... I don’t have energy left to be spiteful and hold grudges. I’m just... I’m done. I’ve been a self-centered prick most of my life, and... and even if I can’t see my kid, I’m going to be a father now. It seems like it’s time to turn over a new leaf.”

“So you start with the girl who ruined your life?”

“You keep saying that Pansy, but... I don’t know if it’s true.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “Your marriage and all of your close relationships ended because of a potion I slipped to you one night, and you impregnated a witch who wants nothing to do with you. How in Merlin’s name is it not true that your life has been ruined?”

“It’s just... it was all a lie. None of it was going the way I wanted it to and I didn’t even realize it, so... in a way... you stopped me from living a lie.”

She was speechless for a while, and they stood staring at one another.

Finally, she began nodding, “alright... I see your point... and that’s why I need to turn myself in. It’s time for me to stop living a lie as well.”

He reached up and held her cheek in his palm, brushing her skin lightly with his thumb. Leaning in, he placed a chaste kiss on her forehead and wrapped his arms around her. Craving the sense of comfort, she responded in kind.

“Alright... but you don’t get to cut me out. You’re stuck with me now, do you hear me?”

She nodded into his shoulder, not wanting to let go. Eventually, she wrenched herself from his grip and walked quickly out of the office towards the lifts without a backward glance.

* * *

Ron

He stood in his office, head spinning, a new sense of worry taking over his stomach and chest.

Would it work? If she told the Greengrasses what she’d done, would that change anything? They wouldn’t want to publicly announce anything, and he knew Pansy wouldn’t be foolish enough to name names with the DMLE, not wanting to cause a public scandal. Perhaps, though... they might allow him visitation of some sort.

Just as he was walking back to his desk he heard something just outside his door.
“Is someone there?” he called, then turned to investigate himself.

He rounded the corner his doorway and immediately caught sight of Astoria, standing stock still with her back against the wall, hands clutched to her chest.

“Astoria?” he said tentatively.

She swallowed. “She slipped us a potion?” she asked, without looking at him.

He felt a butterfly in his stomach at her use of the word “us” and took a deep, steadying breath before speaking. She was more beautiful than he had remembered.

“Y- yea, she uh... was out to sabotage you, it seems... but she’s turning herself in.”

“Yes,” Astoria said, nodding, “I heard everything. I- I’m sorry for eavesdropping, but the door was ajar and when I arrived-”

“It’s alright. Should have closed the door if I wanted privacy, right?”

She still hadn’t looked at him, and he wondered if she was simply too ashamed to do so.

“Um... would you like to come in?”

At this, she turned her head to look at him, the rest of her body rigid, unmoving.

When their eyes met, he was immediately transported back to the last time they had stood face to face in this very spot. The intensity with which she had fused her lips to his and pushed him over the threshold of the office. It seemed that she was also reliving the moment, as her eyes dropped down to his lips, lingering there a few beats too long.

His heart rate increased, breath catching in his throat. Could she... possibly?

“I- um- yes, I would,” she managed to say, but still didn’t move.

He was unsure of what motivated his next action exactly. Perhaps it was the fact that he knew full well what it felt like to be paralyzed with fear... or perhaps the fact that this was the woman carrying his child, but he reached out and gently took her hand, leading her forward into his office. This time, he shut the door and cast privacy charms, determined that they shouldn’t be overheard or interrupted.

“Please sit,” he said, motioning to the sofa on the far side of the office. She did so silently, placing a hand on her stomach as she did so.

He stood in front of his desk, leaning back into it.

“How are you-”

“Oh Ron I’m so sorry!”

They’d spoken at the same time, and then both stopped to stare at the other.

“Oh...” he said. She bit her lower lip, seemingly trying to get up the nerve to continue speaking.

“I... I came here to apologize for my behavior. A- all of my behavior,” she said, glancing towards the doorway.

“Oh,” he repeated, raising his eyebrows. A few more butterflies joined the first as he realized which behavior she was primarily referring to.
“It is incredibly unfair for you to be treated like some criminal by my family when... when I was the one who...”

“Astoria-”

“No please let me say this,” she said, holding up a hand.

Merlin, would none of these witches allow him a small interruption?!

“I insulted you. I came on to you. You said no, you stopped me. I insulted you some more. I later accused you of being responsible for everything, without any proof. I allowed my Father to think you a brute, to forbid you contact with your... our child,” she said, looking utterly despondent. “My behavior has been abhorrent.”

He pushed off from the desk and began slowly walking towards her, hands in his pockets.

“That may all be true, Astoria, but there’s something you don’t know about Pansy’s potions.”

She gazed up at him, a look of hopeful curiosity on her face. Merlin, she really was gorgeous, her perfect porcelain skin seemed to glow. He licked his lips, remembering the excruciatingly brief taste of her he’d gotten that night before wrenching himself away. She stole a brief glance at his lips and bit down on her own.

“She used an extremely diluted version of amormentia on us. One that only works if both parties are attracted to one another.”

He maintained steady eye contact with her after he said this as a hopeful fire erupted in his chest.

“And if I recall correctly, I flung a fair amount of insults your way as well,” he said with a small smile.

Ron recalled feeling more adept at verbal sparring with her than ever before. Something about the lifelong rivalry between families... the fact that she was a pureblood and had been a fascination to him his entire life... it was a source of passion he hadn’t felt before. Forbidden fruit usually was.

She took a breath, her lips parted, and stayed that way looking stunned.

“Oh,” she said, continuing to stare up at him.

He’d never been terribly romantic.

He’d never been one to take charge.

He’d said it was time to turn over a new leaf.

Walking forward, he extended his hand to her and she took it, allowing him to pull her up to standing. Their fingers interlaced automatically, and Ron was startled by how natural this felt. He allowed his eyes to drift all over her face, pausing momentarily on her lips before flitting back up to her eyes as a question occurred to him.

“Are you- you and Malfoy, is that- real?”

She shook her head almost imperceptibly.

“Our parent’s doing,” she said, and her voice was almost a whisper.
“Oh,” he said, raising his eyebrows.

“Yes,” she said, looking back down at his lips.

“Would- would it be alright if I kissed you?”

She let out a small gasp and nodded her head. As their lips met, they both groaned desperately, and what began as soft and tentative turned quickly into a feast of passion. They hungrily, but deftly, devoured one another, hands moving everywhere and anywhere as they collapsed onto the sofa.

He broke their kiss and moved down to her neck. Gasping for breath, she bit down on his earlobe and he moaned, making the skin on her neck erupt with chills.

“I have been dreaming of this,” she said into his ear in a breathy whisper.

“Oh?” he said, returning back to her mouth and gazing into her eyes, “and what happens next in the dream?”

A devilish grin spread across her face.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Weasley?”

* * *

**Lucius**

His copy of the Prophet lay open on the coffee table as he received the report from Corbyn. It seemed his Son had finally given in.

“And they're holding an engagement party tomorrow evening, Sir!”

“You have the trace on Draco in the meantime, though?”

“Yes Sir, recast it in Diagon Alley and it's been working perfectly.”

Lucius nodded. “And what of the muggle born?”

“No contact between them all week, Sir! Tracking all of her owls like you asked.”

“Excellent. It seems everything is going to plan.”

“Yes that’s right, Sir!”

The wizards stared at one another for a few moments.

“Are you waiting for an invitation to leave, Corbyn?”

“Right, Sir, ill just be...”

And he back awkwardly to the door, tripping and falling over the ornate living room rug as he went. Lucius pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head as the door clicked shut.
It was 7:30 on Saturday evening.

The party had begun at 7.

People would probably be trickling in by now.

Should she go now, on the early side, and leave soon after? Or would it be better to arrive even later and blend in?

She had been thinking about this all day and thought she might drive herself insane if she thought on it much longer.

“Fine! I’m going!” she announced to the room at large, and stepped to the floo, grabbing powder and shouting Draco’s address before she could second guess herself.

When she stepped out of his floo, she was met with an empty living room, lit only by candlelight. Soft music was playing from an unknown location, and there was a bottle of champagne chilling on the coffee table beside two crystal flutes, which were dancing with candlelight.

Merlin, did she have the wrong night?! Was she about to walk in on a romantic evening between Draco and Astoria?

Her heart was racing as she turned back to the floo.

“Where are you going?” a drawling voice called.

She spun around, and there stood Draco.

Her eyes feasted on him. It had been so long...

He looked impeccable in black trousers and a white button down, the top buttons mostly undone. She’d chosen a red wrap dress, modest enough but still showing off her curves.

He smiled adoringly at her as she sputtered to make a response. Walking towards her, he picked up a copy of Friday’s Prophet from the side table and held it up.

“Blaise makes a convincing Malfoy, don’t you think?”

Hermione blinked down at the paper, comprehension quickly dawning on her.

“But then...” she said, staring down at the paper as Draco tossed it aside. He reached out and gently took her chin in his hand and lifted it so he could look into her eyes.

“I am so sorry it’s been almost a week since you’ve seen or heard from me. Have you been terribly cross?”

She took in a quick gasping breath, hearing his words.

* * *

Hermione
“I... no...”

He cupped her cheek in his hand. “Well, then you should have been.”

She placed her hand against his and shut her eyes. Then she interlaced their fingers, taking a deep breath.

“Draco, is the party-”

“It’s at the Manor. And we won’t be attending.”

He searched her eyes and took her other hand in his, bringing it up to his mouth and kissing each finger in turn.

“But why-” she began, before he put a finger over her mouth.

“I will explain all that I can, but... can you wait?”

She looked at him, perplexed at first by his wording. All that he could?

But then she remembered their rule about thinking in this flat and nodded slowly instead. He smiled in reply placing both hands on her cheeks and drawing her mouth closer to his.

“I missed you so much, Hermione,” he breathed into her mouth, and she was struck by the level of sincerity, almost desperation, in his voice. Her breath caught in her chest and her stomach twisted as she realized how much she had missed him. Not just his physical touch... but him. His solid presence. His delicate care. His biting wit.

“I missed you too, Draco,” she whispered back, with a slight quaver to her voice, before sinking into their first kiss of the evening.

Chapter End Notes

Looking forward to your comments on this one ;) Love to all of you!!!
Oh What a Night

Chapter Notes

Shoutouts to Maiu, Marymayhem92, and lunalunemoon who are our most recent binge-readers and have left lovely comments that warmed my heart!!! Thank you!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Draco had forgotten the sinful sensation of her lips against his. She was intoxicating and it had been so long since he’d had a drink.

A drink. He remembered the bottle on the table. He’d told himself he’d take this evening slowly. Start there, not rush into the bedroom.

He hated that they had always been in such a hurry to get their clothes off; they’d been so mostly in order to avoid thinking about the future, but this night needed to be different. Blaise couldn’t remain a convincing polyjuiced version of him forever… though he dearly wished that that wasn’t the case.

He reached down and took her hand in his, leading her over to the couch.

“Champagne?”

“Um… yes please.”

There was still a slight quaver to her voice, and he began to worry that slowing down would also mean thinking… and talking…

Quickly popping the cork on the bottle and pouring them each a glass, he handed one to her and held his up. They locked eyes as their glasses clinked together, neither mentioning anything in particular to “cheers” to, and yet there was an unspoken, tortured, “to us” implied in the way they drank each other in.

She pulled her lips away after taking a sip and her brow furrowed for a moment before a small smile crossed her face.

“So,” she said, turning to him, “am I to understand that there is currently a polyjuiced Blaise Zabini in the form of Draco Malfoy, hosting an engagement party at Malfoy Manor?”

Draco nodded and smirked.

“And don’t you… well, isn’t that some sort of recipe for disaster?”

Draco shrugged nonchalantly. “Seems to be the predominant state of my life as a whole lately, I figured it was a risk worth taking,” he said, and then reached over to graze her cheek with his hand before adding, “to get to be alone with you again.”

She shuddered and closed her eyes, leaning into his touch. He bent down and placed his lips against hers. With very little encouragement, she invited him in and their tongues reveled in the shared taste of champagne and desire.
Slowly… slowly… he tried to remind himself, but it had been so long since he’d been with her and he’d thought of her longingly every night, and most of his days. Fairly constantly, now that he thought of it.

Suddenly she pulled out of the kiss, which he was grateful for because he was about to abandon all thought of taking it slow.

“Draco I… I don’t know if I can wait. Why was seeing me such a risk to take? I mean, I know the obvious reasons, but it seems like there’s something different at play?”

She studied his face perplexedly as he nodded and took a deep breath, meaning to choose his words carefully. He’d been able to tell Blaise as much as he’d needed to know, and then asked his friend to drop the issue, since he couldn’t share the truth about Lucius. It was a mark of the solidity of their friendship that Blaise had not argued much, seeming to divine much more than he even let on about the situation.

“I really didn’t want to talk about this first, it may be a bit of a mood killer.”

She let out a low laugh. “Draco, I’ve been able to put aside my obsessive thinking many times now, but after a week of nonstop worry, I don’t think it can reasonably be expected for me to let it go now.”

Draco grimaced. “I’m sorry I’ve caused you worry, it’s the last thing-”

“Well then perhaps you can tell me what’s going on?” she said, a gentle interruption. He was grateful that she wasn’t cross with him, though a bit confused as to why and how that could be the case. There was something different in her eyes when she looked at him, but he couldn’t quite place what it was.

“Astoria’s Father,” he lied, “has been having me followed.”

“What?!”

“Yes, apparently, he still has his misgivings about me, and wanted to check whether what he was reading in the papers matched up true to life.”

“So what did he-”

“He saw us,” he said, taking her hand, “or rather, his man did, when we were at the street fair.”

Her eyes went wide and she drew breath in quickly.

This wasn’t a lie so much as a twisting of truths. One pureblood Father swapped for another… what difference did it truly make?

“And… what did he see exactly?”

“He knows about you and I, Hermione. His man saw us snogging and knew that we aparated back to my flat. They’ve been tracking me.”

“But then, how are you here now without-” she stopped short, a look of comprehension on her face, “oh but of course! You sent Blaise out as you so that they’d start following his trail. That makes sense, since you were in New Zealand for a few days and they surely didn’t need to be tracking you there.”
Draco shifted nervously. He hated lying to her, even when he knew it was for her own good. She was such a brilliant witch, and it seemed undignified to hear any incorrect information coming out of her mouth… especially knowing that he’d put it there. Inwardly cursing his Father, he anxiously awaited her next question.

“Has he- are we forbidden to see each other?”

Draco exhaled and clasped his hands together. “Essentially, yes, but really only for the benefit of outward appearances leading up to the wedding.”

He watched her face as she processed all of this new information, and could almost hear her brain whirring. His fascination with her mind had deep roots, and he realized with a jolt that her ability to piece things together and come to fast conclusions was one of the sexiest things about the witch before him. At least… it was to him. Perhaps his Mother had been right about his feelings beginning long before he’d even realized.

“So… does, um… does Astoria know?”

Draco looked up, snapped out of his thoughts, and nodded.

“I see... so, when she came to see me…”

“Merely a ruse to get you here, though she wouldn’t tell me the entire contents of what you spoke about.”

Hermione looked up at him, surprised.

“Ah, yes… we did talk,” she said, and even in the low candlelight he thought he saw her cheeks flush.

So, she’s alright with… this?” she asked, gesturing between them, and he smirked.

“Stori and I have known each other all our lives. I’m like a brother to her. As such, she’s both not romantically interested in me, and wishes dearly for my happiness. Sort of like you and Potter.”

Hermione nodded, eyes wide, clearly trying to take it all in.

Draco felt a pang of guilt when he thought of all the other things she didn’t yet know. Astoria and Weasley, for one thing. He certainly wouldn’t be bringing that up tonight, but he wondered what her reaction would be.

And then there was the matter of the baby… he’d shared that horrific detail with no one. He’d utilized his occlumency expertly, packing that away somewhere deep. It would be his burden to bear, and his outcome to change. He didn’t think Astoria’s heart could handle knowing that her Father intended his first Grandchild to die before even being born. No, his own heart had been broken enough for the both of them where their Fathers were concerned.

Still, he resolved himself that he would find some way to break the promise so that the entire contract would be null and void. His Mother had told him the one way out, and he would find some way of making it a reality… in just two week’s time.

“Draco…”

Her voice broke his train of thought again, and he looked up questioningly.

“What will we do? I mean, you’ll be married soon. Surely you won’t be sending in Blaise to take
your vows…”

Draco smiled, “You know, that’s not a bad idea.”

“Draco you can’t-”

“I know, I know, magical marriage ceremonies are sacred and eternal and would never allow that level of deception – it may shock you to know that I’ve quite kept up with your level of reading, Hermione.”

This made her grin, and he felt warmth spread through his chest at the sight of it; he loved making her smile.

“Not shocked at all, actually, I think I’m just as attracted to your mind as… the rest of you,” she said, her eyes trailing down his body, making him suddenly ache with desire. He let his eyes wander over the edges of her red dress where fabric met skin.

He hoped that they were almost done with this conversation, he didn’t know how much longer he could stand it.

Take it slow, indeed. What an idea.

In an effort to end the line of questioning, he said, “Hermione, I don’t know exactly what we’ll do, but I… I AM working on a way out of this.”

She pulled back, alarmed. “Surely not the loopholes, they don’t work under deceptive circumstances, and the consequences-”

He put a finger to her lips and shook his head, a small smile playing at his lips.

“It’s something else, something… new.”

He drank in her features as he said this. Could he be in love with her? Properly in love? He still wasn’t sure. They’d rushed into things so quickly, never stopping to talk for long, everything being physical. There was desire, longing, obsession, lust…

Where did love come from, anyway?

She stared at him confusedly. “And… can you tell me what the something new is?”

He shook his head. “Unfortunately, I don’t think it will work if I tell you. Sort of… sort of like if I told you I was going to throw you a surprise party.”

She laughed. “Well I wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise, but Draco-”

“Do you trust me?” he asked, and as the words left his mouth, his chest flooded with anxiety.

He hadn’t meant to ask it. He hadn’t known what made him ask it. Holding his breath, he awaited her reply.

“Yes… I- I do,” she breathed, looking intensely into his eyes.

Unable to help himself, he exhaled deeply and brought his forehead to hers in gratitude.

“Thank you, Hermione,” he whispered, “I promise to share with you all that I can, when I can.”
She nodded against his forehead.

They stood there, pressed together for quite some time as he let her words wash over him again and again.

Finally, he heard her whisper, “Alright, I’m ready to stop thinking again.”

Without hesitation, he bent his head and captured her lips in a deep, grateful kiss. He tried to put many unsaid things into it, a swirl of different emotions coursing through his body. His fingers were caught up in her hair, and the sensation of being pressed against her served to slow his own whirring mind.

The care he felt for her and the want he felt for her seemed to swirl together into a singular feeling. He felt suddenly impatient to be joined with her physically. To be melded together. To have her completely.

Clearly she felt similarly, because the remaining buttons of his shirt were coming undone with great haste. He loved it when she took charge. Her bossiness, so unwelcome when they were at school, was something he rather enjoyed in the bedroom.

He looked down and saw that her dress came together in a small bow at her hip, and he reached down to untie it. “It’s like you’re a present,” he growled as he untwisted the fabric. She began biting and kissing at his neck, and murmured, “well Happy Birthday, I suppose.”

Ripping the dress open and leaning back to take her in, he said, “my birthday was two days before you appeared on my vineyard, so I suppose you were a bit belated.”

She let out a giggle, and he smiled unabashedly. “It’s not like me to be late, I apologize,” she said with a grin as she wrapped her arms around his neck and brought her lips to his once again. He reached down and grabbed her up by the arse, and she let out a squeal.

Kissing her desperately, he carried her off to the bedroom.

~          ~          ~

“Alright, this time I get to be the professor and you have not completed your essay, Mr. Malfoy, for the fourth time this year,” she said, pushing a finger into his chest and bringing her mouth close to his, “I’m beginning to think you enjoy being punished by me.”

He became momentarily entranced before shaking himself.

“Wait you can’t just start right in the middle! We need to go back and build up to that point or it’s not believable.”

She reached down and grabbed him, which was when he realized how hard he already was.

“I think I have someone convinced,” she said with an evil smirk, as she leaned in and took his lower lip between her teeth, making him growl with approval.

“Very well, Professor, you’ve found me out. I’ve just been trying to find excuses to be in detention with you.”

“Ah,” she said, striding away from him so that he could take in her fully naked form, “and what
clever design is this, Draco? What are your plans for me when we’re alone later this evening?”

He closed the space between them and shoved both hands into her hair, cupping the back of her head and drawing her lips to his.

“Only to receive an Outstanding on every test you provide me.”

She pulled back slightly. “Outstanding is an O.W.L or N.E.W.T grade, Draco, you can’t get it on a homework assignment.”

“Oh will you kindly shut the fuck up, Granger?” he said menacingly before pushing her back onto the bed and pressing his hard length into her.

She gasped and pulled him down on top of her, biting his lip again.

“Professor, Granger… Malfoy.”

He let out his deepest growl yet at the use of his surname, and proceeded to plow into her with reckless abandon.

~ ~ ~

They lay at the foot of his bed, each propped up on a single elbow, facing one another. He was playing with a loose thread on his white button down, which she was now wearing with the buttons undone.

“You know, I could cast a warming charm if you’re cold.”

She smirked. “Oh really? How fascinating. Are you a wizard or something?”

He reached for a pillow and hit her playfully over the head with it, making her laugh and shriek “Hey! Give me that!”

She grabbed the pillow from him and wrapped her arms around it, gazing up at him with a smile.

“You just want me lying around naked at all times, don’t you?”

“Well, can you blame me?” he said, slipping a hand underneath the shirt to graze her exposed breast.

She smacked his hand, and he reached back to grab another pillow.

It was an all-out war, both of them standing on the bed smacking each other ruthlessly, pillow feathers flying about the room.

Their shared laughter could be heard through every corner of the flat.

~ ~ ~

“I suppose… I was closer with my Father, but I wouldn’t really compare them. We just had different things in common than I had with my Mother. Our love of books, for one…”

Draco smiled at the way her eyes lit up at the mention of books… and her Father. They were sitting
on the floor, backs up against the bed, and she’d just revealed to him that she’d had to permanently modify her parent’s memories. She’d cried. He’d held her. It was such a different sort of pain than what he was dealing with concerning his own Father, yet still palpable… incredibly acute.

“Do you… miss your Father?”

“No,” he answered a bit too quickly, and she raised her eyebrows.

“I’d rather not discuss him, Granger,” he said, with a finality that seemed to strike her in the face. He hated to see the look on her face, but they were treading on dangerous territory.

Her expression then shifted to one of curious concern.

“Is there anyone you talk to about him?”

“Well… only because I imagine it’s a difficult topic to contend with in your head alone. That, and… I recently realized how much talking about it can help. That just because I can keep it all in and be strong doesn’t… doesn’t mean I should, you know?”

He shrugged, determinedly avoiding looking into her eyes, as he began to feel the pain he’d been suppressing for the last week rise to the surface. A lump formed in his throat, and he had the urge to reach for his occlumency, but found he didn’t want to just then. Didn’t want to protect himself from her.

She came to kneel in front of him, still wearing his white shirt, the buttons done up but a bit disheveled. He stared at the buttons, unable to look her in the eye.

“Draco,” she said, taking both of his hands in hers, “Draco, what is it?”

He kept his head hanging down but didn’t pull his hands away. He needed this, even wanted it, but still found it difficult to allow. A single tear dropped from his eye, and the sound of it hitting the floor seemed to reverberate around the room, echoing off the marble walls. He sniffed once and cleared his throat, letting out a shuddering breath before speaking.

“He’s completely abandoned me, Hermione, I- I’m no more to him than a servant… a- a cog in his machine.”

He couldn’t see what her reaction to this was, but she squeezed his hands tightly and he felt an enormous weight lift off his chest at having said it aloud. Suddenly, he wanted to say more.

“I’m not his son… I haven’t been for a long time… in fact I wonder if I ever was,” he said, and closed his eyes tightly trying to fend off the hot tears that were now coming as surely as thunder after lightning.

At this, she lunged forward, straddling him and wrapping her arms around his torso. He buried his head in her neck and gripped her tightly, letting out a choked sob, and she reached up to stroke his hair, placing small comforting kisses on his shoulder. She asked no questions, required no further clarifications or explanations, and he was so incredibly grateful for it. For her.

They’d stayed that way for a very long while, far beyond the point where his tears had ceased. Eventually they’d both fallen asleep, tangled up in one another’s arms, dried tear marks staining both of their faces.
“Master Blaise!”

Blaise looked down to find Wumply staring up at him, whispering in a panic.

“You must call me Draco, Wumply, how many times do I have to-”

“Master Lucius is here! He waits for you in the drawing room!”

Blaise stiffened and he looked around. Astoria was on the other side of the room, holding court with a number of her old classmates as Rita Skeeter listened in, and no one was within earshot of him. At least the elf had had enough sense to see him out when he was mostly alone.

“Thank you, Wumply, and remember-”

“Yes, apologies… Master Draco!” the elf said with a small salute, before dashing off to the other side of the room. Blaise checked the clock; his last swig of polyjuice had been about 20 minutes ago. He reached into his robes and took a tiny swig anyway, just to be sure. With a shudder from the potion’s effects, he ventured out towards the drawing room, heart pounding in his chest. Would Lucius see right through him? Surely he would recognize an impostor… unless he was truly that disconnected from his own son. Sad as it was, Blaise wished the latter to be true.

When he pushed open the door, he saw the back of the familiar white-blond head he had not seen for many years.

“Father,” he intoned, in his best impression of Draco, “I did not expect to see you here.”

Lucius spun around, a small smirk playing at his lips.

“Well, after the high praise you garnered from Mr. Greengrass I simply had to come and see the truth for myself.”

Blaise crinkled his eyebrows. “But how did you-”

“Oh come now, Draco, I thought you’d have assumed that the Manor would be one of the only places I could floo to safely from my lodgings in the North Sea without worry of being spotted. Had you been keeping this place in use, I would indeed be here far more often.”

When Blaise continued to scowl, Lucius went on, “Is something troubling you, Draco? Not still cross with me for forcing you to end things with the muggleborn? I must say, you seemed quite at your leisure with Ms. Greengrass this evening… unless it was all indeed an act?”

Realizing that he must be missing something, but still committed to playing his part, Blaise shook himself and said, “It was Astoria all along, Father. I was… merely distracted. I’ve loved Astoria since we were children and she has loved me.”

Lucius eyed him suspiciously, and Blaise worried that he’d laid it on a bit too thick. When Lucius smirked again, Blaise breathed an imperceptible sigh of relief.
“Well, I’m quite glad you’ve seen sense, son.”

Blaise swallowed. “Is that all, then? I- should probably be getting back to my fiancé and our guests…”

“Of course… I merely sought to let you know that there will be no need for you to visit me in Azkaban tomorrow, or next weekend, in fact.”

Blaise was thoroughly confused now. How was Lucius here if he was a prisoner? Had he mentioned having lodgings? Quite a lofty name for a cell. How had he floo’d there just for a drop in?

“Oh?” Blaise said, without much affect.

“Yes, you see, I thought it pertinent to keep you as far away from your Mother as possible, lest you begin to get any… ideas.”

Blaise merely stared, unsure what Lucius was even saying. It appeared that Draco kept quite a lot to himself regarding the situation with his Father.

“Very well,” he said, “Is that all then?”

Lucius had maintained a fair distance, but now began striding towards him, closing it quickly. Blaise did all he could not to back away, quite sure that Draco would also stand his ground. Once Lucius was quite close, he spoke.

“Just a final reminder that if you do anything to disrupt the sealing of this marriage promise, your Mother will be the one to answer for your poor choices.”

Blaise fought not to show any ounce of surprise or disgust, though he thought that he’d probably betrayed at least a small amount. Thankfully, Lucius had looked away from him, scanning the room.

“I will meet you again here next Sunday to check in on your progress as well.”

Blaise nodded. “Goodbye then, Father,” he said, turning on his heel.

“Oh and Draco,” Lucius called, causing Blaise to spin around cautiously, wondering if he’d been caught.

“Do give my regards to your fiancé, she is quite lovelier than I even remembered. I hope the two of you will be able to provide a true Malfoy heir once the current abomination is dealt with.”

Blaise felt his stomach drop, but stayed stony-faced as possible as he made a small bow of acknowledgement and swept out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

Come check out my YouTube channel where I’m talking all things Dramione :) it's linked on my tumblr: liliansilverstuff
Fear and Firewhisky

Chapter Notes

Been finding it tougher to write two chapters a week lately, so I may just be posting Tuesdays from now on. I'm in London this week (!) and have lots of time for inspired writing :) so we'll see! Perhaps I can finish a bunch and have them queued for posting, but otherwise I'll need to go down to once a week because the story is just needing to come out of me much slower now that we're in the third act...

Thank you for all of your wonderful comments, I can't wait to hear them on this one!

* * *

Hermione

“Draco, are you here? I need to speak with you!”

Hermione heard the words before she could comprehend the meaning. She opened her eyes, feeling an acute dehydration headache from a mixture of champagne and tears. Her overall body sensation, however, was that of contentment, which was why the hurried voice from the other room seemed so out of place. She hadn’t felt startled by it in the least, just confused.

“Draco?” the voice called again, and she knew that she recognized it, but her brain was not functioning well enough to pair it with a face or name.

Beside her, Draco began to stir. They were tangled up together in his sheets, and she remembered now that they’d fallen asleep wrapped in each other’s arms on the floor, and had later moved up to the bed in a sluggish haze.

Her companion came to, seeming to take in his surroundings and reach some of the same happy conclusions she had been allowing to dance through her own mind. The night had been… incredible. Her heart swelled as she watched him, sure that he was taking stock of the events of the evening too.

“You had better be bloody decent, mate, I’m coming in!”

They turned to face one another, wide eyed.

“Blaise,” they said in panicked unison, as the door to the bedroom was wrenched open and they pulled up the bed sheets to cover themselves fully.

“Well good morning to the happy couple, I trust you slept well?”

“Blaise what the fuck?!” Draco shouted.

Blaise folded his arms, smiling ear to ear. Hermione tugged the sheets more tightly around herself. Evidently, she’d slipped out of the button down at some point, and so was completely nude under the covers.
“Oh right… no “thanks for impersonating me Blaise, cheers for putting yourself through all of that for our benefit, Blaise.” Just shouting?!?”


Blaise pursed his lips and unfolded his arms, backing up slowly. “Don’t be long, yeah? I’ve already been waiting all night.”

With that, he turned and strode out of the room, snapping the door shut behind him.

Draco rose from the bed with a huff and began getting dressed. Hermione eyed him warily, wondering what this could all be about. Perhaps something had gone wrong with the polyjuice?

She made to get out of bed just as he looked over at her.

“Uh… Hermione, I need to speak with Blaise alone, but I’m not quite ready for you to leave yet, so would you mind…”

“Staying in here?” he asked, eyebrows raised, “I - er… yes alright.” Truthfully, her heart had sunk like that of a child being told to go to bed when the party was still going. She wanted to know what had happened, but didn’t want to be too much of a pain. Blaise and Draco were both clearly agitated, and she had no idea what had gone into the planning of the previous evening.

“Wumply,” Draco said calmly, and the elf appeared with a CRACK.

“Yes Master Draco?”

“Thank you for coming so quickly, now how fast could you have a breakfast tray here for Ms. Granger?”

Wumply saluted, and said, “In just a few moments, sir!” He then disappeared with another loud CRACK.

Draco turned to her with a half-smile. “I will try not to be long,” he said as he strode towards her and bent down to give her a kiss on her forehead. Before he could move away fully, she reached up and grabbed his shirt in both hands, pulling him down so that their mouths were almost touching. They stared into each other’s eyes, searching. Then their eyes crinkled into smiles simultaneously as they shared a soft, slow, sweet kiss. He let out a small, satisfied moan as they separated and he stood to make his way out the door.

“I promise I will not be long,” he said with a smirk as he back up towards the door, not daring to take his eyes off her. She grinned sheepishly and felt a delightful blush creeping up her neck.

She felt adored. She truly could not quite remember being regarded this way before.

Viktor had been more aggressively fascinated with her. With Ron, it had been more like dumbfounded and surprised that she had even returned his feelings.

With Draco, it felt like discovering treasure on an adventure they’d mutually embarked upon as partners.

She smiled to herself as that phrase brought to mind Luna and Rolf… two adventurers out in the world looking to bring back news of hitherto undocumented creatures.

After a short while, Wumply reappeared with a CRACK and a breakfast tray filled with options.
“Wumply was not sure what miss liked and so he brought a bit of everything! Tea, coffee, scones, eggs and bacon-”

“This is incredible, Wumply, thank you so very much, you can set it at the foot of the bed.”

The elf did so obediently, and then turned to leave.

Remembering that he had been at the party, Hermione seized her chance at gleaning some information.

“Oh Wumply, one more thing?”

The elf spun on the spot and stood at attention and she had to stifle a laugh. She knew this elf was being paid and cared for, so his manners seemed more amusing to her than they might otherwise have.

“Did anything… unusual happen at the party at last night?”

Wumply’s eyes went wide.

“Unusual, Miss?” he said, tentatively.

“Er- yes… did someone perhaps discover a secret or…” she racked her brain for ways to ask this, but came up rather short on clever ideas, “perhaps there was a disagreement or disturbance of some sort?”

“No miss, Wumply did not see anything of the kind!”

“Ah,” she said, a bit disappointed, “right. Well. Thank you any-”

“Although Wumply was not expecting to see Master Lucius at the party, and nor was Master Draco expecting him to be there, Miss,” the elf said thoughtfully.

Hermione stared blankly. Had she heard correctly? Surely she had, but how?

“Master Lucius?”

Wumply’s eyes went wide again. “Oh but Wumply was not supposed to say!”

Hermione reacted instinctively, grabbing her wand and pointing it at the elf just as he ran at the wall, clearly about to slam himself into it head-first. Her wand hadn’t cast its spell before the elf was thrown back, an invisible force field having erupted in front of him to cushion the would-be blow. She looked down at her wand confusedly as the elf made a second attempt to ram his head into the wall and was again denied the ability to do so. This time, the recoil had made him fall to the ground.

She was on the ground next to him in a moment, restraining him so that he couldn’t make a third pass at it.

“Wumply, please stop!”

The elf struggled to free himself from her grasp. “Wumply must punish himself Miss, but Master Draco has made it impossible!”

Hermione gasped and her grip loosened enough for the elf to break free and make another attempt at the wall, which was again thwarted by some protective spell.
“Draco made it so that you can’t harm yourself?” she asked, breathlessly.

“Yes Miss! He is saying we is not going to hurt ourselves Miss because we doesn’t deserve it. We is allowed to make mistakes, Miss, but Wumply is still wanting to punish himself! It is in his nature, Miss.”

Hermione couldn’t decide what to focus on: the fact that Lucius Malfoy was apparently able to travel outside of prison at will, or that Draco had invented a spell to keep his house elves from hurting themselves. The latter was less shocking, but still a surprise to hear about. She had always wanted to do some work around that particular issue, but had never gotten around to it. She’d been much more focused on getting her larger legislation for elf rights passed.

After a fourth attempt, Wumply seemed to have exhausted himself, now laying back on the floor in defeat. Not wanting to cause another episode, Hermione bit back her desire to ask clarifying questions about Lucius.

“Well I apologize, Wumply. I have no further questions and you can be on your way if you’d like.”

The elf sighed deeply and squeaked, “thanks Miss,” before disapparating with a CRACK.

Hermione’s mind reeled. How could Lucius have been there? Surely this was what Blaise had come to speak to Draco about. Desperate to hear their conversation, but completely unwilling to be so deceptive as to listen at the door, she busied herself with the breakfast tray, taking random bites of everything available.

Drinking black coffee and feeling the bitter liquid’s relieving effects course through her entire body, she resolved herself to wait patiently, noting that she trusted Draco to include her in the conversation if need be.

In fact, her trust in Draco’s good intentions felt stronger in that moment than her ravenous curiosity about Lucius.

With a small smile, she sat contemplating that fact as she waited, contentedly sipping her coffee.

*  *  *

Draco

Draco paced back in forth in front of Blaise, who sat watching him on the middle of the black leather sofa. He’d already downed a shot of firewhisky upon hearing the news and was holding another in his hand.

“And you’re sure he didn’t suspect you as an imposter?”

“Mate, I know your Dad is an excellent liar, but I was obviously watching quite closely and he did not flinch once.”

“That really means nothing,” Draco said, shaking his head in worry and downing the next shot.

“Well then why keep asking me?! My answer won’t change!”

Draco stopped pacing and faced his friend, seemingly have just remembered he wasn’t alone in the
room talking out loud to himself.

“Sorry, Blaise, I’m just—”

“Fucking rattled! Yes I see that, but what I don’t see is why you still insisting on thinking this all out on your own when I’m sat right damn in front of you!”

Draco resumed his pacing, running his hands through his hair and breathing out an agitated sigh.

“I don’t know what the hell your Dad has been up to, and I get he’s tied your tongue, but he hasn’t tied mine! Even if I don’t know the details, I can still act.”

Draco spun around in a panic, arms outstretched as if he were about to physically restrain Blaise.

“It’s too dangerous! He could… if he finds out… if he’s somehow a few steps ahead of us… he could…” Draco trailed off and let out an exasperated grunt as he bit his own fist. He was unable to explain about his Mother, and the potential consequences she might already be dealing with because of him. It was untenable. He couldn’t even think on it. What if Lucius was merely trying to keep him away from the prison so that his Mother couldn’t clue him in to the abuse she’d been enduring?

What if his Father was now onto him and was planning to come for Hermione next? He hadn’t mentioned it… had likely thought her too small a threat… but what if last night had changed everything?

More and more horrific scenarios swirled around in Draco’s mind, mixed with fear and firewhisky.

“Shall we play charades, then? You act out whatever your evil old Dad might do and I’ll give my best guesses, but I warn you, I’m kind of shit at this game so you’ll have to—”

“Blaise will you stop fucking around?! This is fucking serious!”

Blaise stared at him incredulously, a hint of hurt momentarily appearing on his face.

“Fine,” he said, with a sense of forced calm, “you know what? I’d already had a hell of a fucking week mucking about pretending to be you, only to come face to face with your frankly frightening father with only a moment’s notice and nearly shitting my pants in the process. Meanwhile, I haven’t seen MY witch at all whilst I’ve been working my arse off so that you can see yours, and you’re so fucking proud that you still won’t accept that this entire burden doesn’t have to lie on your shoulders alone.”

With that, he stood and walked over to the floo.

“You can come and find me whenever you decide to stop severely fixating on everything that won’t work. I’m going to see Gabrielle.”

Draco watched, dumbstruck, as his friend disappeared into the flames and was gone.

“Fuck!” he yelled, throwing the empty glass that was still in his hand straight into the hearth.

Looking down at the shards scattered about the floor around the fireplace, he realized he’d just drunk the last of his firewhisky. Glancing over at the coffee table, he spotted the bottle of half-drunk flat champagne from the night prior sitting in its bucket of now melted ice. Without hesitation, he walked over and downed it before looking over at his bedroom door. With a wave of his wand, he removed the silencing charms and walked purposefully across the room, grasping the handle and flinging the door open briskly.
“Oh!” she said, clearly startled where she sat at the foot of the bed next to Wumply’s breakfast tray, “all finished?” Her voice was sweet and affectionate, and given how shitty he was feeling, he found it grating him.

Without giving a response, he walked over to her and bent down to make sure she would not continue talking. When their lips met, it was unlike the kiss they’d shared earlier in almost every way. He’d been tender and reverent then, but now was agitated and impatient. He claimed her mouth with little regard for her comfort. It was a forceful demand rather than an invitation, and he was glad when she seemed to be going along with it, standing from the bed and leaning into him with a deep moan, matching his desperate energy.

Suddenly, she pulled away, her brow furrowed concernedly.

“Draco are you- is everything okay?” she breathed.

He pulled her back towards him, slamming their bodies together, hands grasping her hips tightly.

Kissing her hard and then pulling back to look into her eyes, he said a definitive and colorless, “no,” before going back in and deepening the kiss. She pushed him away again, hands braced on his chest, and looked at him again with that concern.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“It doesn’t matter since nothing can be done,” he said as his eyes raked over her, a wolf trying to decide the most optimal way to approach his meal. He put his hands behind both of her knees and pulled her feet out from under her. Her beautiful, naked form was tossed back onto the bed and he lowered his head between her legs, kissing and biting his way up her thigh, which caused her to let out a low moan. When he reached her center, before his lips could make contact, she grabbed him roughly by the hair and tugged him up to meet her eyes.

“Draco Malfoy you will stop this instant and tell me what’s going on or so help me Merlin!”

He stared back at her, a sudden wash of shame coming over him. He dropped his forehead heavily onto her chest and let out a sharp breath.

“I can’t, Hermione,” he said gruffly.

“Can’t or won’t?!” she yelled, a bit hysterically.

He snapped his head up, a look of utter desperation etched across his face and said, “can’t. I can’t. I wish I-” his voice broke and he slumped his head back onto her chest, holding in a sob.

He hated this. He didn’t want to be weak in front of her again. He’d inwardly sworn to himself the night before that it would be the first and last time he’d allow his Father’s treachery to make him lose his nerve in front of her.

“Oh, okay,” she said, a note of surrender in her voice, “okay it’s okay.” She ran her fingers through his hair just as she had the night before, and he broke down completely. The feeling of being held through his emotions was one he hadn’t experienced fully in so long. Longer than he could remember. He hadn’t fully allowed it in the night prior, even though the motions had been the same. This time he could feel that his tears and sobs were not in vain. Somehow she was collecting them. Making them valid. Understood. Suddenly he wanted to pour as much as he could into her waiting arms, and he allowed the tears and fears to flow freely.

When his crying subsided, he looked up at her, wiping the most recent tears from his eyes.
“Oh hang on!” she said suddenly, reaching for her wand. Pointing it at his face she said, “emundaris,” and then followed it with “tergeo.”

He felt his nose clear of all congestion and his face clear of tears. She smirked proudly at him.

“You conjure handkerchiefs by snapping your fingers, I had to find some way to one-up you.”

He smiled and tangled his fingers in her hair before cupping her cheek. “You are still so annoyingly brilliant. You really are.”

She smiled and nuzzled his hand, closing her eyes. He watched her and felt the sudden sense of joy surge and then erode quickly. Grazing her cheek with his thumb he said, “I’m so sorry, Hermione.”

She opened her eyes, searching for understanding before she seemed to settle on what she believed to be his meaning.

“You know, I really don’t mind. I believe I was the first to be a complete emotional wreck here in case you’ve forgotten.”

He shook his head, “that’s not what I’m apologizing for. The… the way I came in here and wanted to- tried to… to use you… just to numb my pain. That was just unacceptable. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Oh,” she said, looking a bit perplexed, “Well… thank you for the apology, but-”

“No,” he cut her off, “no you don’t get to make excuses for me, please Hermione, you absolutely and positively do not deserve to ever be treated that way. Okay?”

She nodded. “No I agree, more or less, but- let me finish!” she said, as he attempted to interrupt her again. “The thing is,” she said, a sudden blush creeping up her neck, “I uh… I kind of… liked it? That raw sort of animal thing? It wasn’t even role play because it was so one-sided, and that’s… that’s what I liked about it. Oh Merlin, is that awful?!”

He said nothing but just stared at her.

“Oh no, it is! I’m horrible! How ridiculous of me to say that out loud, I take it back, pretend I never said it!”

She had her hands over her face now and he fought the bemused expression that wanted so badly to reveal itself. Taking advantage of the fact that she was not looking, he slid quickly back down between her legs and plunged his tongue deep inside her. She gasped.

“Draco! What are you-” but his hand over her mouth cut her off just as she sat up and he came up to meet her, nose to nose.

“Quiet,” he said flatly, and pushed her back onto the bed, gently but with enough force that she let out a small whimper. With that, he buried his face between her legs again and delighted in the way she began writhing beneath him. He let his teeth graze over her soft flesh threateningly and heard her take in a few short gasps as he did so. Then he began to devour her in a way he never had before, and he could feel and taste her mouthing arousal as he claimed her with his mouth. She let out a sudden, uncontrollable moan of pleasure and he reached up to cover her mouth again.

“I said quiet, Granger,” he growled, and continued his ministrations.

She still let out a few small whimpers, clearly doing everything she could to keep it all inside. The
necessity of keeping it in by his demand seemed to increase her level of arousal, which was what he’d been hoping for. Someone like Hermione, always overly responsible, would obviously gain pleasure from being controlled. Why hadn’t he realized this before? They’d come close to it in their role play, but it was always playful.

He shoved two fingers roughly inside her and began pumping them in and out, curling them up just so, and repeatedly finding the spot he’d come to know well.

Just as she began arching into him, her body shuddering, he pulled away and she let out a frustrated cry.

“Turn over,” he said, giving her thigh a small slap, and she did so as he un zipped his trousers.

Grasping her hips tightly, he entered her swiftly from behind, pulling her towards him with each thrust. He was always very careful with her, but now realized that he needn’t have been. Looking down, he noticed that she was grasping handfuls of bedsheets in both hands and gritting her teeth. He brought one knee up onto the bed and leaned forward to move one of her hands between her own legs.

“You’re going to come with me when I say so, and not a moment sooner, understand?”

She looked up at him, her eyes squinting sinfully, and breathed, “yes” with a bit of a hiss and a small smile. He pushed back into her and noted that it was probably a bad idea to insist that she touch herself, because between that and the wicked look she was now giving him, he could scarcely contain himself. Thankfully, his continued thrusts caused her to close her eyes and then bury her face in the sheets, moaning gratefully into them. He grasped her perfect curves even more tightly as his movements became erratic, and he saw that her hand over her clit sped up along with him. He bent lower over her and said, “Now. Come for me now, Granger.”

Both of their bodies jerked and shuddered as their orgasms washed over them in unison, leaving them both moaning and gasping for breath.

Once they’d subsided, Draco looked down at the exhausted witch.

“More?” he asked.

Another wicked grin spread across her face and he nodded in reply.

* * *

Hermione

“Draco I have to tell you something.”

It was almost noon and they’d been lying in bed, wrapped up in each other for a good long while since they’d stopped shagging, and Hermione’s conscience had finally gotten the better of her. He turned to give her his full attention, eyebrows raised in curiosity.

“I uh… I know that your Father showed up at the party last night,” she said, and she watched his eyes widen, “Wumply told me by accident.”

“You know- uh, that is- you knew… since this morning that my, that he, that-” Draco sputtered.
“That somehow Lucius Malfoy is able to leave prison and travel to his Manor at will, yes, I know, I-I knew.”

“Is that all he-”

“Draco what else is there to know and … and… not that you have to but, why haven’t you told me?”

Draco rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I meant it when I said I can’t, Hermione.”

She gasped, a sudden understanding coming over her. “He tongue tied you.”

Draco neither confirmed nor denied, but merely shot her a look of dismay and resignation.

“Oh how horrible,” she said, placing a hand over her mouth, “when did this happen? Can you tell me that?”

“Knowing how deep his magical intentions tend to go, I am not taking chances saying anything, I haven’t even attempted to write it down.”

Hermione nodded. “That’s probably wise, albeit incredibly frustrating. How have you been coping?”

He cocked an eyebrow at her and smirked.

“Oh,” she said, realizing that he meant she’d been one of his main coping mechanisms, “Right.”

“Hermione,” he said in a low, demanding tone, which caused her to look up at him, “you are so much more to me than a coping mechanism.”

With a sharp intake of breath, she smirked at him. “Ditto,” she said, and she watched as understanding washed over him.

They’d both been there for one another at times of crisis, and yet it was becoming clear that the crisis alone was not the reason for it.

The moment passed fairly quickly, as Hermione’s brain was hard at work trying to decipher what exactly was going on with Lucius Malfoy. Had he somehow infiltrated the leadership at Azkaban? It wouldn’t be the first time it had happened, but if that was the case, she could help discover the truth.

“Draco, you know my position at the ministry, I consider it my duty to investigate this-”

“No,” he said sternly, “you will not be getting involved, it’s too dangerous.”

Taken aback, she scoffed, “Umm, I’m not sure you recall who you’re speaking with Mr. Malfoy, I did take great part in vanquishing Voldemort himself if you remember correctly.”

“Yes but this is different.”

“It is not! Your Father was his subordinate, how could this mission-”

“It is not a mission and you will not be taking it on, Hermione, I won’t allow it!”

“You won’t allow it? As if you have the right to dictate my actions!”

Draco seemed to be struggling with something, shaking his head and looking everywhere but at her
“You just… can’t… and that’s it, end of story, Granger.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him.

“Is this because of something you can’t talk about?”

“Yes and no,” he answered, matter-of-factly.

What was he on about? It made complete sense for her to utilize her position to discover what Lucius was up to, and she would do it regardless of garnering his blessing to do so.

She felt like saying something about how wanting to be told what to do did not extend outside of the bedroom, but she bit her tongue. Putting on a voice of forced calm, having decided for herself what her next course of action would be, she decided to put him out of his misery for the moment.

“Alright then, considered to topic dropped. I won’t mention it to you again.”

She smiled privately, knowing that she hadn’t promised not to pursue it, but merely not to talk about it.

He did say she had a bit of Slytherin in her, and between this and their most recent sexual escapade together, she was beginning to embrace that part of her more and more.

“Hermione!” Draco said suddenly, “when Wumply gave you that information, did he… well did he punish himself for doing so?”

Remembering that she wanted to talk to him about this, she gasped and said “No! I mean, he tried, but… no, he couldn’t, could he? Because of whatever you did,” she finished with a smile.

Draco did a small fist pump in celebration and said, “I hadn’t worked how to test it in a humane way, so I wasn’t sure, but that’s great news!”

She shook her head, still smiling. “Draco Malfoy, what in the world happened to you?”

He shrugged. “War. Potter. You. In that order?”

She pulled him into soft, adoring kiss. Once they separated, she said, “Oh! That reminds me, Harry should be back from his assignment today!”

“You’ll have to Brunch without me this time, I need to go grovel to get my would-be doppelganger back.”
“Draco, thank fuck!” Blaise yelled as Draco tumbled out of the Delacour floo and stood up quickly, with an effortless sweep of his clothes.

“Well, I confess I expected I’d need to grovel quite a bit before receiving that sort of greeting,” he said, quirking an eyebrow at his friend and turning confusedly to Gabrielle who was sitting in a window seat in the parlor of the Delacour mansion.

“We ah being watched!” she alerted him, gazing out the window at persons unseen.

“Yea mate, when I left your place I forgot I still had the trace on me. I don’t know how long he’s been here, might have taken him a while to aparate this far, but he’s been out stalking around the grounds.”

“I assume these windows are charmed not to show us?” Draco asked as he moved next to Gabrielle, peering out into the grounds.

“But of course!” Gabrielle said.

Blaise joined them at the window and the three watched as the man, Corbyn, peered around at the house. What he was trying to decipher, they could not tell. Perhaps he thought he’d gone to the wrong place, or maybe he was trying to decide whether to simply knock on the door.

Alternatively, and most likely, he was peering through various windows trying to spot anyone that might be home. Of course, that search would yield nothing, as all of the windows of the estate had privacy charms on them.

“I left without any polyjuice on me, otherwise I would have let him spot me and he’d likely move along. We need to let him see you, Draco.”

“But what pretense could Draco ave for comink ere?”

Draco thought for a moment. Any number of reasons could work, really, and yet he wanted to be careful. Creating a web of lies always seemed simple at first, until various strands began to collide, and breaking one could bring the entire thing down.

“I’m not sure we need to do much more than leave together from here and have him find me when he aparates back to us in London. Perhaps I came here to bring you back for Blaise?” he said, turning to Gabrielle.

Blaise turned to Gabrielle as well and added, “Given the fact that I missed you terribly and came here for that same reason, it would be decidedly believable, my love. Will you come back to London like I’ve already requested?”

Gabrielle looked at him with a concerned expression and let out a sharp huff of air.
“So I can watch you kees Astoria up close eenstead of just in zee papers?!”

Draco’s eyes widened. He hadn’t realized that Blaise had shared any of their plan with Gabrielle.

“Gab, you didn’t even know that was me until I just told you!"

“Eet doesn’t matter! Would you want to see me keesing some ozzer wizerd?!“

Blaise sighed and looked away, then in a defeated voice said, “No I suppose not.”

Draco was surprised by this response. Blaise hadn’t previously dated anyone this exclusively, but even still, he’d never seemed bothered by witches he’d shagged being seen with other wizards. He had also called Gabrielle his “love,” which was something Draco had not heard him say before.

“Actually,” Draco offered, “we might be able to avoid any more public displays of affection, I think between last week in Diagon and the party last night, the papers will be sated for now. You two could stay in the spare bedroom in my flat, just… for the time being?”

Gabrielle pursed her lips and looked between the two wizards, scrutinizing them the way Draco had seen Mademoiselle Delacour inspecting the waitstaff and decorations at the party.

“Why wouldn’t we jus stay at zee Malfoy Manor?”

Blaise and Draco exchanged looks, and Blaise quickly interjected. “Because, love, I can’t stay polyjuiced around the clock, and uh…”

“And,” Draco jumped in urgently, “we’ve had some unwelcome visitors to the manor recently. You know, it was once used as a safe house for Death Eaters?”

“Oh yes zats right! Well zen, zee loft weel do nicely, I will come.”

Both men let out sighs of relief, though Blaise threw Draco a look of exasperation. Draco was sure he was now racking up quite a large debt to his friend, and inwardly resolved himself to pay it back tenfold.

* * *

**Hermione**

“I’m with Harry, Hermione, I don’t think you should go poking your nose around in Lucius Malfoy’s business,” Ginny said. They were back in the Potter’s kitchen after a fairly late brunch, sat around the table together.

“Suppose you go rifling through DMLE paperwork and asking questions, it would only take one wrong move to alert him to the fact that you know something, and then what?”

“Oh you two are just as bad as Draco! Do you really think I can’t handle myself?”

Harry and Ginny turned to one another and rolled their eyes in unison.

“Yea, alright Hermione, you’ve got us. We both secretly think you an incapable moron. We certainly haven’t witnessed you doing anything terribly brilliant in the time we’ve known you, so clearly we hold a negative opinion of your talents,” Harry said.

“Yes and we simply don’t sleep at night worrying about whether you can handle yourself in difficult
situations, you have certainly never, oh… I don’t know… broken into Gringotts and escaped on a
dragon or anything terribly heroic and quick thinking as that, so clearly-"

“Well alright then! If that’s the case then why do you insist on cautioning me in this instance?!”

“Because, Hermione,” Harry said, leaning forward and taking her hand in his, “this is Lucius Malfoy
we’re talking about. A Lucius Malfoy who has apparently fooled us all into thinking he’s in
permanent solitary confinement, when clearly he has far more freedom than any prisoner in the
history of Azkaban. Who knows what else he has in place; who knows who is in his pocket! I’m not
saying do nothing, but I AM saying that you should proceed with extreme caution.”

Hermione had crossed her arms in annoyance. She hated being cautioned by Harry, of all people,
and had expected him to be on her side.

“Should have known you’d side with Draco,” she grumbled at him, which caused him to throw his
arms up in resignation.

“Oh Hermione, you’re being ridiculous,” Ginny interjected, “Think for a moment; this man is pure
evil and has apparently hoodwinked the system we all rely upon to assure our safety. If it’s true that
he has some sort of free reign, then that has much larger implications on all of our lives. I won’t
pretend to know what we should do, but what I DO know is that we have a fairly sensitive piece of
information here, and we’d do well to handle it… sensitively.”

“Look Hermione, I know how aggravating it is to be told to be careful when all you feel is reckless.
Welcome to my summer of age fifteen! If you remember correctly, back then you agreed with
Dumbledore’s insistence of me to not be reckless.”

“Oh don’t go throwing that in my face, Potter! If you could go back in time, you would want that bit
to play out differently, and don’t deny it!”

Harry pouted in response, visibly agreeing with Hermione but not wanting to state it aloud.

“You never call me Potter,” he grumbled.

Hermione shrugged. “I suppose Draco is rubbing off on me.”

Ginny leaned forward, her chin leaning on her hand, “oh really? Go on…” she said, wiggling her
eyebrows.

“Welp, that’s my cue,” Harry said, smacking his hands on the table and standing.

Ginny laughed. “Oh darling, I’m only joking, we don’t need to get into the sordid details right now,”
she said, throwing a wink at Hermione, who was feeling decidedly not in the mood. Truthfully,
though, she had some scintillating details to share with Ginny when the time was right. Apart from
the new and startling realizations of the past 24 hours, her time with Draco had been revelatory, and
not just sexually.

“Don’t worry, Harry, I’m far too preoccupied with other things to talk about that now.”

Now it was Ginny’s turn to pout. She reached over and grabbed her copy of The Daily Prophet from
the side of the table where they had all been studying it earlier. The front page held Rita’s story about
the Malfoy/Greengrass engagement party, the large moving photograph was of Draco (Blaise)
capturing Astoria in a deep kiss in the middle of the ballroom.

“I have to say, he does seem like a spectacular kisser,” Ginny said.
“That’s Blaise!” Hermione exclaimed, grabbing the paper away from Ginny.

Ginny shrugged, “Still… same lips right?”

“Ugh, I’m not even going to comment. See you both later, I’m going to go… do laundry, or something less nauseating,” Harry said, walking by Hermione and dropping a kiss on her head.

“Just don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, Hermione,” he said, and then made to leave the room.

“I believe you ought to rethink that particular instruction, darling!” Ginny called as he disappeared through the swinging door. They heard him let out a low laugh of recognition as he ascended the stairs to the top floor.

* * *

Pansy

Well, Pansy simply did not know what to do with herself.

The events that followed her exit from Ron Weasley’s office on Friday had been shocking and unexpected, to say the least.

First, she’d gone over to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, hoping to have some laws… enforced!

She’d known that Granger had been aware of her misdeeds, and she had already been wondering as to why the muggleborn witch hadn’t turned her in. She supposed it had had something to do with pity… that or not wanting to draw more attention to the entire affair. Pansy knew from reading the papers over the years that Hermione worked mainly on legislation of underrepresented populations, and that potion registry was not likely under her jurisdiction, but still thought that the witch would be the best place to start with her confession.

She was thwarted, however, when the secretary at the front desk insisted she speak to an entirely different wizard in the correct department, and ushered her into his office before she could even catch Hermione’s eye. That wizard, Brooks or Brelin or some such… laughed her out of the room upon hearing her list of crimes! He cited that these were petty and unactionable non-crimes, in fact, and punishable by a fine at best. Then, he had the gall to suggest she simply walk free, not caring to spend time on the paperwork when she was clearly remorseful and surely unlikely to do it again. Oh and also, would she please register the potions at her earliest convenience and be sure to bring her finalized potion filings over to the auror department, as Gawain Robards would surely be interested in purchasing the instructions from her, for use in Auror undercover work!

It was absolutely and unequivocally ludicrous! There she was, looking to do the pious thing for once, and the Ministry of Magic itself would not allow her. She would have gone back to Ron’s office had she not been so utterly embarrassed by her own conviction that she belonged behind bars, or at least in front of the Wizengamot at the very least.

Unable to stand being there a moment longer, she left without registering said potions, thinking that if it was that petty of a crime, her rectification of simple paperwork filing could wait.

Instead, she went and got sloshed in the Leaky alone, and since she was then unable to safely aparate, rented a room (again, alone) and passed out in a haze.

When she awoke, she was startled to realize that she’d been given the very same room that she and Ron had occupied when they’d first been together only a week ago. Utterly disgusted with herself,
she’d quickly left in search of hangover potions in Knockturn. They’d done the trick immediately, and as soon as she was feeling better, she figured she might as well get sloshed again. This time she chose a pub in Knockturn where she bought a few rounds of drinks for just her, and then disillusioned herself so as not to be bothered while brooding in the back of the pub. Eventually, she had fallen asleep at the table and gone wholly unnoticed for a number of hours.

She’d awoken when she heard familiar voices nearby, which turned out to be those of Tracey Davis and Millicent Bulstrode. Unwilling to reveal herself in her current state, she’d stayed disillusioned, but easily overheard their conversation.

It turned out that Draco and Astoria were having an engagement party that evening at Malfoy Manor, and only friends were invited.

Astoria. That was who she needed to make amends to. If the DMLE were going to stick their heads up their arses, Astoria Greengrass surely would not. She’d hated Pansy with a graceful vengeance and surely would use this opportunity to see her burn.

Pansy waited for Tracey and Millicent to be on their way, and then, craving her own condemnation, found the nearest floo and arrived at the manor just on their heels. Still disillusioned, she crept to the ballroom, careful not to bump into any house elves (of which there were many) and settled herself on the floor in a nook between two glass cases with family artifacts and hierlooms.

From her vantage point, she could see the entire party. She re-cast her disillusionment charm and sat biting her tongue and biding her time.

Waiting for the perfect moment.

But it didn’t come.

As she watched Astoria walk about the party with Draco, greeting guests and engaging in conversation, the sheer selfishness of her plan washed over her.

She didn’t want to do this for Astoria’s benefit, she wanted it for her own. To clear her own conscience. To renew who she was in the eyes of these people, in this very room.

Not only that, but the press were in attendance, and the last thing Ron needed was to have the news of his impending Fatherhood be front page Sunday Prophet news.

And so, Pansy simply sat. Casting and re-casting her disillusionment charm as needed, and observing the partygoers, most of whom she’d known from school. Most of whom had been her friends. Now, however, she couldn’t count them as such, and scarcely imagined being able to look any of them in the eyes now that she had come out of her own denial about her misdeeds.

What she had done may not have been technically illegal, but it had certainly been amoral.

No, Pansy wouldn’t be inflicting her company on this lot ever again, if she could manage it. Probably the best and most reasonable thing to do, would be to disappear.

When she could scarcely stand being there another moment, Pansy stood and prepared to creep to the floo in the hall. It was at that moment, however, that Wumply the house elf came charging into the room and over to Draco who was standing not three feet from where Pansy hid.

“Master Blaise!” the elf squeaked.

Draco looked down, instantly panic-stricken. His tone was clipped as he whisper-shouted, “You
must call me Draco, Wumply, how many times do I have to-"

But then the elf had cut him off…

“Master Lucius is here! He waits for you in the drawing room!”

Pansy’s jaw hit the floor along with Draco’s… or Blaise’s? Apparently, this was not Draco at all? Now that it was suggested, she thought she saw the ghost of Blaise’s expression over Draco’s visage.

Polyjuice. But why? And was Draco in on this? Was he in trouble? And what in Salazar’s name was Lucius Malfoy doing in the drawing room when he was meant to be locked up in Azkaban.

She didn’t have time to riddle any of it out, and within moments found herself quietly following polyjuiced Blaise down the dark hollow halls of Malfoy Manor, apparently on the way to see Draco’s Father.

The door closed behind Blaise and Pansy could not easily make out anything in their muffled conversation. Damning herself for not bringing her extendable ears (the Weasleys had been good for something even before she’d discovered her connection with Ron) she pressed her ear against the door straining to catch something, anything.

From there, she only caught snippets of the conversation, as Lucius spoke mostly in a low growl.

“…forcing you to end things with the muggleborn…”

Muggleborn? Which muggle born? What things? Surely not Granger?

“…keep you as far away from your Mother as possible…”

Far away from Narcissa? That part sounded like a threat. Why should Draco stay away from his own Mother?

The last thing Lucius had said, however, had been the clearest, as he’d called it across the room just as Blaise had been on his way out. She’d caught every word clear as day…

“Do give my regards to your fiancé, she is quite lovelier than I even remembered. I hope the two of you will be able to provide a true Malfoy heir once the current abomination is dealt with.”

Abomination?! Dealt with? What did that mean?

She’d watched Blaise leave the room and return to the party, lingering outside the drawing room long enough to hear Lucius flooing away as he cried, “Malfoy Suite at Azkaban!”

Her eyes were permanently stuck wide.

Lucius Malfoy had a SUITE at Azkaban? She knew that the Governor of the prison was provided with exceptional living quarters, having visited the previous Governor who was a friend of the family, but how had Lucius brokered a deal for his own? Was he even imprisoned?

Whatever he was up to, it could not be good.

It did not seem, however, as though Blaise was part of this nefarious plot. She was now sure that he was taking Draco’s place at this party as some sort of favor. To what end, she had no idea, but the look on his face upon exiting the drawing room was not that of a person in the know. He was clearly shocked and appalled.
She made to creep back into the party, but before she could enter the room, the same little elf came running out and they collided.

“Intruder! Show yourself!” the elf managed to squeak before she cast a silencing charm on him and removed her disillusionment.

“Wumply, it’s me! It’s Miss Pansy, do you remember me? I haven’t seen you in ages, I’m Draco’s friend! I was his girlfriend! Do you remember?”

She said all of this in a rushed whisper and the elf seemed to calm, head nodding.

“Alright, I’m going to remove the silencing charm now but you must keep your voice down, I do not want Miss Astoria to know that I’m here, it would greatly upset her. Do you understand?”

The elf nodded vigorously now and she removed the spell.

“Miss Pansy! I is recognizing you, yes! You was always here visiting Miss Narcissa! Miss Narcissa loves Miss Pansy!!”

Pansy smiled solemnly. It was true, Narcissa did take a liking to her in her youth. Presumably, the older witch could sympathize with Pansy’s upbringing. The Parkinson’s always held a small amount of resentment for Pansy having been born a girl and therefore unable to carry on the family name. Narcissa had dealt with enough of that in her own life, and given that fact that she herself had never had a daughter, took the opportunity to allow Pansy some time under her wing. Pansy had come to visit at times, even when Draco had not been with her.

“Yes that’s right, Wumply. Actually, I would love to go and visit her in Azkaban, it has been far too long.”

The elf’s eyes went wide.

“Oh but Miss Pansy will not be able to do that, no,” he said, shaking his head.

Pansy looked at him, perplexedly. “Why ever not?”

“Because she is ill and in St. Mungo’s Hospital, Miss! No visitors allowed!”

“She’s ill? Ill with what? How bad is it?”

“Oh! But Wumply shouldn’t have said! He will have to throw himself in the fire, Miss!”

Before Pansy could react, the elf turned and hurtled toward the nearest floo. Just as his tiny body flew through the air towards the lit fire, an invisible force field erupted around him, and sent him flying backward with a loud SMACK.

“Wumply! Are you trying to hurl yourself into the floo again?!”

Draco…er, Blaise was clearly alerted to the disturbance and on his way out to the hall. Pansy quickly re-cast her disillusionment charm and flung herself toward the floo, grabbing the necessary powder and saying “St Mungo’s Hospital” as quietly as she could manage. As she zoomed away, she thought she caught Blaise’s polyjuiced white-blond hair appearing over the elf’s quaking body.

Chapter End Notes
From here on out this fic will update every Friday! My other fic ideas are tired of waiting around for me, and this one is seeming to need more time to percolate.

Hope you enjoy, and I look forward to comments!!!
A Sort of Mission

Chapter Summary

A quick check-in with our unlikely love birds, and then...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Astoria breezed through the atrium of the ministry trying to suppress the smile threatening to overtake her lips.

She was there on business, strictly business. Wedding related… business. Yes.

At least, that’s what she was endeavoring to convey to anyone who might take interest in her presence at the Ministry.

Clutching her small bag in front of her waist, she entered the lifts and attempted to look as casual and un-excited by her mounting anticipation as she possible could.

Somehow the sneaking around made everything more… charged.

She and Ron had been exchanging letters all weekend in lieu of being able to see each other in person, and his last missive to her had been quite salacious.

She stepped off the lift and turned to head toward Ron’s office. As the golden grille closed, she thought she caught a glimpse of a familiar face in the very back of the lift she’d just exited. Could that have been… it had looked like Pansy Parkinson, but she couldn’t be sure. She made a mental note to ask Ron what had happened with Pansy’s bid for conviction last week.

No matter, she had better things on her mind at the moment.

She walked past the secretaries, not interested in having herself announced. Walking purposefully toward his office, she made sure to wipe away any pleasant expression that might occur to her traitorous face.

The people she passed, however, were wholly absorbed in their work. No one even looked up at her, and she reasoned that Magical Games and Sports was a far less secure floor than most others.

All the better for her.

His office door was closed and she gave it a muted knock with her gloved hand. She heard him clear his throat before saying, “it’s open.”

She entered and shut the door behind her quickly, pressing her back and her hands flat against it. He stood. They stared at each other for quite some time before speaking.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello,” she replied, barely moving her lips.
Clearing his throat nervously, he said, “So you, er… got my last letter then?”

She took in a deep breath and nodded, a mischievous smirk appearing on her lips.

“Right,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets, looking down at his desk and fiddling with a cup of quills before knocking it over and clearing his throat again.

Finally she realized that even though he was the Gryffindor, she’d need to ignite his bravery.

“I’m sure it will come as no surprise to you, Mr. Weasley,” she said loudly, “that the amount of time it’s taking for you to procure these tickets for my family is beyond unacceptable.”

He started to smile, but shook it off with another small throat clearing, beginning to walk towards her as he spoke.

“As a matter of fact, you’re correct Ms. Greengrass, it would never surprise me to hear that you or your family are so entitled as to believe it appropriate to march into my office demanding favors on the basis of nothing other than your blood status!”

“That is exactly why I’m here. Were you actually worthy of your blood you’d respond with prompt service and no further commentary!”

“And you have the gall to believe that insulting me and my family further will earn you rewards?”

They were nose to nose now. Her eyes drifted from his eyes to his lips as she reached her hand down to his trousers and felt the evidence of his arousal already there.

She grinned and said softly, “Well it certainly seems that way.”

Their mouths crashed together, and each time they came up for air they let out small mirthful laughs.

They had no grand plan for their future, but they did intend on spending every one of his lunch hours together that week, and sending copious owls in between.

* * *

It was lunchtime on Monday and Hermione had no appetite as she sat at her desk, warring with herself about whether or not to proceed as planned. She could easily call a meeting with Madame Parmal, the Governor of Azkaban, but that would likely be too obvious of a move.

As she examined her other options, Harry and Ginny’s points became steadily more salient, and she began to feel a combination of helpless and taciturn.

Her bleak train of thought was interrupted when Artemis suddenly appeared in her doorway looking fearful.

“Miss Granger? May I come in?”

Perplexed, Hermione stood and said, “Of course,” motioning to the chair in front of her desk.

Artemis turned and shut the door with haste and cast a silencing charm. Hermione eyed the witch warily, wondering what could be so urgent as to require a private audience.
Her secretary spun around, wringing her hands and biting her lower lip. She walked over to the chair but did not sit down.

“It’s just… Pansy Parkinson is here to see you, Miss.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide.

“She’s here to see me? You’re sure?”

Artemis nodded nervously.

“What in the world could she want to see me for?” Hermione said, almost to herself. “Surely she’s too busy manipulating my ex-husband into a relationship to-”

Artemis gasped and covered her mouth with her hands.

“I didn’t know anything about that, Miss Granger! I can try to send her away, but I doubt she’ll go willingly. That’s what I came in to say; I came in to warn you. She was here just last Friday trying to get in to see you then, too. She spent a while with Mr. Brooks instead, and she was trying to convince him to arrest her!”

Hermione’s brow furrowed. Could this be? Had Pansy actually come clean, then?

“And… did he?”

“No Miss Granger! Whatever she did it was apparently not bad enough to warrant a strict punishment, but she was adamant. They had quite a row before she left, and today… today she seems… different.”

“Different how?”

“It’s hard to describe, really, but she’s more… severe? I’m wondering if she’s alright in the head. I- I just wanted to put you on your guard.”

Hermione was more confused than frightened by this. From all she’d heard about Pansy, the witch did not, in fact, seem very well… but a threat? Surely not.

“I appreciate that very much, Artemis.”

“So should I- would you like me to send her away, Miss?”

Hermione decided that it would probably be best to know what Pansy was up to, and there was only one way to find out.

“No that’s fine, please send her back.”

Artemis let out a sigh of relief, “Thank gods for that, I don’t think I’d have the stomach to tell her no.”

Hermione gave the witch a caring smile as she followed her to the office door, thanking her again quietly as she left. From her doorway, she could see Pansy standing by the front desk, clearly agitated at being made to wait, her toe tapping with annoyance.

Hermione went back to sit in her own chair, feeling it was best to act casual.

Pansy entered the office slowly and looked down at Hermione. She had a slightly haughty look
about her, which Hermione had been accustomed to back in their school years, but which seemed rather inappropriate now, considering the circumstances.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me, Hermione.”

A bit perplexed by the formality, as well as the use of her given name, she said nothing but merely motioned to the chair, inviting Pansy to have a seat. In a similar fashion to what Artemis had done, Pansy shut the door but did not cast any charms. Then she turned and took her seat, placing herself daintily on the edge of the chair as if she wanted to come in contact with as little of it as possible. Hermione grimaced and held up a hand.

“Before you say anything, I know about the potions. What you did to Ron.”

Pansy scowled for a moment before raising her eyebrows. “Oh yes, that was unfortunate. I am very sorry for my actions, but that’s not why I’m here.”

Hermione eyed her even more warily still. How odd for her to come there just days prior looking for a conviction and to now appear almost unconcerned with the entire affair.

The pale pureblood witch leaned forward, seeming eager to move the conversation along.

“Hermione, I’m here to talk to you about Draco and the marriage promise.”

Hermione looked at her perplexedly. Since when did Pansy know about her and Draco? Did she know fully? Did that mean Ron knew too?

“You’re- you know about-”

“Yes I know all about it, you see… I went to visit Narcissa Malfoy and she sent me on a sort of mission.”

“You went to Azkaban… to visit Narcissa Malfoy? But why?”

“It’s a long story, and one I do not have adequate time to tell. The point is, I know some things. Things that will greatly affect the futures of people you and I both care for and I- I think you’re the key to it all.”

Hermione looked at her, confused. The witch was surely off her rocker, just like Artemis had said. That, or she was more entitled and presumptuous than ever, and her quest for some punishment for her crimes had been nothing more than a ruse. Now that Hermione thought on it, the theory seemed highly likely and she felt her temper flare.

“I don’t know what you’re on about, Pansy, but you’d better explain yourself fully, and quick. You seem to be regarding me as some sort of confidant here, but I might remind you that you were the cause of my marriage falling apart!”

Rather than growing more apologetic at this, Pansy reacted to Hermione’s words as if they were a fly buzzing around her face.

“I could spend my whole time here apologizing for the past, something that even the authorities here could not care less about, or we could instead focus on the innocent life at stake in the present. Which one sounds like a more valuable use of our time to you, Hermione? You are a fairly busy witch, are you not?”

Hermione sat stunned. The anger swelling inside of her did not lessen, yet her curiosity to find out
which innocent life Pansy was referring to made her force a sense of calm.

“Fine. The latter,” Hermione said through clenched teeth.

Pansy sat back in her seat, body relaxing. “Thank you,” she said with a bow of her head. “Now, what I’m about to tell you might shock you.”

Pansy paused dramatically and Hermione raised her eyebrows impatiently as if to say “go on, then!”

Taking in a deep breath first, Pansy said, “the baby that Astoria is carrying is in grave danger. It- it seems that there is a rather startling clause included in the marriage promise. One that will make it so that whether the promise is denied or sealed, the child will die.”

Hermione could not breathe. It had been so long since she’d even given thought to the fate of the baby. It had been her main source of caution at first, and she felt a huge wave of guilt course through her as she thought back on how distracted she’d grown from the issue over the last few weeks. The time had instead been spent growing more and more focused on her relationship with Draco.

She sat consumed by her guilt, staring at Pansy with her mouth hanging open.

“Does- Astoria know-”

Pansy shook her head. “And she will not be told. The shock could cause more damage than good.”

“What about Ron?”

“Same thing. It wouldn’t be smart for either of them to know. Have you ever witnessed the wrath of a parent whose child is threatened?”

Hermione thought immediately of Molly Weasley as she struck down Bellatrix Lestrange… then of Narcissa Malfoy herself lying to Voldemort’s face and risking everything to get to Draco… then to Harry’s Mother giving her life for his. She nodded almost imperceptibly, hardly able to draw breath.

In the reverse, she had made a similar sacrifice for her own parents, and she knew they would have done the same for her. She felt hot tears begin to prick at her eyes.

Her heart ached for Ron, and even for Astoria. What an unspeakably cruel thing for the child’s own Grandfather to choose, whether the pregnancy had been planned or not.

Lucius Malfoy was a monster.

She would do whatever she could to right his wrong.

“Tell me about being the key? You said you think I am the key to-”

Pansy nodded gravely and said, “to everything, yes. I think that if we work together, we can still save this, but we are going to have to act quickly.”

Hermione’s face was set as she fought back tears at the thought of her parents… of the innocent unborn child…

“Tell me what I need to do.”

Chapter End Notes
Super short one for this week. When I read other dramione fics I get pretty impatient with too much of the side relationships, so I debated including Ron/Astoria smut here and decided not to, but I also think it could make a good add-on once Sour Grapes is complete :) Perhaps something with all of the smut scenes you didn't get to see in the entire fic? Ideas ideas ideas... I need something to grasp onto as we head toward the end!!!

I estimate there will be 8 more chapters. Something like that. AAAAAH I don't want it to end but I do but I don't!

Looking forward to your comments on this one!!!
Draco was agitated.

It was Monday evening and Hermione had not yet arrived. He’d sent Astoria to the ministry to surreptitiously pass her a small package containing a portkey to his flat, but when she’d gone to do so, Hermione hadn’t been in her office. The secretary had assured Astoria that she would deliver the package as soon as Hermione was back from her meeting.

Worry pooled in his stomach. Had she received it at all? Perhaps she hadn’t come back to the office. It wouldn’t be wise for her to owl him if she couldn’t make it there, but he hadn’t predicted that she simply wouldn’t show up.

“You are going to wear a hole in that floor, mate,” Blaise said as he emerged from the spare bedroom and caught sight of Draco pacing. “Granger is a big girl, I’m sure she’s fine.”

“Are you? With my maniac Father traipsing about England unencumbered?”

“He can only visit the Manor, Draco, he told me so himself. Don’t go making this all more fucking terrifying than it already is.”

“Well what would you suggest I do, then? Play fucking gobstones with you on the balcony and soak in the warm summer air?”

Blaise looked over to the balcony and raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t say it sounds like a great idea, you prick. Any response from Potter?”

“I told you, Draco, he’s off on another mission out of the country, he’ll be gone all week.”

Draco grumbled an incoherent reply and went back to pacing the room. Something did not feel right about this; it simply was not in character for Hermione to neglect to communicate.

The evening progressed slowly, with Blaise making varied attempts to calm Draco to no avail.

Eventually, Blaise had retired to bed with Gabrielle, leaving Draco to pace and stew alone in his living room.

* * *

“Bloody hell, mate, have you been awake all night?!” Blaise exclaimed as he re-emerged from the spare bedroom the following morning, wearing only boxer shorts.

Draco sat on the couch, elbows on knees, staring at the floo.

Looking over at his friend through heavily lidded eyes he said, “she never came.”
Blaise’s eyes went wide. “Yes that’s pretty fucking apparent, but why didn’t you go to bed eventually?”

Draco turned back to the floo and shook his head, making no reply.

“Mate, it looks like you were stood up for a date at the very worst. At best, she never got the message, will you please take your head out of your arse and—”

“He knows,” Draco muttered. “My Father knows it was you and not me on Saturday night. He knows I’ve been with Hermione after he forbid it. He’s taken her.”

Again, Blaise’s eyes went wide.

“That’s quite a whacking conclusion to come to, don’t you think?”

Draco glared at him, his voice suddenly sharp. “Prove it wrong.”

Blaise held his hands out at his sides and let out a low laugh. “And how would you have me do that, Draco? It’s not as though I can go strolling into the Ministry to see if she’s turned up for work with this damn trace on me. It just doesn’t make sense Lucius has her. Much more likely she had some meeting and never returned to the office.”

Draco was hardly listening. He had been doing mental acrobatics all night to create and then review the ways in which his Father might play his hand. Would he simply do away with her and never say a word about it? Would he use her as a hostage in order to get Draco to do some sort of unspeakable things on his behalf? No matter what conclusion he came to, they all involved Hermione being hurt in some way, or worse…

And it was all his fault.

He realized with a start that Blaise was seated beside him, trying to get his attention.

“-did you hear me, Draco? I’m sure Gabi would be happy to go and look for her.”

Draco snapped his head up, his heart lightening and his stomach twisting with nerves all at once.

“What? Oh. Yes, you think she would?”

“Of course, mate. I filled her in on pretty much everything last night. I’ll go see if she’s awake, just… hang here,” Blaise said, eyeing Draco warily as he walked to the bedroom.

Draco didn’t care that he was acting like an absolute maniac. Fear had been storming inside of him ever since hearing that his Father had shown up at the Manor. He had already lost the ability to know whether his Mother was alright, and now it seemed the same was true for Hermione.

“She’s going to get dressed and head to the Ministry immediately,” Blaise said as he re-entered the room.

Draco took a deep breath and nodded, closing his eyes briefly. He was quite sure Hermione would not be there when Gabrielle called, but felt a small swell of hope that she would be, and that this all would have been a gross overreaction.
Ron sat at his office desk attempting to get some paperwork completed, but having difficulty concentrating when the image of Astoria splayed out across said desk would not stop assaulting his mind.

He sighed, a nervous swooping in his stomach occurring as he recalled that he would be spending his lunch break with her again today. It all seemed too good to be true… and yet it was.

It had been such an unexpected development when she had shown up there the previous Friday. He was still unsure what he had done to deserve such attention from her. Then again, it seemed as though they had certain things in common given their upbringing. A staunch prejudice on both sides that their mutual attraction stood clearly in the face of. They were at once a rebellion and a coming home to who they really were, beyond their parent’s ideals.

Ron felt that Astoria made him a better version of himself. More honest.

Somehow he thought he did the same for her.

Their relationship had been exclusively physical thus far, but he suspected that it ran much deeper than either of them were willing to yet acknowledge.

He didn’t just want her, he wanted her to be happy.

A small knock at his door broke his train of thought.

“It’s open!”

The door swung slowly inward to reveal Gabrielle Delacour looking timid.

“’allo Ron,” she said without moving from the doorway. He stood and began walking towards her.

“Gabrielle. What are you doing here? Come in!”

Though they were family, he had been sure that Gabrielle would never speak to him again after the scene he’d caused at her party. He couldn’t imagine why she would be coming to see him now.

She nodded and came quickly into his office shutting the door behind her, and then began to pace in front of the desk.

“I am not sure ‘ow to explain zees,” she said, “but I don’t know oo else to go to.”

Ron watched her nervously as he scoured his mind for all of the possible reasons Gabrielle would be coming to him. Was she in trouble? Perhaps something to do with Zabini?

“Gabrielle, is it… are you hurt? I know you’ve been seeing Zabini… did he?”

She snapped her head up, looking angered.

“Of course not! Zat ees not why I am ere!”

Ron recoiled. “Alright fine, then please tell me what the real reason is so I can stop making guesses that offend.”

“It’s ‘Ermione! We don’t know where she ees!”
“We? Who is we? And what are you talking about? Since when?”

“She was not een er office yesterday when Astoria went to deliver Draco’s package, an zen I went zere just now and she ‘as not come een and ere assistant does not know where she ees!”

“Wait wait, back up, Astoria went to deliver what? Something from Malfoy?”

Gabrielle froze, her face going completely white and her hand coming up to cover her mouth. “Oh merde!”

Just then another knock sounded on Ron’s door. He groaned and stalked over to tell whoever it was to bugger off. When he opened the door, however, Astoria stood there looking concerned. Glancing over at the clock, he realized it was already lunch time.

“Is everything alright?” she asked.

“No, but I’m glad you’re here, for more reasons than one,” he said, taking her hand and leading her inside.

When Astoria caught sight of Gabrielle, she started.

“Oh. Hello. I don’t believe we’ve been formally-”

“Astoria!” Gabrielle yelled, lunging forward and pulling the witch into an embrace. Astoria held her arms awkwardly out at her sides, but that didn’t seem to deter Gabrielle.

“I am so glad you ah ere!”

“Clearly,” Astoria said, glancing down at the French witch with a look of subtle amusement mixed with confusion.

“Astoria, Gabrielle reckons that you delivered a package to Hermione yesterday?”

Astoria turned her head swiftly to Gabrielle, glaring menacingly.

“Does she? I wonder where she got that idea from.”

Ron grimaced. “So it’s not true?”

Ron glanced between the two women, who seemed to be having a non-verbal conversation using only glares on Astoria’s part and frightened stares on Gabrielle’s. After a long moment of observing this, Ron lost his patience.

“Alright! Obviously, there is something going on that I know nothing about, and one of you better tell me what it is if it concerns Hermione and her safety. And what does this all have to do with Malfoy?”

Gabrielle continued to stare at Astoria, her frightened eyes begging the older witch to speak.

Astoria took a deep breath and laid a hand over her eyes. “I suppose you were going to find out eventually. Better sit down, darling.”

The use of the term of endearment caught him off guard long enough to allow his pride and frustration to abate. Obediently, he took a seat.
The floo sounded and Draco’s eyes shot open. He’d begun to doze on the couch after Gabrielle had left, finally succumbing to lack of sleep and temporarily contented that some semblance of a plan was in action. He looked up expecting to see the small French witch, but was startled by who stood before him instead.

“Weasley?”

The red-headed wizard scowled down at him, chest heaving, when suddenly Astoria tumbled out of the floo on his heels. Her usual demure nature was replaced by panic and haste.

“Ron wait! I told you I was going first!”

“Malfoy.”

Draco noted that Astoria was looking back and forth between the men, panic evident in her gaze. With a small, graceful THUMP, Gabrielle followed them out of the fireplace, her cheeks red and her expression not unlike that of his future wife.

“Ron! Draco! Oh zees is all my fault!”

Returning his attention to Ron, he realized that the recently jilted wizard must have found out about his burgeoning relationship with Hermione. Draco stood, not interested in being spoken down to by the man before him.

“To what do I owe the honor of you barging into my home, Weasley?”

“You,” Ron growled menacingly.

Draco was undeterred. Whatever the man thought, he was sorely mistaken, and Draco was not interested in a role reversal of being bullied by Ron.

“Care to finish a sentence? Whatever you have to say to me, just spit it out.”

Ron walked toward him slowly as he spoke. “You stole her from me.”

Draco raised a hand. “Let me stop you right there Weasley. She was far gone from you when we met again. I was merely there to pick up the pieces. Furthermore, never in my wildest dreams would she have been interested in me. That’s something that surprised us all, I’m afraid.”

Ron’s eyes went wide. “Oh you’ve got that right.”

Uninterested in arguing any of these points, Draco turned to Astoria and Gabrielle. “Since you’re not sounding the alarms, I assume you found her safely at work?”

Gabrielle began to sputter, and Draco’s heart dropped out of his chest. He looked to Astoria for confirmation. She held up both hands in an attempt to encourage calm.

“Now Draco, we don’t actually know what happened to her, only that she didn’t come into work today. She could very well be taking a sick day and just forgot to inform the Ministry.”

Entirely ignoring Ron Weasley’s presence now, Draco let out a frustrated yell, raking his fingers through and pulling on his hair as he resumed his previous path pacing the living room at top speed.
“She does not take sick days. The last day she stayed home was a few Thursdays ago after getting smashed at Potter’s due to my surprise presence there. We spent the day sending owls to one another and she told me she had never missed one day. It’s not something Hermione does.”

He surveyed Astoria and Gabrielle’s faces and was annoyed to see that they both seemed at a loss for what to say. Glancing over at Ron, he saw that the man looked curious. Draco ignored him.

Gabrielle began to cry quietly. “I deedint know what to do so I went to find Ron!”

The door to the spare bedroom opened and Blaise emerged in a bath robe, clearly having just come out of the shower. Seeing Gabrielle in distress, he charged across the room and wrapped his arms around her.

“What happened?” he barked to the room at large, and then more quietly to Gabrielle he said, “it’s alright love, just breathe.”

“Hermione wasn’t in her office when Gabrielle went to check, and she went to Ron for help,” said Astoria.

Blaise glared at Ron. “And you made my witch cry, is that it Weasley?”

Ron barely glanced at Blaise, still focused on Draco.

“She stayed home from work to spend the day exchanging owls with you?”

Draco rubbed his hands over his face. “I’m sure her hangover was the culprit; the letters were just happenstance after that.”

“Bollocks. That’s what hangover potion is for.”

Draco shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you Weasley.”

“Well you better know where she is then. Clearly you understand her habits,” Ron said as if he was swallowing acid to admit this. “I agree, she would never skive off work for no reason, so where is it you think she is?”

Draco swallowed hard, his heart rate quickening. He did not want to share his fears with Ron Weasley. He did not want to see the warranted blame on the man’s face for endangering the woman they both cared for. The woman they both…

No, Ron was with Astoria now, and he… well, he didn’t know where he stood with Hermione in that regard…

“Malfoy you have about five seconds before I beat it out of you.”

“As if that would help the situation, Weasley! Get a hold of yourself!”

“Me?! You’re the one who—”

“Gentlemen, please!” Astoria interjected.

“Yea, everyone calm the bloody hell down and let’s have a useful conversation about what to do next,” Blaise said from his spot on the floor next to Gabrielle.

Draco resumed pacing, while Ron slumped onto one of the chairs. Blaise helped Gabrielle up and after he went and changed into his robes, everyone was seated in the living room in an awkward
silence. Ron hadn’t taken his eyes off Draco, who was deep in tortured thought.

Draco took a deep breath, not looking any of them in the eye.

“I have a suspicion that my… Father has somehow abducted her, due to the fact that he forbade me see her again, and we have been sneaking around and evading his notice… or so we thought.”

Ron stood. “Lucius Malfoy is in Azkaban.”

“It would seem,” said Blaise, “that he has something of an agreement with the staff there.”

“What does that mean?!?” Ron asked, incredulously.

When Draco didn’t answer, Ron turned back to Blaise. “Draco’s been tongue tied, he knows but he can’t say. I happened to run into Lucius when I was polyjuice’d as Draco at Malfoy Manor, and from our conversation I inferred that he is able to travel at least to the Manor, and who knows what other free reign he has.”

Ron looked flabbergasted. “We need to report this!”

Draco, Blaise, Astoria and Gabrielle all yelled, “No!” in unison. Ron recoiled, looking around at all of them.

“He’s threatened my Mother,” Draco said, and he was embarrassed to hear the crack in his voice as he said it. Ron stared at him, his mouth hanging open and an expression of pain across his face. Draco knew how important Ron’s Mother was to him. The two men shared an ever so brief moment of understanding.

“And now he’s taken Hermione,” Draco said solemnly.

Something in Ron seemed to snap back into place. “So this is your fault.”

Draco winced and buried his head in his hands.

“Weasley,” Blaise said forcefully, “Draco hasn’t slept all night, he’s worried sick and he’s been beating the ever-loving shit out of himself over this. While I can appreciate your anger, I don’t think directing it at him is going to help much in this moment, so will you please calm the fuck down and shut your trap?”

“Furthermore,” Astoria said, “any one of us is just as guilty as Draco.”

All three men looked over at her in surprise. She did not waver. “We were all complicit in this plan. If Lucius did indeed take her, it is on all of our heads.”

Blaise nodded in agreement. “That’s right mate, we were all fighting to make it work between you two so you could break the promise.”

Ron turned his attention to Blaise now. “Break the promise? But I thought that wasn’t possible…”

“Ron, darling… I didn’t share this part with you… but for a reason,” Astoria said sheepishly.

And awkward silence followed in which neither Blaise, Draco or Astoria wanted to offer Ron an explanation. Suddenly a small voice interrupted the silence.

“Ess eet true love?”
They all turned toward Gabrielle who had finally calmed down and was innocently staring back at each of them in turn.

A cacophony of ums ahs and ers went around the room. Draco looked over at Astoria and noted that she was doing anything but looking at Ron.

After another long silence, Blaise stood pulling Gabrielle with him and turned to Draco.

“How about that game of gobstones, mate?”

* * *

Draco, Blaise, and Gabrielle had exited to the terrace to give Ron and Astoria a moment alone.

“Deed I say somesink wrong again?” Gabrielle cried.

“No my love, you merely said aloud what others were only thinking. It was bound to come out and it might as well be now.”

Draco glanced through the glass at the stilted conversation Astoria was having with her beau.

“I doubted Weasley had it in him to be truly in love in the first place, let alone now when he knows it would matter. Prat was never good under pressure.”

Blaise shrugged. “Honestly, mate, I wasn’t placing my bets on them in the first place. That relationship is purely physical. They’re going to need more time.”

“Yea, if they get that time at all,” Draco said, letting out a low laugh. Then he thought again of Hermione and the panic he had been distracted from returned in full measure.

“Fuck. What are we going to do about Hermione? Standing around discussing this has eaten up a considerable amount of time we could have spent figuring this out.”

“No worries, I’ve been concocting a plan this whole time.”

Draco looked up at his friend and was relieved to see that he looked sincere.

“You have?”

Blaise shrugged again. “With Potter out of the picture for the moment, you need a good co-conspirator. My witch is right here, my head is level, I’m the man for the job.”

Draco glanced from Blaise to Gabrielle and considered saying something heartfelt to his oldest friend, but found that the words were stuck in his throat. He wanted to thank him profusely for always being there for him. He wanted to tell him how much it meant that he would give up his time and essentially his life just to help Draco. He wanted to express his deepest possible gratitude.

Instead, he merely nodded while making stern eye contact, and he could tell that his friend intuited his meaning without the words.

Blaise smiled over at Gabrielle. “Darling, do you think you could manage another trip to the ministry? We need to put in an official missing person’s report on Hermione.”
Gabrielle perked up immediately. “But of course!”

They kissed, and Draco looked away, gazing instead out over London. The gorgeous day was mocking his inner state of turmoil.

Blaise gave Gabrielle a few detailed instructions on where to go and precisely what to say to the Ministry officials and sent her on her way. When he turned back, Draco was scowling at him.

His friend shrugged for a third time and said, “I’ve had to do it for a few of my… er… Fathers.”

Draco grimaced. “Right.”

“Now, the papers likely won’t be notified immediately. There’s a waiting period before someone is officially considered missing. Probably tomorrow morning.”

“Alright…” Draco said, eager to hear the rest of his friend’s plan. He failed to see what could be done.

“We need to rule out the theory that Lucius has her,” Blaise said simply.

“But.”

Blaise held up a hand to stop him.

“Look Draco, I am with you. I completely see why you think it… and we still need confirmation. Who knows where she is, anything could have happened. Think about it.”

Draco supposed he had a point. He realized that while capture by his Father would be horrible, it was also easier to stop at that conclusion than to imagine the countless other possibilities of where she could be.

Perhaps she decided that she didn’t want to be with him and went abroad, for instance. It had crossed his mind, but he was refusing to entertain it. He thought he knew her feelings, but whenever they were apart he began to doubt…

“Alright fine, we need confirmation. How do you propose we attain that?”

Blaise smiled. “Come on, we’ll need their help,” he said, motioning for them to go back inside to finish their discussion.

* * *

When Draco and Blaise reentered the living room, it was to find Ron and Astoria in a passionate embrace. Apparently, Gabrielle had gone right by them and exited without disturbing their progress.

“Oi!” Blaise yelled.

“No one needs to see that,” Draco said, shielding his view by holding his hand out at arm’s length.

The two lovers broke apart and looked up at them with flushed cheeks.

“If you two are finished, we need to find Hermione,” Draco said.
As if coming out of a trance, Ron shot up at attention. “Oh right, ‘Mione. I... forgot.”

“Stori is one hell of a snog, eh Weasley?”

Ron furrowed his brow angrily, looking from Blaise to Astoria in panicked confusion. Astoria held up her hands.

“Ignore him,” she said sternly.

“But-” Ron made to argue, but Astoria grabbed his face with one hand, forcing him to look only into her eyes.

“Your lips are the only ones that matter to me. If you get jealous and force me to prove that to you over and over again, it will annoy me to the extent that I will hex you, and Zabini here would even caution you against chancing it.”

Blaise raised a hand. “It’s true, she’s vicious. Goes right for the balls.”

Ron’s eyes widened.

“Am I understood?” Astoria asked.

Ron stared at Astoria, his look softening into one of deep admiration. Then he nodded, eyes staring down at her lips. She leaned in and kissed him hard, hand still gripping his face as she ended the kiss and pushed his mouth away.

Draco stood watching this, arms crossed and head titled in contemplation.

“This match is finally making complete sense to me.”

“Oh shove off, Malfoy,” Ron said with a bit less fervor than would be expected. “What’s the plan?”

* * *

The prim and proper form of Narcissa Malfoy sat up straight in her hospital bed, unfolding the Daily Prophet and feeling a swoop in her stomach upon reading the headline.

**Hermione Granger Missing!**

It is with great regret that we inform the wizarding world, our very own Golden Girl, Hermione Granger, has been reported missing as of Tuesday June 24th, 2003. However, the last reported sighting of Ms. Granger was sometime on the afternoon of Monday the 23rd according to her secretary Artemis Flume. “It’s really unlike her to just disappear! She never misses a workday and always checks in with me if she’s leaving early or coming in late. We’re all racked with worry!” said her secretary upon interrogation at the ministry yesterday afternoon.

Flume also revealed that Ms. Granger’s last meeting prior to leaving the Ministry was with her former schoolmate, Pansy Parkinson. Ms. Parkinson, largely removed from wizarding society after the war, is of pureblood descent and sources say she was something of a bully to Ms. Granger in their school days. She is currently wanted for questioning in this case but has yet to make herself known.

Narcissa stopped reading and folded the paper. Mumbling to herself, she said, “that’s my cue.”
Checking the clock, she noted that the healers would not be in to insist she eat again for another two hours. Perfect.

Reaching down below her hospital robes, she pulled her wand out of its holster and unlocked the binds keeping her in the bed with a simple tap.

Glancing out in the hall once more to make sure the coast was clear, she pointed her wand at herself and said, “finite incantatem!”

A gruesome transformation began to take place. The one streak of black hair on her head seeming to grow and spread, taking over as the dominant color. Her wrinkles faded and skin became taut. Her long nose was replaced by a slightly more pug-like one.

Pansy Parkinson cast a disillusionment charm on herself since she was now wanted for questioning, before turning on the spot and disapparating out of St. Mungos. In a few hours’ time, the healers would be sounding the alarms, and by then she would be long gone.

Chapter End Notes

Looking forward to all of your thoughts and theories! There might actually be less than 8 chapters left, but certainly not more. We shall see!

Feel free to ask me anything on tumblr between updates: liliansilverstuff
Escaped

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Narcissa Malfoy ESCAPED!

The wife of Death Eater Lucius Malfoy and Mother to recently redeemed ex-Death Eater Draco Malfoy was discovered to have escaped sometime yesterday morning from her heavily guarded room in St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Mrs. Malfoy had been serving a sentence at Azkaban Prison and was expected to remain there for the foreseeable future. Following a sudden illness, the details of which we have not been exclusively privy to, Mrs. Malfoy was removed from the prison to receive treatment, only to disappear from her hospital bed inexplicably sometime Thursday morning.

The guards and healers who were brought in for questioning seemed to have been confounded, unable to recall any suspicious activity that may have led to the escape. As Azkaban residents are not permitted to carry wands, and it is highly unlikely that Mrs. Malfoy performed wandless magic in her condition, it can only be concluded that accomplices were involved. However, the hospital holds no record of any visitors to the floor, and nor can the prison or hospital staff involved tell us anything of note in regard to the matter.

“Truly it is a dizzying and unexpected turn of events. The hospital, along with the Auror office will be conducting a full enquiry. Presumably, if our staff have been confounded, we will be able to restore their memories and discover who the culprit was,” said Miriam Strout, recently appointed Head of Hospital. “We can only hope there is no Death Eater involvement in this matter.”

Blaise stopped reading and looked up at Draco.

“They’re going to want you in for questioning.”

Draco heard him, but couldn’t break from his current train of thought. What did this mean? How had his Mother accomplished such a feat, and why? Was this part of his Father’s plan, or was this a rebellion on his Mother’s part? Was there a link between Hermione’s disappearance and his Mother’s escape? The two seemed connected, and yet he could not for the life of him riddle out how.

“Draco, did you hear me? We’re going to need to rethink our entire plan.”

Finally, he looked up at his oldest friend through tired eyes; he had still hardly slept but for the few potion-induced naps that had been forced upon him by Blaise… and Ron, of all people.

Never in his life had he imagined being held down and forced a potion by the red-headed barmiest wizard of their age, and in his own home.

“I heard you.”

Blaise shook his head, while Ron shifted awkwardly where he stood. “Are you… are you alright, Malfoy?” he asked, tentatively.

Draco glared at him. They’d been plotting and planning together the entire day previous, and while Draco had come to accept the man’s presence there, he was not interested in becoming chums. When Draco made no response other than the glare, Ron threw up both hands and sat back in his seat.

“Fine, sorry for giving a shit about your mental state. I’ll go back to reviling you in every sense of the word, shall I?”
Draco felt the slightest pang of guilt at this. He was not alright, but he could scarcely admit that to himself or Blaise, let alone to a Weasley.

“You can’t just ask him outright, Weasley,” Blaise said, then turned to smile at Draco. “Draco isn’t quite so easy as that.”

“Oh bugger off, the both of you. I’m trying to think,” said Draco, who was biting his lower lip raw in a similar fashion to the way Hermione always did when she was worried.

“It’s just,” Ron began, clearly unable to take Blaise’s advice, “your Mum is missing now, on top of your… Hermione.”

There was an awkward pause in which the fact that Ron he called her “your Hermione” hung in the air without dissipating.

Ron looked away and in an effort to change the subject, mumbled, “I would be in a right state if my Mum was also missing.”

“Yes, and while being in a state likely would mean storming around breaking things and screaming baseless admonitions at the sky, some of us lean a bit more toward subtlety, Weasley.”

“Oh, I see… so your stoic inward mental torture is a mark of pureblood refinement, is that it?”

Draco glared at him once more. “That’s right. Ten points to Gryffindor, it seems you can be competent when you try hard enough.”

“Oh that’s enough!”

Astoria had returned in the middle of their argument, unnoticed by all. Draco noticed that upon seeing her, Ron looked like a child being caught stealing an extra helping of treacle tart.

“Hello Astoria,” they all chorused bitterly. She’d been playing referee for the past day as they had worked to formulate the best plan for infiltrating Lucius’s operation.

“Honestly, the more time you all spend yelling at one another, the more time passes where we are getting no nearer finding Hermione.”

Draco and Ron began speaking at the same time, each informing her of the reasons why they were individually not to blame. She held up a hand for silence and they obeyed.

“Draco,” she said, as she strode across the room, coming to kneel beside him and placing a hand on his shoulder. “I saw the papers. Your Mother. Are you alright?”

He scowled at Ron briefly before turning to Astoria. His eyes softened and he shook his head, speaking quietly in hope of not being overheard by any but her.

“I don’t know what the fuck is happening, Stori, and there’s nothing I can do.”

Dimly, he thought he heard Ron whispering something to the effect of, “how come he’ll tell her?”

“Nonsense, there is plenty to do,” she said, standing. “First thing’s first, the Ministry will be calling. They’ll want to question you about your Mother.”

“I have nothing to tell them.”

“Yes, that’s true, however you can’t go evading them. Probably best that we go straight to the
Blaise stood. “Then it needs to be me as Draco. I know it’s been a few days since he was seen publicly, so the trace may have worn off, but we can’t chance it.”

“The question is,” said Ron, “do you mention anything to them about Lucius and the Manor?”

Draco looked up, mouth agape. “Weasley, it’s too dangerous. What if my Mother’s escape is all a ruse and he has her held somewhere? If I publicly defy him, I’m pretty much asking him to hurt her, or Hermione, and we have no confirmation that either of them are safe at this point.” The words seemed to leave his mouth with ease, and yet the pain they caused was stabbing at his insides. It had been a strange twenty-four hours of moving between riddling it all out in his head, versus talking it out among the group. He couldn’t decide what was worse, the feeling of being stuck and helpless when he tried to think it all through alone, or the sting of hearing the truth out loud when shared with others.

“Alright then, we need to find out where they are and whether they’re safe,” Ron concluded.

Draco’s stomach dropped. The odds that Hermione was safe… seemed low. The same went for his Mother. To think of them both at once brought forth a truth he did not want to face: at least one of the two was likely in peril. It seemed hopeless, and his worry began to swallow him again.

Suddenly Ron shouted, “We can use the Order!”

Draco groaned.

This was the second time Ron had made this particular suggestion and it had elicited the same effect the day before.

Ron had already alerted all of the old members of the Order of the Phoenix regarding Hermione’s whereabouts. Draco could not imagine that the same people would join in any sort of effort to find his Mother, especially because she was a wanted fugitive.

“Oh brilliant,” Draco drawled, “that way they can make sure she’s chucked back in Azkaban as soon as possible.”

Ron grimaced, “Oh you are insufferable, you know that? In case it has escaped your notice, I’m attempting to be not only civil but also decent to you, Malfoy. The least you could do is to give me the benefit of the doubt!”

“Fine, Weasley, please elaborate. What good do you see in bringing your Order into this?”

“As if reading his thoughts, Weasley replied, “it’s true. Harry told everyone about how your Mum lied to Voldemort about him being dead. Sure, she did it to get to you, but she did it nonetheless. She seems, in my Mum’s opinion, to have been more of a pawn than anything else. My Mum sympathizes with her. Says the Order should find her before the Ministry at large. Thankfully, the Minister himself is an Order member, so it’s likely that an operation is already underway.”

“If that’s the case, Weasley, then why has my Mother been locked up all this…” he trailed off as the answer dawned on him. How could he have forgotten his Father’s misdeeds? It had all been momentarily struck from his mind, seeing as how it was information he couldn’t share with anyone,
tongue tied as he was. His Mother was being held by Lucius alone. She was being taught a lesson.

In that moment, something else occurred to him.

His Mother would never allow herself to be separated from her son. She had once before been sent to St. Mungo’s when she had refused to eat. Presumably, she could have pulled the same stunt just to get herself to a place where there was lessened security. A place where it would be easier for her to escape. To get to him.

It started to fit. His Father had just revoked visiting rights, intent on keeping Mother and Son apart.

That had been Lucius’s mistake.

“My Mother is alright,” Draco announced suddenly, his mind now crystal clear.

Blaise, Astoria and Ron all began questioning him, but he brushed away their queries with the flick of a hand. “I just know. This isn’t part of my Father’s plan, he’s scrambling. Probably enraged, probably panicked, probably-”

But none of them heard what else Lucius Malfoy was probably feeling, because a large brown owl flew through the hatch at that moment and landed next to Draco.

“That’s a prison bird,” Draco said matter-of-factly as he reached out to detach the letter. Endeavoring not to rip it in his haste, Draco peeled open the note and read.

--

Draco,

I am sure by now you have heard of your Mother’s escape. This changes nothing. She will surely be recaptured forthwith.

It does, however, change the plans for your wedding. With all the scandal surrounding her escape, it is only right to pull back from the grandiosity of a formal wedding.

You and Ms. Greengrass are to report to the Ministry on Monday next at 9am to be legally bound in matrimony. Mr. Greengrass has already made the arrangements and secured you that date. The formal wedding celebration will be postponed until further notice.

L.M.

--

As his eyes reached the end of the page, the letter dissolved into ash and floated up into the air, slowly disappearing as it went.

“Blimey. What’s that spell, then?” said Ron.

“Never mind that, what did it say, Draco?”

Draco looked up at Blaise and then over to Astoria. “They’ve moved our wedding up. To Monday.”
Astoria’s mouth hung open. No one spoke for a while, but eventually his future wife found her voice. “So this is really happening, then.”

“It seems so,” Draco said, a slight quaver to his voice.

Ron looked from Draco to Astoria with a sense of indignation. Suddenly he strode over to Astoria and took both of her hands in his. He looked determinedly into her eyes with the concentration of a keeper trying to determine which hoop the quaffle would fly to.

“I love you, Astoria Greengrass!”

Astoria’s eyes went wide and she jerked her head back while Ron’s expression remained entirely serious, if a bit aggressive. Blaise dropped his face into his hands and Draco bit his fist to keep from laughing. Suddenly, Astoria burst out in a fit of giggles. Ron looked around the room at each of them in quick succession.

“What are you all on about?! I love her!”

Now Blaise and Draco both joined the cacophony of laughter, bent double with tears nearly streaming from their eyes.

“Oh! Oh Ron, darling!” Astoria said between laughs, gasping for air, “please stop saying it!”

“But it’s true, I love you!”

Another wave of laughter overtook them, as they all fell onto couches or chairs, hitting the armrests for emphasis. Ron crossed his arms and pouted, waiting for them to stop.

It took a few minutes.

“Oh Weasley, you are such a bloody Gryffindor,” said Blaise, as he was the first to regain composure. “But thanks, I believe we all needed that laugh.”

Draco’s overwhelming sense of mirth dissipated fairly quickly, however.

As watched Ron glare back at Blaise, he felt an unfamiliar note of sympathy for the man. Ron might have been an imbecile. He might have been stupid enough to lose Hermione, though Draco would have to thank him for that someday.

What the wizard lacked in subtlety, however, he made up for in bravery. Draco never thought he’d find himself envying the signature trait of the lions, but he’d also never before been faced with a task like the one before him.

He’d done all he could to achieve the task of killing Albus Dumbledore without having to apply an ounce of courage. That task went against who he truly was, so there was no reason to use his guts to achieve it. It was all an effort to avoid something terrible, rather than to move toward a brighter future.

Hermione Granger, it turned out, was his brighter future. For the first time in his life, he was going to have to fight for what he wanted, rather than against what he didn’t.

He didn’t know why yet, but it seemed an important revelation in that moment.

Weasley, for his part, clearly wanted to be in love. A few days of courting was clearly not sufficient to produce such a result from a genuine place, and yet… he knew what he wanted, and he was
willing to say it out loud. For that, Draco respected him. The sensation of feeling respect for Ron Weasley felt foreign in his body. He shook it off quickly, but still crossed the room and put a conciliatory hand on Ron’s shoulder.

“An admirable attempt to break the promise, but I’m afraid your feelings aren’t strong enough to get through the barriers of such dark magic as our Fathers have invoked.”

Blaise and Astoria stood stock still observing the unlikely goodwill coming from Draco, waiting for the volcanic eruption that would predictably come.

Rather than explode in anger, however, Ron shrugged and said, “I ‘spose it was a long shot.”

Then, turning to Astoria, he added, “I sure as hell love that baby of ours, though I ‘spose that won’t count?” He looked glumly down at her stomach and ran his hands over it before looking back up into her eyes.

She put her hands on his cheeks and whispered, “I’m sorry for laughing.”

He shrugged, “It’s alright. I’m a bloody idiot.”

She shook her head. “No, you’re sweet. And you’re going to be a wonderful Father, even if our family is all fucked up and odd.” With that, she kissed him, and it was too much for Blaise or Draco to stomach.

“If you two are finished,” Draco began, causing the couple to pull apart and give him their attention. “We should probably get to the Ministry.”

“Right, I’ll get the polyjuice and let Gabi know. She’s having a lie in,” Blaise said with a smirk.

“Yes, I imagine so given how late you were both up,” Draco called after him. “You know you can silence your room, right?”

Blaise shrugged, now grinning. “Can’t help it if I forget while in the throes of passionate lovemaking!”

A small voice came from behind the closed door of the spare bedroom. “Blaise what ah you telling them?!”

“Nothing, my dulcet darling!” he called back, just as he reached the door and disappeared.

“Right, then… I’m going to Dad. I’ll find out if there’s any update on the search for Hermione and then see what’s being done to locate your Mum.”

Draco nodded, but Astoria looked suddenly anxious.

“Do you think-” she blurted out, “I could go with you, Ron?”

“But you have to accompany me to the Ministry,” Blaise said.

Without missing a beat, Astoria reached up and plucked a few strands of her hair, reaching out to offer them to Draco.

“There’s an entire wardrobe of my clothes here, and I don’t trust him,” she motioned to Blaise, “with my body.”

Draco stared at her, dumbstruck, while Blaise and Ron cried out with arguments against this idea.
Astoria once again held up a hand and they all fell silent. “I’d like to meet the future Grandparents of my child. Perhaps I can be of some other use in these efforts as well.”

Then she grabbed Ron’s hand and turned to the floo, signaling the end of the conversation.

“Where is the Order located?” Astoria asked.

“We, uh, set up at our old headquarters. It’s in London, but I’ll have to take you inside the Fidelius charm- no floo yet, it’ll have to be apparition,” Ron said, clearly still shocked by Astoria’s desire to meet his parents.

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

Startled, Ron held out his arm. Astoria turned to Draco and Blaise, threw them a smile and a wave, and took Ron’s arm. The pair disappeared with a loud CRACK.

The two remaining wizards looked down simultaneously at the strands of Astoria’s hair.

“I knew I’d eventually get to snog you, Draco,” Blaise said with a devilish grin.

Draco sighed deeply, but made no retort. He walked stoically to the bedroom where, for appearances sake, some of Astoria’s clothes were kept in a large ornate wardrobe.

* * *

Pansy appeared at the wrought iron gates topped with winged boars that she hadn’t seen in so many years. In the distance, she could make out a cloaked figure coming down to meet her.

Finally, the tall, lean form of Neville Longbottom came into clear view. Her stomach flipped. He’d know all about her potions by now.

“Parkinson,” he said in a colorless voice, then pointed his wand and magically unlocked the gates.

“Hi, Neville,” she replied in a small voice.

She had expected someone else to meet her, but supposed it made sense it would be him, being a Professor and all.

Neville jerked his head in the direction of the castle. “Let’s go. Room of requirement.”

Pansy grimaced. “Why in there?”

Without looking at her, Neville said, “It’s secure and out of the way. There are still some students here who had late exams. We didn’t want to take chances of them being seen.”

They were silent as they walked, and Pansy thought the iciness he was giving off was entirely valid. She wanted to tell him as much, but instinct persuaded her to follow his lead.

After several minutes of silence, Neville stopped walking abruptly and turned to her, taking a deep breath.

“Was it all a lie to you?” he said. She’d never seen him properly angry before. In the back of her
mind she registered that it suited him.

“I- it-” she sputtered.

“Look it doesn’t matter to me anymore, Pansy, I’m with Hannah now and we’re to be married, but ever since I found out I just- can’t stop wondering what our- what that was even about. Was I ever of sound mind?!”

She looked up at him, wide-eyed. “Neville,” she whispered.

“Or were you just messing me about, dousing me with love potions and Merlin knows what else and then going home to laugh about it after?!”

Overwhelmed by a sudden flood of sadness, Pansy burst into tears and dropped to the ground. They were in the castle now, and she leant against the stone wall to steady herself. Neville stood stock still, looking down at her, showing no signs of empathy.

When she regained the ability to form a sentence, she said, “Neville I have to tell you something.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Something else?! Do I even want to know?!”

“Probably not,” she mumbled, looking at the ground.

“Well get your arse off the floor then and spit it out.”

Shaking herself, she quickly stood and wiped tears from her eyes before meeting his. Taking a deep breath, she said, “I never gave you any potions.”

He gaped at her in disbelief. “But Ron said…”

She nodded. “He accused me of it. I just didn’t deny it because I figured, in the end… you’d come off better. Probably not- not wanting to be associated with me… like that.”

He continued to gape, his brain clearly whirring with the new information.

“So I- so we-”

She waved a hand in a resigned way. “It was all real. Too real. Why do you think I did a runner?”

After a bit more stunned staring Neville managed an, “Oh.”

Then after a long silence he said, “I just assumed you were embarrassed to be seen with me.”

“Well,” she cringed, “I kind of was?”

He looked up at her, clearly offended and she held up both hands. “Sorry Neville, but I’m doing this new honesty thing and sometimes I just-”

“Never mind, it’s fine,” he said, with a wave of his hand.

“Look that was only because I was a bloody moron back then! I mean look at you, you’re fit as fuck! I was just worried what people would think and far too self-conscious to actually believe you could like me without… without my potions.”

He looked at her sadly and shook his head.

“But it doesn’t matter anymore, does it? You’ve got someone now. Congratulations, by the way,”
she said, and managed a small smile.

“Thanks,” he said with a grimace, clearly still hung up on what she had just confessed.

The pity stung worse than the anger, but then that always did seem to be the case.

“We better go, I’m sure there’s lots to sort out. We mustn’t keep our Mistress waiting,” she said, making to continue walking down the corridor. Neville grabbed her hand and spun her around.

“Pansy… thank you.”

She raised her eyebrows and shook her head. “I told you, everyone is getting the truth these days. It’s the only mode I operate in-”

“I meant,” he interjected, “for what you’re doing for Hermione. And Ron for that matter.”

She looked down and he was still holding her hand. He let go as soon as he noticed as well, and she felt her heartrate increase. It didn’t matter, however; she was not about to add homewrecker to her list of misdeeds. She had lost her chance with him a long time ago, and that was that.

Steeling herself, she straightened out her robes and said, “It’s really the least I can do given… given my part in all this.”

He had his hands in his pockets and was smirking at her in a way that made her stomach dance.

Desperately needing to end the interaction, she gave a stiff nod and began walking again. Mercifully, he followed, and she knew that they’d soon be busy with much more urgent matters that would require their full attention.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to all you lovely readers. I adore your commentary and always look forward to hearing your thoughts! It keeps me going!

Chapter 38 will be up next Friday and we will discover some of what is happening in the RoR ;) thanks for hanging with this story, whether you just showed up or have been here since November 1st!

Hang with me on tumblr: liliansilverstuff
Lucius Malfoy stood in the middle of his clean, white suite at Azkaban, surveying the room.

Corbyn’s body lay a few feet away from him, surrounded by a pool of blood.

Sectumsempra had been Snape’s creation, but Lucius had always favored the spell in place of a clean Avada. More satisfying when he was this angry.

The bodies of six other guards were strewn about the room. He’d used poison to avoid exhausting his magic, saving the one spell for the man who had failed him most deeply. Before the Aurors had had a chance to interrogate them all, Lucius had used his own methods to extract their memories.

He couldn’t have his secrets getting out, though he assumed that his wife knew more than he could afford by now, and was likely spreading her knowledge far and wide. Then again, it was a bit foreboding that the prison was not already swarming with Aurors. Surely, she must be up to something, and whatever it was, it could not be good.

It was time to act.

Stepping over the many bodies, he crossed to his floo and grabbed a handful of powder.

“Malfoy Manor!” he shouted, and he disappeared into the hearth.

* * *

Draco had never been so uncomfortable in his life. He thought the high heels would be the difficult part, but why did women constrain their waists in such a torturous way? No wonder Astoria always tended to be in such a haughty attitude, she had every right to resent the world she was always dressing up for.

Affecting her general demeanor was simple, though as he glanced over at Blaise he had to scoff.

“You aren’t quite capturing my essence, you know.”

Blaise scowled back at him. “I’ve been donning your appearance for over a week, I think I know what I’m doing. By the way, Astoria does not sneer that way.”

Draco fixed his face as the lift came to a halt, forcing down his next retort as they reached the offices of the DMLE. He linked arms with Blaise, thinking how bizarre it was to be taking his own arm. He never would have agreed to this ridiculous farce, but thought he owed it to Astoria to give her some
time alone with Ron, as much as he still couldn’t believe she would want it. Besides, better to have them both out of the way.

They approached the witch at the front desk and Draco nearly spoke first, before realizing that that would have to be Blaise’s job.

“Hello! Can you tell us who to speak to about Narcissa Malfoy’s disappearance?”

The young witch looked up, her eyes widening in shock when she took in Blaise’s appearance.

“You’re Draco Malfoy!” she exclaimed stupidly.

Blaise grinned. “In the flesh!”

Draco looked away and muttered, “you fucking tosser” under his breath, causing the witch before them to grimace and cock her head at his polyjuiced form.

“Wow, uh, well… that will be Mr. Brooks, I’ll let him know that you’re here,” she said, rising from her seat. She walked off in the direction of the offices off the hall on the left and as soon as she was out of sight, Draco rounded on Blaise.

“Is this always how you portray me or are you just trying to get a rise out of me?”

His raised voice cause a couple of people at nearby desks to look up. Through gritted teeth, Blaise said, “please keep it down darling, you’re drawing undue attention to us.”

Draco rolled his eyes and crossed his arms in a very Astoria-like manner, before realizing that it would reflect poorly on him to have his fiancé looking annoyed with him in public. Upon realizing how it must look, he dropped his arms and softened his expression, throwing a simpering smile toward Blaise. “Sorry my love, I’m just worried about my dear future mother-in-law and it has me a bit on edge,” he said, reaching out to take Blaise’s (his own) hands, “as I’m sure you are.”

Blaise raised an eyebrow and a small smirk appeared on his lips. Draco sensed his mistake far too late.

“You are incredibly sweet, Stori, to worry about her so. What would I do without you by my side?”

And with that, he leaned in and kissed Draco deeply.

It was easily the strangest thing he had ever experienced, and there was nothing he could do but accept the kiss as a willing participant in the whole spectacle. He thought, or hoped, it would be over quickly, but Blaise did not relent. It wasn’t until the secretary came back, interrupting them with a small cough, that Blaise released him. Of course, every eye in the room had been on them, and Draco’s cheeks flushed red in embarrassment, confusion, and anger.

“Mr. Brooks will see you now! You can follow me right this way,” she said, emitting a small giggle and making a sweeping motion with her hand.

They followed in her wake, and Draco took the opportunity of having his arm wrapped tightly around Blaise’s to send the best wandless stunning hex he could manage, aimed right at his crotch. Blaise doubled over and cried out immediately, and Draco patted him on the back.

“Anapneo!” Draco shouted, pointing his wand at Blaise’s throat and turning apologetically to the witch leading the way, “he took one of the mints from your desk, must have gone down the wrong pipe!”
“Oh dear! I do that all the time!” she said in a conciliatory tone, and then turned and continued leading them down the hall.

Blaise recovered quickly and tugged Draco closer to him as they walked. “Thank you, my pet, you are always right there when I need you.”

Draco grinned before remembering why they were there. A brief moment of distraction from the reality before him was, however, quite welcome, and he found himself feeling privately grateful for his friend by his side.

Bespectacled Mr. Brooks rose to greet them both. “Mr. Malfoy! Thank you for responding to the summons owl so quickly.”

Draco opened his mouth to respond before again remembering that he was playing the part of doting fiancé for the day. As Blaise shook hands with the man, Draco said, “I do hope this won’t take too long, Mr. Brooks, my future husband is quite torn up about his Mother’s disappearance.”

Mr. Brooks’ nodded sympathetically. “Of course. So shall I take that to mean you have received no communication from your Mother, Mr. Malfoy?”

“I have had no contact with my Mother since June the 9th when I went to visit her in Azkaban, Mr. Brooks. I’m sure if you check the records there, you will see as much.”

The man looked down at some paperwork in front of him and nodded. “Yes that’s what I have here. Of course, any illicit owls or floo calls wouldn’t have been tracked,” he said, glaring at Blaise over the top of his spectacles. “You’re certain you’ve received no knowledge of her whereabouts?”

“I have not.”

“And if you do, you will come straight to the Ministry to let us know, correct?”

Blaise hesitated, looking over at Draco who gave an almost imperceptible nod in response. Before Blaise could reply, however, Mr. Brooks spoke again.

“I am aware that your reputation in wizarding society has changed recently Mr. Malfoy. We wouldn’t want it sliding back to how it was previously now would we?”

Blaise looked affronted at first, and Draco gave him a nudge to indicate that he should answer in the affirmative. Straightening his face, Blaise said sternly, “I will certainly come straight to you if I hear anything from my Mother, Sir.”

Mr. Brooks scrutinized Blaise carefully before giving a curt nod. “Wonderful,” he said, pulling out his wand, “then I’m sure you wouldn’t mind consenting to a simple oath of truth? It will make it so that if either of you receive communication from Narcissa Malfoy and do not report it, I will be magically notified on my end.”

Draco and Blaise had the same shocked look in response to this. Mr. Brooks allowed a small smile. “It’s a recent invention, lads. Judging by your expressions you haven’t heard of it before?”

They both shook their heads, still looking aghast. Mr. Brooks seemed unperturbed. “Right, then shall I cast the spells? It’s done similarly to the unbreakable vow, but there’s no dark magic involved, and of course, no death!” he said with a laugh.

Neither Draco nor Blaise laughed in reply. Mr. Brooks seemed to be quite enjoying himself, now that he had them trapped.
Having no other choice, they both consented and had the spells performed on them. Once that was complete, Mr. Brooks bid them a far too jovial “good day!” and they strode from the office.

“Well, bollocks,” Blaise said without moving his mouth.

“Just keep walking, we need to get out of here.”

Once the golden grille on the lift slammed shut, Blaise rounded on Draco. “We are absolutely fucked! Now we have to worry about hearing from your Mother in addition to the worrying we’ve been doing about NOT hearing from her!”

“I know, I know, alright? No need to scream it in my face. I’m trying to think.”

Blaise ignored him, pacing restlessly as the lift ascended. “Oh!” he said, spinning around and facing Draco again, “Hex me in the balls, Malfoy? Your own balls??”

“My polyjuiced balls, not the same thing,” Draco mumbled, “oh and by the way, how do my tonsils taste you fucking tosser?!”

“Delightful, thank you! Though I have to wonder how you manage a good snog with these thin lips of yours. I have sympathy for you mate. Not much at all to work with here.”

“If you weren’t wearing my face I would knock you out right here,” Draco growled as they reached the Atrium.

Draco checked the clock on the wall of the entryway and saw that they only had 15 minutes before the polyjuice would wear off. “Come on, let’s get back before someone-”

“Well if it isn’t my favorite betrothed couple!”

Draco and Blaise froze at the sound of Rita Skeeter’s voice.

There was no escape, they were still too far from the floos to feign deafness and disappear. They turned to face her instead.

“Hello Rita,” Draco said brightly.

Rita looked slightly puzzled. “Not the greeting I’m accustomed to from you, Ms. Greengrass, not that I mind of course! I’ll take surprised and delighted over haughty and annoyed any day.”

Draco cursed himself inwardly. Of course Astoria wouldn’t have been happy to see Rita. It was a mistake he only made because he’d been rattled by the oath they’d been forced to take, as well as their lack of time.

He looked pleadingly over at Blaise who had dealt with Rita a number of times already, urging him silently to take the lead.

In an impeccable impression of Draco, for once, Blaise turned to her and said, “we are short on time at the moment, Rita, can we cut to your questions and be on our way? As you know, my Mother has gone missing, and-”

“Missing? Is that what you’re calling it? From my view she is an escaped fugitive, Draco. Far more interesting than a disappearance, though I daresay my cup runneth over this week with both this news as well as that of Miss Muggleborn Priss and her actual disappearance. Tell me, do you think the two are related? You are a friend of Miss Granger, are you not?”
“What?” Draco and Blaise chorused in unison, eye’s wide.

Rita looked between them, a greedy and suspicious look in her eye.

“Interesting reactions,” she cooed. They all stood staring for a moment before Rita leaned in.

“You know, Mr. Malfoy, I think this will require a longer interview. Remember, you still owe me another article, otherwise I will have to go forward with the information you requested I withhold. What with Mr. Greengrass’s cancellation of your wedding ceremony and Miss Granger’s sudden disappearance, I’m not sure what connections people may make.”

Draco’s eyes widened, unable to even fathom what it could all mean. He needed to leave. Needed to get back to his loft so he could think this through.

For once in his life, Blaise was caught speechless, so Draco leaned in.

“Rita, he would be happy to grant you that interview. Can we meet this evening? We have a few things to attend to in the meantime.”

Rita pursed her lips, looking unsure. “Fine. But no canceling at the last moment. If we get it in before six I might be able to make the evening Prophet, which would greatly please me, and I’m quite sure that pleasing me is currently high on both of your lists,” she said with a sneer, then added, “meet me at the Leaky at four,” before turning on her heel and heading to the lifts.

“Come on,” Draco said, pulling Blaise’s sleeve. “We need to work this all out.” And the pair walked quickly to and through to floos in a flash of green flames.

* * *

“Alright, let’s run through it again,” said Draco, now back in his un-polyjuiced form.

“We’re quite sure your Mother is holed up somewhere, presumably with accomplices, plotting some sort of revenge on your Father,” Blaise said, holding up a finger.

“Right,” Draco said, “possibly my Aunt Andromeda, or else some unknown French relative. Perhaps even your Mother, but the possibilities are too vast to narrow.”

“Right. Two,” he said, holding up a second finger, “we’ve got no bloody clue where Granger is, but now a new theory that perhaps her disappearance and your Mother’s escape are somehow linked.”

“Yes but it doesn’t really make sense, does it? The timing does not line up.”

“Yes, but what if that was intentional? What if they somehow staggered the events?”

“Who is they?!” Draco shouted.

“Fuck if I know, Draco, I’m just postulating!”

“Fine fine, go on,” he said, laying his head in his hands, “this is so fucking confusing, but go on.”

“Okay so, three… Skeeter is threatening to print the story about Granger’s break up with Weasley, but your Father as well as Mr. Greengrass would flay her alive if she let out the bit about him knocking up Astoria, so I can’t imagine she’s actually threatening to do so.”

Draco sat up. “Wait that’s something. If Rita publishes that bit, my Father will go after her. My Father was not involved in hushing that story up, I’m the one who did that and he was pleased with
me for doing so. I believe he relates to that bit as sorted.”

“So you think we use Rita as bait for Lucius? I don’t know mate, she’s a complete nuisance but even I wouldn’t wish you Father on her.”

Draco grimaced and began biting on his thumb. “True. True,” he grumbled. “We have to find some way of knowing where my Father is and what he’s up to.”

Blaise looked up suddenly. “Hey that reminds me, we were out today and I didn’t see his man at all.”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “I completely forgot about the trace. So he didn’t appear at all?”

Blaise shook his head. “He’s never very discrete. I’ve seen him every time, but today… nothing. Seems we’re out of the woods there.”

“I wonder what my Father did to the guards who let my Mother escape. Perhaps he was one of them?”

“That seems likely, mate. What is it with you Malfoy men hiring the dimmest wizards to be your top guards?”

“Don’t start about Crabbe and Goyle again.”

“I’m just saying! Theo and I were around, you never asked us for a damn thing!”

“That’s because you’re not stupid enough to follow orders. Well… maybe now you are.”

“Stupid is not the same as adoring you too much to say no,” he said with a wink.

“Isn’t it though?” Draco drawled.

At that moment a loud CRACK sounded and Wumply appeared in the middle of the room.

“Sirs! You asked Wumply to alert you if Master Lucius returned to the Manor and he has! He has returned, Sirs!”

Draco and Blaise jumped up in unison and moved quickly to the elf’s side.

“What did he say? Have you spoken to him, Wumply?” Draco said in a frantic tone.

Wumply shook his head. “I came right here Sirs! But I should be getting back quickly so he doesn’t notice my absence.”

“Yes! Do go back Wumply and remember, I am your true Master now. My Father is an enemy to our family name. Please play your part well and do not let him realize that you no longer answer to him. Is that clear?”

“Yes Sir, I remembers our conversation, Sir! Wumply is ready.”

Draco nodded and Wumply gave a small salute before disappearing with a CRACK.

“Lucius better not harm a hair on that hairless little elf’s body,” said Blaise.

Draco nodded solemnly in agreement, thinking of Dobby with a small pang of guilt.

“Yea, let’s hope those guards are the last beings my Father gets to harm ever again.”
Hermione opened her eyes and, for the fourth morning in a row, was surprised to see Gryffindor red hangings on the canopy of her bed. Glancing around the room, she once again remembered that she was not home, nor in her old tower dorm, but in a room created especially for her by the magic of the Room of Requirement. She had arrived here Monday with who she believed to be Pansy Parkinson. Her shock had been monumental when the witch had revealed herself, in actuality, to be Narcissa Malfoy.

If that wasn’t enough, she’d also discovered that Narcissa had purposefully gotten herself admitted to St Mungos in a bid for freedom she’d begun orchestrating many weeks prior. The arrival of Pansy Parkinson at her hospital room had not been part of the plan, but Narcissa had been extremely grateful and impressed by the young witch’s ability to befuddle and persuade her guards far more quickly than Narcissa herself could have.

Pansy’s potions, it turned out, had won the day.

Then, the witches had quickly constructed a plan together, reasoning that Narcissa would be more useful on the outside. Pansy had then agreed to stay polyjuiced in Narcissa’s place, waiting for the news of Hermione being missing to appear in the papers before joining them at Hogwarts.

Narcissa, it turned out, had had quite an affinity for Hermione.

“This will come as a shock to you, no doubt, Miss Granger, but I had long hoped that you and my son would find one another under the right circumstances.”

“I- er- what?”

Narcissa had chuckled. “I won’t waste time endeavoring to explain it to you,” she had said, holding out a hand. “Permit me to show you instead.”

The following few days found them utilizing the penseive Dumbledore had left to the school, procured easily for them by the Room, to review a variety of Narcissa’s memories.

They sat together in an elegant parlor that had manifested itself as soon as Narcissa had spoken the need for a private space to convene with Hermione.

“We shall begin, I think, with memories of my own childhood. I’d like for you to have a full picture of my upbringing first, and the events that led to my acceptance of Lucius as a marriage partner.”

Narcissa had, indeed, shared quite a lot about her childhood. The events that had shaped her beliefs, as well as her concealment of them. Hermione had been fascinated by how defiant Narcissa had been about Pureblood ideologies as a girl. She and her sister Andromeda had agreed that their parents were stuck in the past and that it felt unnatural to cling to such ancient ideals. Their other sister seemed lost from an early age, and it struck Hermione deeply to have to witness young Bellatrix Black showing her first signs of evil.

Still, Narcissa had gone along with the arranged marriage, never having quite as much backbone as Andromeda. Instead, she contented herself to play a part and hope for peace. It hadn’t been until her son had arrived that she’d realized her grave error. She’d never had something to lose before, and the fear had consumed her.

She had known what was coming. She had understood the world that Voldemort was creating. She had resigned herself to groom her son to be a part of it, knowing that anything else would surely
result in his death.

Of course, his odds hadn’t been favorable either way.

To be inside of her memories with her had brought a level of sympathy and understanding that Hermione never believed she could possibly have for Narcissa Malfoy.

Once they’d sufficiently plumbed those memories of the older witch’s upbringing, they’d moved on to Draco’s Hogwarts years. Namely, the first time he’d come home ranting about Hermione Granger. Then the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth. It seemed to have been his favorite topic, next to complaining about Harry beating him at Quidditch or Ron being a general prat.

Hermione got to witness a variety of knowing smiles emitted by Narcissa whenever young Draco focused on “that Granger girl” specifically. They had just come out of a particularly enjoyable one of his rantings about cursing her teeth huge, resulting in them being put back to a size smaller than they initially were, and causing her to look “far prettier than she deserved to look,” when Narcissa met her gaze with a similar knowing smile in the present.

“Are you beginning to see it?” she asked.

Hermione’s cheeks reddened. “Yes, I think I,” she said and then paused, taking it all in. “It was a good idea to use the pensieve, I don’t think I could have believed it without seeing it.”

Narcissa smiled and nodded. “Somehow I imagined that would be the case for you, Hermione.”

Hermione made no reply, but looked quizzically at Narcissa.

“Perhaps, then, you’re closer to understanding why you’re the answer to all of this?”

When Hermione didn’t answer, Narcissa went on. “Love is not some overnight phenomenon. Even a mother spends nine months with her child before meeting them in the flesh. There is a moment when a Mother meets her child, it is unparalleled. No one is prepared for it. It’s a moment when she finds herself entirely at the mercy of the fates. She, all at once, loves this small and fragile being, and recognizes that she finally has something to lose. Her heart breaks and becomes full all at once.”

Hermione felt her heart swell at the description, but furrowed her brow.

“But what does that have to do with-”

“Ignorance, Hermione. Prior to that moment, a woman is ignorant of the impact the child will have. She carried it in her belly, a mere concept. Not until the moment of holding it… of feeling, acutely, that there is a life to be responsible for, does she lose her ignorance.”

Hermione stared at Narcissa, still unsure of her point.

“My son is ignorant of his love for you, Hermione.”

The younger witch took a deep breath. “Right, isn’t that why we’re feigning my disappearance? So he’ll be forced to see how much he cares? If, indeed, he-”

“He does,” Narcissa said, cutting her off. “There is no ‘if,’ Hermione, and yes that is why we’re doing this, however…”

“What?” Hermione snapped, suddenly anxious for the witch to finally reveal the entire plot to her, as she had clearly been left partially in the dark the last few days.
“There are two problems that I hope to solve. The first I have probably already achieved: ridding him of his ignorance, at least in part. I am certain he is worried sick about you by this point, and probably about me as well. The trouble is, it’s likely riddled with all-consuming guilt.”

“But why should that-”

“Because guilt is a selfish feeling, Hermione. It speaks to the importance of the one holding it, more so than the person they feel it for. It’s based in Draco’s self-hatred, and that is problem number two.”

Hermione took a deep breath. “Alright, do go on…”

Narcissa leaned forward, her eyes boring into Hermione’s. “In order for Draco to truly feel his love for you, he will need to feel it for himself.”

After a very long silence, Hermione began nodding. “I see. So, we’re going to orchestrate some way for him to come to that conclusion?”

Narcissa grinned. “I’m glad to have you up to speed, Hermione.”

Hermione’s heart rate quickened. How in the world was this going to work? She supposed she would find out in due course, but she couldn’t help but be distracted by one small detail.

“Um… there is one thing, Narcissa. I- that is- I’m not sure I know the state of my own heart in regard to-”

“Ah yes,” Narcissa said, smiling, “you’re not sure whether you love Draco?”

Hermione looked up with a guiltily cringe on her face. “It’s just, I care about him a lot, obviously, but how do I know-”

She stopped speaking when she saw Narcissa’s smile broaden. “Oh my dear, I think that will be made quite clear to you once our plan is carried out.”

At that moment there was a knock at the door.

“Enter!” Narcissa called, and Neville came striding in with Pansy at his heels.

“Pansy, my dear!” Narcissa cried, rising from her seat and crossing the small room to pull Pansy into a motherly embrace. “You brilliant girl, thank you so much,” she said, placing a kiss on her head. Once they pulled apart, Pansy looked over to Hermione.

“Hello, Granger.”

It was a truly bizarre moment, as Hermione had spoken to Pansy already, not knowing that she’d actually been speaking to Narcissa at the time.

“H- Hi Pansy.”

The awkward tension hung in the air for a long moment before Neville interjected.

“I um- I’ve had news from Arthur and the Order. Ron arrived at headquarters not long ago, accompanied by Astoria Greengrass.”

Hermione’s eyebrows flew to the ceiling and a hot swooping sensation shot through her stomach. To her right, she noticed Pansy looking slightly uneasy.
“But what were they-” Hermione began, but Narcissa cut her off, speaking directly to Neville.

“Do either of them know?”

Neville shook his head. “No, they remain blissfully ignorant of their baby’s fate, they just think they’re helping Draco get you and Hermione back. They’ve all but resigned to the idea of breaking the promise.”

Narcissa let out a relieved sigh and put her hand over her heart. “Alright, wonderful, that’s one less complication. And the Order?”

Neville nodded. “They’re maintaining that there is a frantic search going on. From what Arthur said, Ron was completely convinced,” he said, then smiled, “admittedly not a difficult bloke to fool.”

“Hey!” Pansy and Hermione cried in unison, then turned their heads to awkwardly glare at one another. Finally, they both allowed small smiles. Hermione shrugged and Pansy said, “I guess he has a point.”

The odd moment between the two witches was interrupted by more news from Neville, however.

“Lucius is panicking, though. He’s canceled the large ceremony and moved up the wedding to Monday at the Ministry.”

Hermione and Pansy gasped, while Narcissa’s eyes simply widened. “Well then, Mr. Longbottom, we are going to have to act very quickly.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait! I’ve had this written for a week but real life stuff has been in the way. I added the Hermione bit at the end, which was going to be the start of the next chapter, as a reward for having to wait. Although, I’m sure you’re all still significantly curious about what will happen next anyway :D

We are nearing the end of this journey and I am so grateful for all of you. Thank you so much for your comments and I can’t wait to hear them on this installment.
The Set Up

Chapter Summary

Neville contacts Draco in the early hours of the morning, but something about his message doesn't seem right...

Chapter Notes

Welcome to FINALE WEEK! We are coming to the end of the story, and I will be posting a chapter a day until it is complete. Let's do this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Draco should have taken dreamless sleep potion.

It was Friday morning and he hadn’t been able to keep his eyes closed for any extended period of time all night. His mind had become a veritable obstacle course of things to worry about, and he hadn’t wanted to knock himself out in case anything happened.

He knew that his father was up to something. He knew that his mother was up to something.

He desperately hoped that Hermione was also up to something.

Although, he supposed that if his father had taken her, they would have found out by now.

Then again, he had been over and over these same thoughts for hours and had come to no logical conclusions.

What he wouldn’t have given for a penseive.

There was one at Hogwarts, but the likelihood of Minerva McGonnagal giving him access to it was not great. Plus, he only had a vague inclination that it would lead to some solution.

He padded through his dark living room, the first signs of sunlight were beginning to creep over the horizon, visible through his floor to ceiling windows. Blaise had gone to bring Gabrielle to her home in France, not wishing her to be in harm’s way if Lucius decided to somehow descend upon the loft apartment. The silence in the room was broken by an owl flying through the hatch, and Ptolemy stirred indignantly on his perch in the far corner of the room at the sound of the intruder. It looked to be a Hogwarts barn own, and Draco had a moment of unease recognizing that he had just been thinking of the school only moments ago.

He brought a treat to the visiting bird and detached its missive, ripping it open with haste.

--

Dear Malfoy,
Pardon the early hour, but I’d like to meet with you as soon as possible. I have managed to get the engagement ring back from the goblins and can now accept your offer to have it privately resized. However, I cannot go too far from Hogwarts at the moment, given the end of year workload. Would it be too much trouble to ask that you meet me in Hogsmeade? Today at your earliest convenience?

Please send the school owl back with your reply including the time you can be there.

Many thanks,

Neville

--

Draco held the letter in his hands, a scowl on his face, for a long moment. Something was incredibly odd about this. Yes, he had offered this deal to Neville less than a fortnight ago. The timing of his procurement of the ring was not off. The fact, however, that he had not mentioned Hermione was not on at all.

The truth of it washed over him and his heart began to race. No, Neville would surely not send a letter this casual at a time this grave. It must have been his way of calling Draco there in code.

He looked around the empty apartment. Blaise was not there to consult. Astoria had gone off with Ron, distracted by healer’s visits and magical tests to be administered on their baby. A baby whose fate they were both blissfully ignorant of. Potter was off on some blasted mission that no one seemed to know anything about. Even his house elf was otherwise occupied.

There was nothing for it, he had to go. Even if the letter was a fake and he was walking into some kind of trap, it would be better to go and to find out than to spend one more minute alone with his thoughts.

He scribbled back a reply letting Neville know he would be there by nine, and went to his room to pack and prepare. He had no idea what he would be walking into and might as well behave as though he was going into battle. Dragon hide under armor. Peruvian instant darkness powder. His hand of glory.

He would also sit and review the collection of spells he’d learned from the books written by his ancestors that had lined the walls of the library at Malfoy manor. The ones that bordered on dark magic, but were more just lacking in light. For whatever reason, he found them incredibly easy to wield. It was always as though the spells were made just for him. He’d used one in the pub when he’d met with Potter to distract all other patrons from noticing them. He’d conjured multiple handkerchiefs in a snap with this magic. He’d written letters that could disintegrate after being read.

Yes, he’d be well prepared for whatever he was walking into. He would just need a few hours to prepare.

* * *

Draco stepped through the floo at The Three Broomsticks at nine on the nose. There were few people there, as it was quite early on a Saturday morning. A smattering of inn guests were having breakfast, but that was it. He spotted his quarry right away and was not surprised to note that the man did not look as though he was expecting Draco for a casual ring exchange.

Neville walked hastily up to him, looking unnerved as ever. He might have just lost his toad on the Hogwarts Express.
“I only just got your owl, glad I got here in time.”

“What is this about, Longbottom?” he clipped. “I know this isn’t just about a ring.”

Neville nodded. “I knew you’d see through it. Glad to know you’re sharp as ever, Malfoy. We’re gonna need it.”

Draco grimaced, but Neville did not explain.

“Come, we need to go to the Hog’s Head. Too easy to be overheard here and Aberforth has a room where we can speak privately.”

“Is this about Hermione?” Draco whispered.

Neville spun and walked quickly towards him. “Keep your voice down,” he snapped, “I can’t say anything here, we’re too exposed. Now let’s go.”

Draco’s stomach did a turn. Neville did not seem overly distressed, which was calming to notice. However, he had contacted Draco urgently, so she may very well be in danger. His heart sped as he began to follow, but he hesitated, remembering that this could also be a trap set by his father.

“Longbottom, wait.”

Neville spun around with an air of impatience and looked questioningly at Draco.

“We should probably make sure that each of us are who we say we are, should we not?”

When Neville looked confused, Draco went on. “For example, no one but the real Draco Malfoy could tell you that in third year, I caught you wank-”

“That’s enough, Malfoy! Please don’t finish that sentence,” he clipped, glancing around to see if anyone had been within earshot. Then he turned back to Draco and said, “Yes, clearly you are the real you.”

Draco smirked. “And clearly you are the real you or you wouldn’t have stopped me.”

Neville looked visibly annoyed. “Yea… well, thanks again by the way, for not telling the entire school. I still don’t quite understand that choice.”

Draco shrugged. “I was a fucking prat, Longbottom, but in order for it to be fun it had to be something of a challenge. That was just too easy.”

“Ah yes, so throwing my remembrall onto the roof of the castle, sure, but not-”

“Exactly,” Draco said with a smug smirk.

“Hmm,” Neville said, regarding him with scrutiny, “I think perhaps you’re just not as much of a monster as you think yourself to be.”

Draco scowled and began walking out of the pub. “You said Hog’s Head, right? Let’s get going.”

Neville turned and followed without pressing the conversation any further.

They entered the Hog’s Head and it was empty, given that few would be drinking at this early of an hour, though Draco felt he could certainly use a Firewhisky right about then.
“Aberforth and I go way back. Well, to seventh year at least. He gave me a key and allows me to use his study for meetings any time I like. It’s just up here.”

He led Draco up a narrow staircase. It was quite dark and had a distinct smell that was not unpleasant, though at the same time a bit harsh in his nostrils. There was a feeling of unsettledness about the place, as though it had seen horrors and miracles in equal measure.

They entered the small study and Draco took a seat opposite Neville in one of the two wingback chairs.

“Malfoy, I’m about to tell you a few things and I need you to remain calm as I do so.”

Draco’s hands clenched the arms of the chair instantly. “Go on,” he said severely.

Neville shook his head. “I need you to promise me that you will remain calm and not try to rush out of here until we are both on the same page about what to do next. Do I have your word on that?”

Draco’s eyes widened maliciously, but he reigned in his calamitous energy, intent on getting the information. He nodded in a faux-calm manner that seemed to be enough for Neville.

“Your father has Hermione.”

It was as though a black hole had opened in the room and was sucking out all of the oxygen. In addition to being unable to draw breath, he could not feel his legs.

“Explain more,” he managed to say.

“He’s holding her… somewhere. He is using her as bait for Harry.”

Draco snapped his head up. “Potter is involved?”

Neville nodded. “Yes, he’s been gone all week tracking your uncles, as well as a handful of other escaped Death Eaters who have apparently been working for your father. You see, Hermione told Harry what she knew about your father’s… status… and Harry went investigating.”

His anxiety lessened in spite of himself. So, Hermione had been captured not because of his, Draco’s, involvement, but because of Potter’s. It didn’t make the situation any better, but it certainly lessened his all-consuming guilt.

“And what did he find?”

Neville swallowed. “Well, they’ve been rebuilding. Very quietly. Without an intent to overthrow or rule, but with the design of unsettling the current government from within. Very slowly. Like a frog boiling in water.”

Draco grimaced. “Like a what?”

“Haven’t you ever heard that if you put a frog in a pot of water and slowly bring it to a boil, it won’t try to escape? It will simply accept its fate and be boiled alive. Well, until it’s not alive anymore, I suppose.”

Draco had to sit with that for a moment. It sounded a bit like his own childhood. He’d had no idea he was in deep until the water had been boiling.

It made sense that his father would design something similar now, only this time it would seem even more geared towards the good of all, rather than simply the musings of one maniac.
A great number of calculated movements and Lucius could create a resurgence of the Death Eaters as a completely faceless organization. No figure head. No false idol. Just underground social influence.

It would be a return to how his father operated in the time while Voldemort was in exile, but with more grandiose future plans given that Voldemort himself was dead and gone.

This was a scenario worthy of a headline in The Quibbler, and yet it was likely what was happening.

His family reputation was quite public and mostly inaccurate, at least as far as his father was concerned. People didn’t know that Lucius Malfoy was not in prison, but Potter knew.

The tightness that was gathering in Draco’s chest abated abruptly, and a wave of shock washed over him.

“I trust Potter,” he blurted.

Neville looked up startled. “You what?”

Draco took in a long steady breath. “I trust Harry Potter.”

“Um… alright?”

Draco leaned forward, elbows on knees. “I never realized. I mean, we’re friends. Sort of. Odd friends… but it’s just hitting me now that I actually rely on him. I’m not sure when that happened.”

Neville looked puzzled. “You said all that stuff in the Daily Prophet interview about him being a close friend of yours.”

Draco shook his head. “I let Skeeter go on. I may have even spoken the words, I just… didn’t believe them until now.”

Neville grunted in response, and Draco shook himself, realizing he was getting far from the point.

“So what’s Potter’s plan then?”

“Well he knows that your father is going to try and use Hermione as leverage. He wants to set a trap while pretending to go along with you father’s demands.”

“My father is supposed to fall for that?”

“He already has, that’s why I contacted you early this morning. He’s planning to meet with Harry tonight at Hogwarts.”

Draco grimaced. “Why at Hogwarts?”

Neville shrugged. “Part of Harry’s terms for accepting the meeting. Being on his turf, so to speak. It wasn’t like they could meet at the Ministry, could they?”

Draco nodded. Sure, that was true. The whole thing still seemed odd, though.

“Alright, so what do you need me for?”

Neville took a deep breath and released it as a sigh. “Element of surprise. The last thing Lucius expects is for you to show up. For you to be involved at all. As far as he’s concerned, he has you under his thumb, what with moving up the wedding and all…”
“How do you know about that?”

“I’m part of The Order, remember? Did you not send Ron in to aid in the search for your mother?”

Draco’s head spun for a moment. Yes of course. Sometimes he forgot that his forced engagement affected so many other people.

“Right, of course. But then, what about my mother? Does Potter-”

Neville shook his head solemnly. “Sorry, Malfoy. We have not located her yet, but we do have theories.”

Draco raised his eyebrows and motioned for Neville to continue.

“Well, we think she may have gone to infiltrate Lucius’s plans from the inside. Perhaps trying to incite a coup. Whatever she’s doing, she’s made herself quite untraceable, but we have people searching for her.”

Draco took a deep breath. It was not comforting, the information, but at least it was different. At least there was a conversation happening outside of his head, and one that did not go in circles. At least there was action to take.

“Alright, so what’s next?”

“Right, so I will stay here and fill you in on everything we know about what your father is doing. I’ll need to return to the school soon so as not to raise suspicion. Your father is expected to arrive tonight at nine o’clock. You will enter shortly before using the secret passage behind the portrait here.”

Draco looked up at the painting of a young blonde girl with kind yet mischievous eyes.

“Where does it lead?”

“Oh just to a corridor on the seventh floor. I’ll give you directions to where they are meeting and you can go from there.”

Draco nodded. Despite the knot growing in his stomach, it felt incredible to finally be taking some action.

* * *

Hermione waited anxiously for Neville to return. She knew he would be meeting with Draco in that moment and found herself rather tortured wondering what must be going through his mind. She had done her best all week to put from her mind thoughts of what this must be doing to Draco, but now that the plan was being enacted and she knew that he was not far from where she currently sat, her mind was all over the place.

Narcissa had concocted quite an elaborate scheme, and Hermione could see an endless number of ways it could go wrong, and very few that could go right.

She also had a suspicion that she was not being told the entire truth. There was just something about the way everyone was speaking to her that made her uneasy.

She knew that Draco was being told that she was a hostage of Lucius, and that Harry would be meeting with the eldest Malfoy at Hogwarts. What Draco didn’t know was that the part of Lucius would be played by his own mother, as that entire story had been created as a cover.
It worried her greatly, given what she knew about Lucius Malfoy and his relationship with Draco. What was to stop Draco from killing him on the spot?

His mother seemed to think it an impossibility, but Hermione had seen his pain. She was not sure that it would be beyond Draco to take his own father’s life, especially with his mother’s life on the line.

Plus, she had some serious doubts about whether the prospect of her being held hostage would be enough for Draco. She knew he cared for her, but this seemed like quite a risky test of his love, even given everything she had seen in the pensieve.

Sure, she had come around to the idea that Draco had harbored feelings for her over the years. If fact, viewing so many memories of his childhood had given her an understanding of the wizard that she had not expected to gain. From a young age, she could see his pain. His insecurity. She could see why he had hated her, and it was not just about blood superiority. In fact, it wasn’t about that at all. He was scared and desperate for approval. He had been handed so much by his family, and his first day at Hogwarts had been filled with rejection unlike anything he’d experienced before. She didn’t feel bad for him exactly, but she had compassion for a young boy whose expectations of himself and the world were so very incorrect, through no fault of his own.

Furthermore, she recognized that he still held incorrect expectations. He didn’t expect her to truly care for him. At least, she didn’t think he did. He was always slipping in little comments or actions that said he didn’t think he deserved her time and attention. It wasn’t very direct; it was more in his energy than his speaking and actions.

However, he had opened up to her the last time they’d been together. He’d certainly felt betrayed by his father. Her blood boiled at the thought of Lucius Malfoy. How dare the man be so intolerably cruel to his own son? How dare he make Draco think he wasn’t worth more than being a pawn in the man’s schemes?

In many ways, Lucius was worse than Voldemort. At least the latter did not pretend to care for anyone. Did not create a family and an heir and then sell them out. He was pure evil and he owned it, and while it wasn’t something that made him in any way redeemable, it put Lucius’s calculating actions into sharp relief. Lucius was a different kind of evil. It wasn’t even about his crooked plans for the wizarding world, it was entirely about pride and revenge.

While Hermione knew full well that Voldemort had no qualms about killing a baby, there was something so much more sinister about what Lucius was prepared to allow.

Neville appeared in the doorway of her room. She stood and moved towards him looking expectant.

“He bought it,” Neville said. “He’s coming through the portrait passage just before nine.”

Hermione took in a shuddering breath. She couldn’t help the nerves.

“Oh, alright. You’re sure the room can handle this sort of transformation?”

Neville gave her a bemused look, and she realized that she found his cockiness on this subject heartening.

“Heartening… I was master of this room among the students in seventh year. I’ve since found and studied the founder’s original notes on its creation. I rebuilt it after the fiendfire incident. I believe I’ve plumbed the depths of its abilities more than Dumbledore himself ever did. This is going to work.”

She nodded and took a deep steady breath this time.
“I trust you, Neville. I’m just nervous.”

“Yes, I can imagine so,” he replied gently, and then reached into his robes and removed a small blue bottle. “Here, you can have this, they hardly work on me anymore.”

Hermione smiled. “I told you to ease up on the calming draughts, Neville.”

He shrugged. “I knew it wouldn’t last. I told Pansy though, and she reckons there’s a version possible that won’t create the same tolerance.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “That witch is full of surprises.”

Neville nodded. “So is Malfoy. Do you know he just told me he trusts Harry?”

Hermione’s brow furrowed. “What-”

“It was just a moment he had when we were speaking. I told him about Harry being on his father’s case and it seemed to calm his tension and then he just blurted it out.”

Hermione felt her stomach twist. It was odd, the idea of Draco only just coming to that conclusion about Harry. She noticed a small spark of hope that he’d be having more epiphanies about his feelings very soon.

For her part, she felt as though she was poised to admit feelings of her own.

The combination of being away from him, connecting with his mother and understanding her childhood upbringing, and being privy to so many of Draco’s early memories was making her very aware of a fluttering feeling of euphoria in her chest whenever she thought of him.

She had loved Ron, but the beginning had been so different. She had loved Harry, but there had always been something different about the energy she felt between herself and each of them. Getting together with Ron had seemed like a foregone conclusion. It had lacked a certain spark of excitement. Even their kiss in the very room in which she now resided had been motivated more by the imminent battle than anything. After that, she’d just gone with it.

This thing with Draco had started very differently. When she thought of him, he seemed in the strangest way like someone she had been destined to end up with. They were far from childhood sweethearts. Quite the opposite, in fact.

She had no doubt in her mind that he would be there for her no matter what. It was one thing to know it, though… it would be quite another to see it in action. That evening. Her heart swelled along with the knot in her stomach. This was so different from something like planning the trip down the trap door, or the infiltration of Gringotts. Something very distinctive was on the line for her. It wasn’t just about saving the world, it was personal this time.

She wished more deeply than she could remember wishing for anything that their plan would work.

* * *

At 8:45 Draco approached the painting of the young blonde girl and gave her a small nod. She made a curtsy in response, throwing him a kind smile, and the portrait swung forward. He climbed into the stone passage and was surprised to see how modern and clean it was. It seemed to have been restored recently. He’d heard many stories about a variety of passages in and out of the castle, but had never discovered any for himself. He walked along by the light of his wand for what seemed like half an hour before reaching the door at the end that would lead him into the castle corridor.
As soon as he pushed it open he knew that something had gone wrong. He was under Potter’s cloak, which Neville had given him, but the moment the door swung forward he heard the unmistakable drawl of his father.

“Oh, Draco… so good of you to join us.”

Chapter End Notes

See you all tomorrow (Tuesday) for the next installment!
“Ah, Draco… so good of you to join us.”

At the sound of his father’s voice, Draco darted to the side of the door he’d just swung open.

He missed a hex by mere inches as he did so, and then threw a powerful shield charm in front of him which thwarted the other spells his father flung his way. The charm itself, however, gave away his new location and he noticed his mistake too late. It broke after a few different assaults and a hex got through and hit him in the chest.

His dragon hide armor had held true, and yet the force of the spell still stung, causing him to bend forward with the wind knocked out of him.

After a moment, he forced himself to look up. His face went white and he couldn’t discern whether the pain in his heart was from the hex, or from the sight that met his eyes.

There was his father, standing behind Hermione who was slumped forward in a chair, bound, gagged, and unconscious. They were indeed in a seventh-floor corridor, and Potter was nowhere to be seen. For good measure, his father gripped Hermione around the neck in a choke hold.

“Come out from under that silly cape. I wish to speak to you and it is somewhat of an urgent matter.”

His father’s cool silky voice ran through him like shockwaves. He stared at Hermione’s unconscious figure a beat too long, his tired eyes feasting on her features. Even unconscious, she looked like an angel.

Shaking himself, he remembered where he was and removed the cloak, tossing it to the side.

“Hello, Father,” he said, mustering all the confidence he could.

“Hello, Draco.”

“Not meeting Potter in secret then?”

“No, unfortunately I had to cancel that meeting. You see, Potter intended it to be a trap. Imagine my disappointment when I realized you were also a part of that plan.”

“How did you-”

“It is none of your concern how I deconstructed Potter’s little plot, Draco.”

“Where is he now?”

Lucius raised his eyebrows. “Perhaps I should have bound him instead of Miss Granger here? Am I
to also discover that you prefer the company of—"

“What do you want, Father?!”

A smirk crossed the man’s face and Draco saw him tighten his hold around Hermione’s neck. He forced himself to look away from her and focus on his father.

“So many demanding questions, Son. I would think you’d know better than to allow emotion to take over at a time like this.”

Draco felt hot anger surge up into his throat. “Stop with the fucking mind games and tell me what you want.”

“Very well,” Lucius said casually, “but only because I do not wish to be in such close proximity to this filth for longer than necessary.” He’d shaken Hermione when he’d said the word “filth” and Draco had to use all of his restraint not to run forward.

“I am here to put an end to your childish belief that you could possibly work against me, Draco.”

“How do you propose to do that?”

“Well, I have tried negotiating with you and clearly it did not work, as you simply took on more complex methods of betrayal. The polyjuice was inspired, by the way.”

Draco blinked. So he had known. He cursed himself for being naïve enough to imagine he could have hidden his relationship with Hermione like that. He’d put her in danger after all.

How could it have been any other way? He ought to have refused her the moment she’d set foot on the vineyard. Her life had already been crumbling and he’d only made things worse.

A desperate need to right his wrongs gripped at his very lungs, making it difficult to breathe. Finally, he looked right into his father’s eyes and drew as deep a breath as he could manage.

“It’s done. I will obey from here on out,” he said with great difficulty.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. “Oh but promises alone will not suffice this time, I’m sorry to say.”

Draco felt a shudder run through his body, from the top of his head down to his feet where it settled and caused him to sway on the spot. He highly doubted that his father was in any way sorry.

“What then?” he asked through gritted teeth. It was taking everything in him to show an outward sense of calmness when he was seething inside. His hatred for his father mounted to unthinkable heights and was now joined by his own sense of self-loathing for having caused this to be.

“Well, Draco, while I did not entirely agree with our former Master’s practices, there were a few I believe to have been prudent in their uses. Namely, ensuring that there was always a punishment equal to or greater than the crime.”

Draco swallowed. Every nerve in his body was on edge, and he was sure he must be visibly shaking.

“What did you have in mind?”

Lucius grinned. It was an expression that did not make him more handsome, but mangled his features into something rather repellant. Had his father always been this gruesome?

“Well, let us count your crimes. You have betrayed me time and again. First by befriendi
then by refusing to take orders and fleeing England. Next, you blatantly disregarded my command to end your tryst with this scum, and as if that weren’t enough, you joined Potter in plotting my demise. I have, in essence, lost my heir. You shall therefore lose something equally valuable to you.”

Draco felt as though the floor had dropped out from beneath him. His breathing was hitched, erratic, as Lucius brought his wand arm up and pointed it directly at Hermione’s heart.

“Stop! Don’t do this, Father!”

Lucius looked up with a sneer. “Oh but I’m not going to kill her, Draco. Though it is interesting you believe that to be an adequate punishment. I can’t say I’m impressed that you put such stock in your affair with a mudblood.”

Confusion swam and swirled around Draco as he tried to understand what his father was actually threatening to do.

“Now, Draco… you must make it convincing. Anything less and she dies,” he said. Draco barely had time to process what Lucius had meant before the man was turning his wand on Hermione again.

Panic. Sheer panic was all he felt.

“Renervate!” She awoke with a gasp, and though she was gagged, began shouting imperceptibly. First at Lucius, then at Draco.

The look she gave him shattered his heart into pieces. She was terrified, but it wasn’t just that.

When she looked into his eyes, he saw more concern for his own welfare than for hers.

“Now, then, Draco. Tell Miss Granger here that your time together is through. That you have succeeded in your task to infiltrate her Ministry department on my behalf and can now take your leave of her.”

Draco stared blank-faced at his father. He’d heard the words and yet they did not add up to anything logical. Looking back down at Hermione, he was crushed to see that her eyes had filled with tears. He wanted more than anything to run to her. To take her face in his hands. To kiss her and reassure her that his father was lying. That he would never… had never… didn’t want to ever leave her. She was so good, and he was so… cursed.

“We haven’t this kind of time, my Son. Please do get on with it.”

There was nothing for it, he had to make some bid for her freedom, and if it had to be at the expense of his own reputation, his own happiness, then so be it. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, he finally spoke.

“You heard what he said, Granger. It’s true,” he said, his voice shuddering, “I won’t have any need of seeing you after today, do you understand?”

Hermione stared into his eyes as she began sobbing. Eventually, her crying became so violent that she doubled over in the chair, hands still bound behind her. Draco’s heart swelled painfully. He could not remember hurting in quite this way before. Probably not since he’d been tasked with killing his headmaster and his mother’s life had been threatened. Even then, the pain had not been this acute. He looked up at his father’s face and saw a level of mirth that disgusted him.

“Shall we release her then, father? Modify her memory and send her on her way?” Send her to

He did not, however, get to hear a response from his father, because at that moment two bodies sprang forth from behind the door from which Draco had entered the corridor. Upon closer inspection, Draco recognized the man his father had been sending out to track his movements, and Neville. They were caught in a furious wrestling match, each trying to wrench the other’s wand from their hand.

Taking the opportunity of the distraction, Draco acted quickly. Using the meticulous hand movement and murmuring the incantation, he caused his father’s gaze to stay magically rooted to the men on the floor. Casting the spell sapped his energy, probably due to the duress under which it had been done. He’d never tried it before in this sort of environment, and his breath caught in his chest as he realized what it had cost him. Placing a hand over his forehead, he took a steadying breath and refocused on his task.

He pointed his wand at Hermione and released her bonds. The spell worked, but only just, and there was no denying that his magic had been weakened.

When he looked to Hermione, however, he saw the light re-enter her eyes as she registered the fact that he had freed her unbeknownst to her captor. She knew that his words had been for his father’s benefit alone. She knew. She believed in him still.

The stolen moment he’d spent with his eyes locked on hers sent a wave of energy through him. It was as though her trust and care had refueled his magic.

The men on the floor were still locked in a tousle, and Lucius was painstakingly trying to aim a spell at them, endeavoring to avoid his man. Draco considered aiming a spell at his father, but didn’t want to do anything to cause him to remember Hermione.

Then Harry was there, flying out the same door, jumping over the struggling men, and firing a spell at Lucius as he went.


Draco and Harry were then dueling Lucius; two on one meant he’d have no space to harm Hermione. Casting and ducking and dodging, it was incredible that the older man could keep up in the slightest.

Neville broke free of the man’s grip and immobilized him. He came staggering to a standing position, but just then two more men in Azkaban guard uniforms barreled out the door and joined Lucius’s side. Hermione screamed and threw herself out of the chair, moving across the floor and out of the direct line of fire. She was still pretending to be bound even though Draco had released her, moving like a panicked inchworm across the corridor to the wall. She had no wand, and feigning powerlessness was her best bet for survival.

If they made it out of this, he would teach her all the wandless magic he knew, he thought. Then he felt suddenly emboldened.

The thought of their survival alone seemed to strengthen him.

Somehow he had to get to her, to bring her away from the danger as he had not yet been able to.

Then he remembered that he’d hidden his hand of glory in the pocket of his robes with an undetectable extension charm, along with the Peruvian instant darkness powder. The moment he’d taken to reach in and grasp for it, however, had cost more than it was worth.
Neville was down, by what spell Draco did not know, and now it was three on two.

His father’s voice suddenly rang through the corridor, and everything started moving even faster than it already had been. “You will stop this now, Draco, if you want her to live!” The two guards advanced on them and Lucius turned his attention to Hermione, his wand directed right at her heart. Continuing to duel the guards, Draco glared at his father.

“Just leave her out of this!”

“Oh but you brought her into this. You put a mudblood before your family.”

“You put everything before your family you fucking hypocrite!”

Lucius sneered menacingly. “You will watch your tongue once and for all.”

Harry had managed to down one of the guards, and with Lucius’s focus elsewhere, it only took a moment for Draco and Harry to down the second. At the same moment, Lucius began the wand movement and Draco took off, running full speed towards Hermione.

He wasn’t aware of diving through the air. Was not aware of the spell hitting him square in the chest. Because in those split-second moments, there had been no other options. Dimly, as the light left his eyes, he registered Hermione’s tearful face only inches from his own.

Then, as though he’d successfully thrown the Peruvian powder, everything was darkness.

Chapter End Notes

DUNH DUH DUUUUHHHHHH

That one’s for my Alpha, Christine ;)
A Whole Lot of Grapes

Chapter Notes

Last chapter! Just an epilogue after this. I hope you all like it!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione stared down at Draco’s lifeless form and was overcome by the need to pull him into her arms, and so she did. Cradling his head delicately, she sobbed and let her forehead fall gently to his, where she began crying in earnest.

She was barely aware of who was around her, but thought she’d registered Harry’s expelliarmus at the same time that Draco had fallen. Unable to care about the state of things, she clutched more tightly to Draco and let tears flow from her face to his. This was not part of the plan; it had gone all wrong. It was supposed to be Narcissa polyjuiced as Lucius. None of them had counted on the real Lucius Malfoy arriving to actually take her captive.

Voices murmured around her and she felt a consoling hand across her back.

“Hermione?”

It was Harry’s voice, but he sounded very far away. She shook her head and cried harder.

“No no, this can’t be,” she choked. “No please. Don’t be. You can’t be gone. Draco.”

“No Harry, leave me be, just leave me,” she sobbed, bending lower and bringing her lips right to Draco’s. “Please, please don’t be gone. Please, Draco,” she said, and then kissed him. His lips were still warm, and soft as ever.

Hermione was still crying and she broke the kiss to take a breath before whispering with her lips pressed against his, “please, please… I love you, Draco.” When she kissed him again, a shock ran through her entire body as she felt him respond. His lips moved slowly, but he was absolutely conscious. Pulling back with a gasp, she stared down into his grey eyes, which were just barely opened. A small smile pulled at his lips as he replied in a whisper, “I love you too, Hermione.”

At that moment, the entire room faded to white, dissolving around them in a flash. There were a few confused moments where she could see nothing at all around her, before a room reappeared around her. It was the one she’d spent the entire week in planning. She looked around in a panic.

Narcissa stood feet away from them, right where Lucius had been. She was staring down at them with a broad smile, and tears were running steadily down her cheeks.

Then there was Harry, Neville, Pansy, Ginny, and Luna, the latter three were looking a bit discombobulated. Hermione realized with a jolt that they had been polyjuiced.

But then…

She turned to Narcissa. “Where is Lucius?”
The older witch grinned still more widely. “Harry apprehended him last night.”

“He’s in a secure cell in the ministry itself, and heavily potioned,” Harry added, looking over to Pansy with a smirk.

“So that wasn’t—”

Narcissa stepped forward. “I’m so sorry to have had to put you through this, Hermione. We needed you both to believe you were in on a plan, only for it to go terribly wrong.”

Draco groaned, causing Hermione to look down in surprise. In her bewilderment, she had almost forgotten he was still in her arms.

“What did you hit me with, Mother?”

“Concussion hex, my love.”

“But I heard you,” Hermione said.

“You cast the avada,” Draco finished for her.

Narcissa smiled over at Neville, who moved forward to join the conversation.

“The room had you hear and see what you needed to.”

“I have a potion for your head, Draco,” Pansy said, rifling through a pocket of her over-large robes.

“Wait, we were in the room of requirement?” Draco asked.

Harry stepped in, “We still are, actually, and we can explain it all in due course. To both of you. For now, I’d like to point out that the room dissolved because you broke the marriage promise.”

Hermione looked around at all of them as they grinned at her, and finally down at Draco who was also looking confusedly around at the people in the room, before he turned his attention to her. They glared hard into one another’s eyes for a very long moment, the full weight of what had happened crashing down upon them both.

Lucius was caught. The promise was broken. Ron and Astoria’s baby was safe.

They were in love.

Finally, both their faces broke into grins.

“Hi,” he said, reaching up to stroke her cheek with great difficulty.

“Hi,” she said, laughing in relief and holding his hand to her face.

Ginny cleared her throat. “Well, this seems like a private moment, perhaps we ought to…”

“Right!” said Neville, “There’s a room over here we can all go to for some… er, refreshments, or at least there will be by the time we…” a door materialized across the room. “Ah yes, there we are. In you go, all!”

Neville ushered Harry and Ginny over to the door, while Pansy, Luna, and Narcissa remained entranced by the young couple.
Luna linked arms with Pansy and put her head on her shoulder, “Don’t you just love love?”

Pansy did not flinch at Luna’s touch, but simply said, “The real thing is so much better than any potion could imitate.”

Narcissa moved forward and knelt down next to her son, running a hand through his hair. “I am so proud of you, my Son. And so very sorry it had to be this way.”

“Right you lot,” Neville called. “Let’s leave them all be.”

“Wait, here’s the potion!” Pansy said, running forward.

Hermione took it from her and smiled. “Thank you, Pansy.”

Pansy nodded with a small smile and then turned to join Luna and the rest in the newly materialized room.

Just before the door closed, Hermione could hear Ginny say, “I still maintain we could have had Hermione decide to move to Bulgaria, and have Draco run to catch her before her portkey left!”

The door clicked shut and silence fell in the room. Hermione tipped the potion into Draco’s mouth and he swallowed with a grimace.

“Better?” Hermione and Narcissa asked in unison. The pair then looked up at one another and laughed.

“Oh, Merlin,” said Draco, with a hand covering his face.

They laughed harder.

* * *

**SCANDAL AT AZKABAN PRISON!**

Lucius Malfoy, former Death Eater and former (apparent) life-term resident at Azkaban Prison has been discovered to have infiltrated the Office of the Governor, Madam Parmal, and usurped her position through nefarious dealings. This arrangement has been in effect since his initial imprisonment following The Final Battle, and during that time, Mr. Malfoy has built an intricate web of underground spies, informants, and officers with the design of creating a second uprising of The Death Eaters. Never fear, dear readers, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is still well and gone, and thanks again to The Boy Whose Lives We’ve Lost Count of, every single last one of his followers have now been captured. Rallying under the leadership of Mr. Malfoy, the underground group was gathered for a meeting at Malfoy Manor, following the escape of Narcissa Malfoy from St. Mungos Hospital. (Exclusive interview with the Malfoy Matriarch, including the sordid details of how her own husband imprisoned and held her unlawfully these past five years, on page 3.)

Auror Potter was alerted to the existence of the meeting by Mr. Malfoy’s own house elf, whom Potter had previously created an alliance with. Late Thursday night, Potter and his team descended upon the Manor only to find Lucius Malfoy and his band of former Death Eaters and new recruits strung up around the drawing room, covered in toadspawn [photo above] surrounded by a squad of Hogwarts house elves. (see page 6 for Wumply the [free] house elves’ tale of heroism and friendship, as he engaged the help of his former colleagues to secure the end of the second uprising!)

It seems that Mr. Malfoy had created and deployed teams to New Zealand, Spain, Russia, Germany, and the USA, each taking a year to set up. Had they not been caught, the Second Death Eaters would have been poised to make a bid for control within the year.

Noteworthy on the list of those implicated is Mr. Cameron Greengrass, whose youngest
daughter, Astoria, was recently betrothed to Mr. Malfoy’s only son and heir.

“There you are, Draco! Miraculous it took that long to mention you,” Blaise said.

They had spent the entirety of Saturday being questioned by the aurors and interviewed by the press and were having a day of rest after such a fiasco of a month.

Draco scoffed. “It’s a ruddy long and convoluted story, I don’t envy Skeeter’s plight over the next few days. Perhaps weeks or months, really.”

He was sat on the couch in his loft apartment, with Hermione draped over his lap. She was reading one of the many books she’d been meaning to get her hands on since first setting foot in his home, and he was running his fingers softly through her hair.

“She’ll be fine. She’s a busybody on a regular day, just look how she accosted us at the Ministry and demanded an interview. Now we know why she never showed for it,” Blaise said.

Laughing, Draco said, “Too busy getting the scoop on the House Elf Rebellion of 2003.”

Hermione put her book in her lap and glared up at him. “More like a crusade than a rebellion, they’re all free!”

“Yes, love, they’re free. Still it goes against their nature to attack wizards.”

She clicked her tongue and picked her book back up. “Not the Hogwarts elves. They’re warriors.”

Blaise smirked at Draco and shook his head ever so slightly as if to say “let her have this one.”

The floo in the living room turned bright green and Harry came tumbling out, closely followed by Ginny and then Neville.

“There he is,” said Blaise, “I was beginning to think I’d never lay eyes on you again, gorgeous.”

“You saw me last week,” Harry replied with an eye roll.

“Yes but I had grown accustomed to being in close proximity on a regular basis, Potter. You can’t just go taking that away from me.”

“Well my apologies, darling, I was a bit busy tracking down a criminal mastermind in all my spare time.”

“That’s far too grandiose a term, Potter. Don’t give my arsehole of a father that much credit.”

“Hey, he’s speaking to me right now, Draco. You stay out of it.”

Neville interjected. “What… is even happening?” They all looked around to see him staring perplexedly between the three wizards.

Hermione sighed, still reading her book. “I’m told you get used to it.”

“If not a bit turned on,” Ginny said, smirking.

“Huh?” Neville said, but Draco cut him off.

“Potter, were you able to…?”
Harry looked startled and then said, “Oh right!” He rummaged through his pockets and pulled out an envelope, handing it to Draco. “That there will grant you and your mother the ability to be out of the country even with a pending trial, and…” He reached back in to his pocket and withdrew a stapler and a mason jar, both covered in silk cloths.

“The stapler is your Monday 9am portkey to France, the mason jar is for your mother and Pansy at 6pm today.”

Draco took each item carefully and placed them all on the side table.

“I can’t thank you enough, Potter.” They exchanged nods.

“We will miss you terribly, Potter. Do come and visit, hmm?” Blaise called.

“Oh I will miss you too, Blaise! Thank you, I will absolutely come to visit!”

Blaise threw her a smirking glare, which she returned in equal measure.

“We’re keeping our standing brunch date, aren’t we?” Harry asked, looking at Hermione. She grinned back at him.

“Of course. You know, he’s going to come along, though,” she said, motioning to Blaise.

“I’m going to need some respite from my future in-laws!”

They all turned to look at him in shock.

“You asked her?” Draco said.

Blaise smirked. “Nah, not yet. But I probably will eventually and she’ll say yes and they will be my future in-laws and I will need Potter brunch respite.”

Draco and Harry chuckled, while Hermione and Ginny squealed and grinned at each other like idiots.

“I feel like I miss far too much being at Hogwarts all year,” Neville said glumly.

“Spend the summer with us in France, Neville! We’re only ducking out to avoid the press for a few months. Well, and to get Narcissa set up in her old family home,” Hermione said.

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” said Neville, “I’ll see if Hannah is open to it!”

“Hey, I’ll come!” Ginny said.

“What and leave me here dealing with this whole mess?!” Harry said, motioning towards Hermione and Draco.

“Hey!” Hermione and Draco said together, affronted.

Ginny shrugged, “You can get loads of international portkeys-”

When Harry glared at her she scoffed and said, “I’m just kidding! I need to be here for quidditch anyway.” She wrapped her arms around Harry’s neck and gave him a quick kiss.

“Alright there, no need to rub it in our faces,” said Blaise.
The floo came to life again and Draco said, “My apartment is bloody King’s Cross today!” just as Ron and Astoria appeared from out of the hearth. Hermione nudged his shoulder and whispered, “We told them to come by!”

Ron and Astoria were arm in arm, both beaming. Everyone exchanged slightly awkward hellos and nods of greeting.

“How are you, Stori?” Draco asked.

She put a hand on her stomach and continued smiling, “Could not be better.”

Ron was smiling dumbly at her when she gave him a nudge and whispered, “Show them, darling.”

“Oh!” Ron said in a similar manner to what Harry had just done, rummaging through his pockets. Withdrawing a small white box, he placed it on the coffee table.

“It’s something new, actually, that Luna and her father are working with St Mungo’s on. Combines muggle technology with magic to show a… sonneram of the baby.”

Hermione chuckled. “A sonogram?!!”

“Yea… that,” Ron said, and he clicked a button on the top of the box. A moving sonogram image of the baby was then projected in the air just above the box, and everyone gathered around to have a look.

“Is this the baby right now?!” Neville asked.

“Nah, it’s sort of like a memory from earlier when we were with the healer.”

“That’s just bloody amazing,” said Harry.

“I can’t see anything!” said Blaise.

Astoria hit him in the arm. “That’s because it’s only about the size of Droobles. That’s what they told me, anyway.”

“Wow,” Hermione and Ginny whispered in unison.

Draco took Astoria’s hand and smiled up at her. She squeezed his hand back tightly, tears already falling from her eyes.

The four of them had had a long interlude the day before, after Astoria and Ron had found out about the danger their child had been in. They’d been cross at first over not being told, but understood in the end, conceding that they probably would have been more trouble than help in the matter. Plus, Astoria’s stress would have been horrible for the baby.

Of course, they were not the only ones who had been egregiously lied to and manipulated through this entire ordeal. Draco and Hermione had been exceptionally angry about the ways they’d been forced into realizing their feelings for one another. Many hours had been spent deconstructing and analyzing what exactly had occurred. Many admissions and apologies had been made, largely by Narcissa. A considerable amount of time had been spent solely on the fact that Hermione had seen so many of Draco’s private memories.

A part of him, however, had been glad of it. It was kind of wonderful to have someone he cared so much for know him so intimately. He would, of course, be reviewing every single thing she had seen
once they arrived in France (McGonnagal was loaning them the penseive). It certainly wouldn’t do for Hermione to surprise him with her knowledge at any point in future. He was especially nervous about the times his mother had told him about; the memories of him as a small boy, wherein he seemed to put Hermione down, simply because he could not have her.

He was half looking forward to viewing the memories, and half really, really not.

His mother had maintained that it had all been necessary, and Draco had argued vehemently that there could have been other ways to reach their ends.

Yet, as he stood there looking down at the tiny glowing drooble-sized baby, and seeing the look of joy and relief on Astoria’s face, he had a hard time caring how they’d gotten there.

What was done was done. He was surrounded by friends. He had a place in the world that made sense, and for the first time in a very long time, his future seemed to hold nothing but love, light, and promise.

And grapes. A whole lot of grapes.

At least, for the rest of the summer.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay I’m having a lot of feelings now and don’t know what to write here. I’m going to write the epilogue for posting tomorrow, but I’m going to give myself the option of waiting if it’s not perfect :D

For now, I just wanted to get this out to you all who are waiting anxiously! I will put proper thank you’s in the epilogue!
Epilogue? What Epilogue?

Chapter Notes

I can’t believe it’s finally done! It’s so bittersweet. I really loved writing these last two chapters in particular and I hope you enjoy it too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Five Years Later*

Draco was sweating.

Again.

“You can do this. You're going to regret it if you're not in there when it happens.”

“I know, I know, I bloody well know that! Why does everyone keep telling me that as if it's brand new information?!”

Ginny struck her signature hands-on-hips pose and raised an eyebrow.

“Oh you don't want to get snippy with me today, Malfoy. I'm here to keep you sane, so unless you'd like a quick portkey to the Janus Thickey ward-”

“Alright! I'm sorry, okay?”

Ginny turned her head and put a hand to her ear.

“What was that? Didn't quite catch it?”

Draco scoffed and hung his head, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

“I'm sorry, Ginny.”

She perked up, smiling. “Apology accepted! Now, let's go back in there.”

With a flourish of her robes, Ginny turned quickly and began to walk down the hall.

“No, wait!” he called after her, but she kept walking.

Panicking, he cried out, “I'm scared, Ginny.”

She stopped abruptly and spun around, regarding him with a mixture of delight and surprise.

“Well, isn't this an honor?”

He rolled his eyes and ran a hand through his hair as she strode back over to him.

“What are you scared of, Draco?”

“I should think that would be obvious.”
“You would think so, but for sake of ease let's pretend I'm a simpleton and spell it out for-”

“What if I'm a horrible father?”

The words spilled out so quickly that for a moment he wasn't sure if she'd fully heard what he'd said, but then she closed the space between them and took one of his hands in hers. He didn't withdraw, which surprised even him. After regarding him for a moment with a look bordering on pity, she took a deep breath and spoke.

“Draco Lucius Malfoy, you were raised by a man whose heart was corrupted by dark magic a long time before you entered his world. You were used and manipulated and betrayed, and yet here you are, loved and in love, and about to bring not one, but two new lives into this world. If you died today, there would be no question as to what kind of person you were. You are a credit to your father’s name, not that any credit should or will ever be applied. You have redefined your family name ten times over and risen from impossible odds. So don't you for one second think that just because he was a sick, twisted, psychotic arsehole that it has any bearing on who you will be as a father.”

Something snapped in him as she spoke. Her words, which would normally have ricocheted right off of him and off into the ether, sunk in instead. Once inside, he found them soothing. How had she known to say exactly what he needed to hear?

He felt hot tears prick at the backs of his eyes, but pushed them away, taking a steadying breath.

“You've been hanging around Potter too long.”

She smirked. “Or just long enough?”

Draco let out a low laugh and Ginny grinned at him.

“Come here, Weaselette,” he said, pulling her into a hug.

“I suppose I'll allow that just this once.”

“It's always been a term of endearment. You Gryffindors are so touchy.”

“I doubt the ‘always’ bit, but alright.”

He didn't pull away from the hug, keenly aware that what was next was re-entering the birthing room.

“Did Potter also teach you not to pat backs when hugging? We're both doing a good job of it at the moment.”

“Now you're just stalling, Malfoy.”

She gave him a squeeze and pulled away, motioning for him to lead on. Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward, allowing her words to reverberate in his mind. He didn't feel altogether calm, but it was certainly an improvement. Anyway, he supposed that some measure of nerves on the day one becomes a parent should be expected.

Before turning the doorknob to re-enter the room, he turned back to her.

“Thanks, Ginny.”

“Get your arse in there, Dad.”
“They both have your eyes, Draco.”

Hermione was dosing, but could vaguely hear her mother-in-law’s doting voice in the room.

“The healers said that most babies have light colored eyes when they’re born, and that they could change.”

His voice still sent a tingle through her, and even more so now. His presence was protection. Reassurance. Love.

She’d had a hell of a time delivering magical twins, and could hardly keep her eyes open. Had she not felt such anchored trust in him, she was certain she’d be forcing herself to stay awake and make sure the babies were alright.

“Well regardless, I’m so glad they’re healthy and that everything went relatively smoothly. Do we have names yet?”

“We each chose a constellation.”

“And...?”

“Scorpius for the boy, and Lyra for the girl.”

“Wonderful. Simply wonderful. Strong names for both, just like their parents.” She leaned over the bassinets to observe her grandchildren more closely.

Hermione smiled to herself as she drifted into a deep, contented sleep.

* * *

“So, how do you tell them apart?” Blaise asked.

“I don’t know, I can just tell,” Hermione said as she smiled down at her week-old babies.

“And how is Draco faring? Does he need them labeled?”

At this, Hermione let out a burst of laughter and then covered her mouth, not wanting to wake them.

“Oh dear, I feel treacherous saying this, but yes! Yesterday he thought he had Lyra and I let him carry on thinking that until ‘she’ needed a new nappie and then…”

Blaise chuckled. “We could really do a number on him if we wanted.”

She raised a cautionary finger. “Get that gleam out of your eye, I think my husband has endured enough manipulative plots for a lifetime.”

The door to Hermione and Draco’s bedroom opened and Neville entered.
“Alright in here?”

“You’re just in time, Nev. We’re plotting ways to mess with the new father-.”

“We are not!”

“Keep your voice down, Mum! We have sleeping babes here,” Blaise said in an exaggerated whisper.

Neville looked between them, a wry smile on his face. “I can remove him if necessary, Mione.”

Blaise threw his hands behind his head and his feet up on the coffee table. “You’ll have to do so forcibly, Nev, and feel free to be a bit handsy while you’re at it.” He winked.

“On second thoughts, you’re stuck with him.”

* * *

“Dahlia, come sit here and Daddy will let you hold the baby.”

Ron led his daughter over to a cozy wingback armchair and helped her get settled.

Her Godfather kneeled beside her, brushing a strand of jet black hair out of her sky-blue eyes. “Who would you like to hold first, love?”

The small girl pursed her lips. “Hmm… the girl!”

“Very well,” Draco said with a smile. “You hear that, Uncle Ronald?”

Ron stood over the twin bassinets, scratching his head. “I did, but that doesn’t make selecting the correct one any easier. Why don’t you dress them in pink and blue or something?!”

“Don’t get me started,” Draco said, standing to join Ron in front of the babies. “Hermione is on this whole kick about not ‘conforming to gender norms’ or some rubbish.”

“What the bloody hell-”

“Daddy said a bad word!”

Both men turned their heads to face the smiling little girl, who was proffering a proud hand in their direction.

Ron groaned. “This one is going to rob me of house and home.” He then crossed over to her, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a sickle.

“Please don’t tell mummy I’ve added to the swear jar,” he said in a whisper, and then kissed her on the forehead as she pocketed the coin.

“Do you really think that will work?” Draco asked with a grin.

Ron stood and let out a long sigh. “Not a chance.”
“Parkinson, do you have eyes on him?” Harry spoke into his wristwatch.

Pansy’s voice came through the invisible bug in his ear.

“Yea, he just bought a damned ice cream cone at Fortescue’s and is now enjoying it in the sunshine. Is this man really linked to the Lestrange’s? Because so far he seems as ordinary as that bloke you set me up with last week.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Can we focus on the task at hand, please? We can discuss your disastrous love life over celebratory drinks once we catch this scumbag.”

“Fair enough, Potter. I’m going in.”

Harry donned his invisibility cloak and moved to a position where he could see the tables outside of the ice cream parlor. Sure enough, the man they’d been tracking was seated alone at one of the small white tables, enjoying what looked like a strawberry and peanut butter cone with unicorn sprinkles.

Pansy sauntered past him, inconspicuously spritzing the air with her patented concoction. Harry knew it had worked within seconds, as the man dropped his magically sparkling cone and spun around to look at her.

She smirked at him. “My place or yours?”

Harry followed closely behind as the man followed her to her flat just up the road. They walked past the “Pansy’s Potions” storefront on the way there, and Harry had to hold in a chuckle at the irony of it. The man had no idea he’d already been caught.

* * *

Astoria smirked as she saw her business partner pass by the shop. Another mission with Harry, no doubt. She wondered whether he’d just gone by as well, unbeknownst to everyone on the busy street.

“Mrs. Weasley, we’re running low on the pre-hangover cure all. Shall I put in an order for more?”

“Please do, Eveline.”

Her summer shop assistant spun around to go and complete the task, and Astoria continued reorganizing the shelves at the front. Just then the bell on the door dinged and in walked Gabrielle and Hannah, both looking harassed by the heat.

“I am done weeth zees summer!” Gabrielle exclaimed.

“We’re out of cooling charm mist, Astoria. Please have mercy on a few miserable pregnant witches!” said Hannah.

Astoria smirked, motioning for them to have a seat in the small waiting area in the front of the shop.
“Magic acting up again, ladies?”

“Yes! I cannot cast a cooling charm to save my life, and nor can Gabi. I’d ask a stranger to do it, but that would be an oddly intimate thing to ask, wouldn’t it? I mean maybe not, but I feel like I would just make it weird.”

Astoria chuckled as she retrieved two small spray bottles from the shelf she’d just been organizing; a summer-specific potion display. Hannah did have a penchant for awkwardness.

“What should we ave to when Astoria ees always ere to elp?”

“Happy to be of service,” she said, crossing back over to them. “I know your plight all too well.” She spritzed both ladies with the charmed mist and they sighed contentedly, relaxing back into their armchairs.

“Did you see the twins yesterday?” Hannah asked, her eyes still closed in relief.

“Yes, I actually took the night shift with Draco,” Astoria said.

“And you ah steel standing?!”

Astoria laughed and then motioned to one of the shelves. “I have plenty of resources to aid in wakefulness.”

Hannah opened her eyes wide and sat up. “Oh, but Astoria, you shouldn’t be doing that multiple times a week, you need actual sleep!”

Astoria shrugged. “I owe them my child’s life, and my own by extension. I will lose weeks of sleep if need be.”

The bell on the door dinged again.

“Well hello all! I wasn’t expecting everyone to be here!” said Luna.

“What’s the news?” Astoria said, excitedly.

Luna stilled, smiling broadly at Astoria.

“What news?” “Hey what is this about?!” Gabrielle and Hannah said at once.

“Well,” Luna said, “Hermione won’t be the only one of us to be having twins!”

The screaming that ensued was enough to shatter the storefront. Eveline emerged hurriedly from the back room looking panic-stricken.

“Is everything alright, Mrs. Weasley?!”

Astoria turned back to face the girl as her friends danced around in celebration.

“Oh yes, Eveline. Everything is just wonderful.”

* * *
“Do you know that Luna actually told me she would have twins some day?”

“Couldn’t have bothered to mention that you would as well?”

Hermione laughed and rolled onto her side to gaze at her husband.

“Well, she did bother to tell me that you’d been in love with me since we were eleven.”

Draco scoffed. “I still maintain that none of that early complaining was due to my actually liking you. It gives young me far too much credit.”

She leaned forward and softly kissed his cheek, then snuggled up closer to him.

“Draco, you really had no choice but to hate me. I was so much smarter than you.”

“Getting your usual pluck back, I see.”

She sat up enough to look into his eyes. “Yes, it’s a good thing that that’s what you love most about me.” He reached up and tangled his fingers in her hair, drawing her in for a kiss. They hadn’t been alone together in more days than either of them could accurately count.

When they broke apart, he said, “Do you think the Potters will survive the night?”

“Survive? No doubt in my mind,” Hermione said. “Whether they’ll agree to take the twins ever again is another matter entirely.”

“You’re probably right.”

She laid back down with her head on his chest and they settled into a contented silence for a while; his steady heartbeat casting a sense of comfort over her entire body.

“It’s too bad we can’t… you know… this soon after the births.”

Hermione grinned. “Actually, Luna and Pansy gave me a gift today.”

“What sort of gift?” he said slowly, in a voice rapt with anticipation.

“Oh just a new potion to aid in postpartum recovery.”

“Is that so?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“And how fast does this potion-”

“Instantly.”

She could hear him swallow hard. “And when were you going to tell me th-”

“I thought I’d tell you right now, since it was my idea for Harry and Gin to take the babies for the night,” she said as she ran her hand teasingly down his chest and drew circles over his hip bones.

Pulling her up so that she was straddling him, he dragged her lips to his for a fierce kiss. Then he bit her lower lip and said, “minx.”
Fin.

Chapter End Notes

HUGE thanks to Christine who was Alpha for this story at the times when I was actually patient enough to send her something and wait for feedback. Not that I ever waited long, she is amazing! Thanks so much for your patience and steady love and encouragement. Without you, this all would quite literally not be happening. I never would have gotten into fan fiction if it wasn’t for you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart <3

Thanks to my dear friend Grace Helbig for enthusiastically encouraging me to write and being my weekly accountability partner! Your energy and excitement was fuel for my fire, and continues to be. Love you so much, girl!

Thanks to Mark for reading everything I write and giving super detailed and encouraging feedback every time. Thanks for being excited for new chapters always! It’s so much fun to share this with you.

Thanks to Melanie for also devouring every new chapter (sometimes in advance of the readers here ) and for always giving me amazing line by line commentary. Love you to pieces!

And finally, thank you to all of the readers! I wanted to name specific user names, but I feel like I will leave out too many people. You that have been here from the beginning on Ao3 know who you are and how much your comments have meant to me <3 And thanks to everyone newly binging the whole story. I look forward to all of your comments as well!

I’ve posted a number of dramione drabbles and one-shots to my account, as well as two WIPs: “Draco Malfoy Gets a Life Coach” and “Here’s the Deal” – I’m working on one other, a Hogwarts professor fic that I started on tumblr and the idea wouldn’t leave me alone, but will probably wait until it’s almost complete before posting.

I would love it if you went to check out my other stuff! Thanks so much for being on this journey with me!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!