Memorised

by mhcalamas

Summary

Astoria Malfoy is found dead in Paris. Hanging from her ankle, all the blood drained from her body, and the galleons and galleons apparently with her are missing. Aurors have a suspect, but mounting evidence seems to point to her husband, Draco. In a twisted tale of intrigue, suspicion and love, Magizoologist Hermione Granger wishes she'd never set foot in Paris. EWE. DRAMIONE.

Notes

A/N: Welcome. This fic has been completely written, and would not be presented to you without the incredible assistance of alpha Kynomiko and beta CourtingInsanity. They are gems—treasured and invaluable. Any and all errors are completely mine. Infinite gratitude to Mykespirit for volunteering to read it through just because. She's incredible.

WARNINGS: There are no lemons. Death, mild language, infidelity may be found throughout this fic, and I just really didn't want a 13-year-old reading it.

ALSO, I have flashbacks spread throughout, which is why I dated sections, to keep me straight. If you have a thing about flashbacks though, you have been warned.

Inspired by "The Mystery of the Blue Train" by Agatha Christie. These characters are not mine, nor is the magical HP world. I simply wrote this for the fun of it.
Saturday, 6 April 2002

'Paris is always a good idea.'

Hermione Granger couldn't recall that specific phrase ever being uttered by the late Audrey Hepburn in any of her iconic Parisian-set films, but the sentiment was ever present. The Hollywood star enchanted her fans through a screen, endearing them to Paris forever.

To Paris in the spring. With blossoming blooms and budding trees. Soft drizzles from an overcast sky, just enough to waltz along the sidewalks under the safety of an umbrella. Or duck into a street café, and perchance happen upon the fated handsome stranger—who would, of course, be charming enough to dance the night away with under the blessing of a full moon and a canopy of applauding stars…

A hard body shoved passed Hermione, muttering something French under his breath—Hermione thought she caught the words 'out of my way', but couldn't be quite sure. It had been too long since she'd vacationed in France, and while working for Rolf Scamander as a Magizoologist opened wide the doors for travel, Hermione avoided France whenever possible.

Especially Paris.

It had been a special, mother-daughter thing, watching all those classic black-and-white films over and over, until they were both dramatically following the script along with the characters. Paris had become the perfect holiday, if only just for a week or two once she had started to Hogwarts.

From the relationship Hermione had forged with Monica Wilkins of Perth, Australia, the middle-aged dentist maintained her love of the golden-era films, and her husband, Wendell, would cast a smitten look across the room, musing aloud: "We'll always have Paris."

There were sounds of fast footfalls against the pavement, splashing and a great roar, wrenching Hermione from her thoughts. She tossed an annoyed look over her shoulder, long chocolate and cinnamon curls whipping around her face, as when caught in a violent wind. Angry clouds had gathered and darkened overhead, unleashing furious sheets of water from behind, with Hermione directly in their path.

She pulled at the collar of her lightweight coat, and hastened into a jog, weaving around her fellow pedestrians. She squinted at the shop signs to her right, hoping she had remembered this area correctly…

There!

She slipped in through a painted white doorway, under an ostentatious purple and gold sign just as the falling water caught up to her, and she breathed a relieved exhale. Rain pounded against the large glass windows and the wind howled, snarling and furious as it carried the storm up further up the sidewalk.
Someone brushed against Hermione, cursing under their breath and Hermione shook herself, wild curls tumbling around her shoulders. Ignoring the dozens of rows of bookshelves, Hermione slipped closer to the window, mesmerised by the sudden swirling storm, unable to look away…

"Hermione Granger?"

She snapped her gaze from the window, searching for the owner of that familiar voice…

Ah…Hermione forced a pleased expression on to her face as a raven haired young woman with a full-hourglass figure bustled her way to the front of the bookshop.

"Oh, it is you—how delightful!" the woman exclaimed.

"Hello—oh!" Hermione was cut off as the stylish young witch threw her arms around Hermione, pulling her in for an inescapable squeeze, and then kissed both Hermione's cheeks.

"It's been ages, Hermione, I would guess since the wedding and—oh!" The gushing figure gasped, dramatically clapping a hand over her mouth, just as a clap of thunder sounded outside. "We've never really just talked as friends, you and I," the witch continued, "and there I went right in and called you 'Hermione'—I'm so embarrassed!"

Rain pelted against the window as Hermione pulled a tight smile; the young thing appeared to be neither particularly apologetic nor especially abashed. In fact, Hermione didn't think it would have mattered how she responded, but because she had been raised with some measure of decorum...

"Hermione's fine," she granted with a smile that she hoped wouldn't appear as strained as it felt. "How are you Mrs. Malfoy?"

The witch's face twitched and her own exuberant smile faltered. "'Astoria', please. Narcissa's still—I mean..." she stiffened and the smile dropped completely. "Narcissa will always be 'Mrs. Malfoy'. To everyone, but especially Draco."

All pretence of a heartfelt reunion fell, but even so, Hermione surrendered to her compassionate instincts and took the witch's hands in hers, pressing a sympathetic squeeze to her fingers. "I'm truly sorry for your loss," Hermione whispered.

"Oh, I—" the witch snapped her mouth shut, seemingly uncomfortable with the unexpected twist in the conversation. "Thank you. She's still missed by those who knew and loved her most." Her hand slackened in Hermione's and her raven locks shifted to reveal large gold hoop earrings as she inclined her head thoughtfully. "Were you not invited to the funeral?"

"I—"

"But that's probably too presumptuous on my part to expect you to have been there..." Astoria cut in as Hermione lifted dubious brow—the young witch had clearly regained her earlier spirit of joie de vivre. "I just assumed, as you were friends with everyone else in attendance..."

"I-was-in-Australia," Hermione hissed, her insides twisting as she wished the witch would find someone - anyone - else to divert this asinine conversation towards.

She cleared her throat at Astoria's confused expression. "Rolf—Mr. Scamander—had a long-term assignment idea in Australia," Hermione started again. "I started the first week of October last year."

"You've been there all this time?" Astoria asked, appearing surprised.
"Mostly..." Hermione offered, not caring expound on the particulars of her private affairs in the middle of such a public setting. She checked out the window, taking note of overhanging canvases billowing and flapping in the howling storm. "My, my, certainly coming down out there," she said, almost to herself.

Astoria give a breezy chuckle. "Too lost in my own thoughts to notice it had started raining, until I heard the rush of footsteps clamouring about...This isn't usually a frequented bookstore."

"No, it isn't," Hermione agreed with a slight head tilt. "My father always complained of the prices here, but my mother loved digging, and she'd always walk out of here with something that would have her beaming for days." She blinked in rapid succession, eyes unexpectedly misting over.

"I've made several lavish purchases here myself," Astoria murmured. "Stumbled upon it while exploring Muggle Paris on my own several years ago..."

Hermione gave a sound of acknowledgment, but made no other contribution to continue conversation.

The silence to follow was just as uncomfortable as the talking, if not exponentially worse, as the younger witch began acting as one with something to say, yet uncertain how to proceed, if one should even proceed. Hermione pretended to study the raging storm outside the window, when in fact, she was observing this curious internal war surfacing in the young Mrs. Malfoy through her reflection in the window.

Golden bracelets jingled on Astoria's wrist as she would raise an arm and open her mouth, only to snap it shut, rub her chin in consideration, lower her arm, and start the waring process again.

The fourth time, Astoria finally broke the silence. "Is it business or pleasure that brings you to Paris, Hermione?"

"Business," Hermione answered, lifting her head from the panel of water-streaked glass.

Astoria paused, as if waiting for further explanation.

Hermione only blinked, offering a smile that didn't invite for further inquiries.

Astoria cleared her throat. "Then back to Australia afterwards?" It was clear she was still waging an internal war.

"London tomorrow. With plans to be there for the foreseeable future."

"Oh, that's...good..." Astoria gulped, talking almost to herself next. "An extraordinary coincidence really..."

Hermione was quite at her limit now, as Astoria once again fell silent, fiddling with a dangling chain on one of her bracelets, piecing things together in her mind. If the price of freedom from this unfortunate case of happenstance was the most expensive book in this ostentatious store, Hermione would gladly pay it, if only to be alone amongst the shelves...

"Where are you staying tonight?"

"A hotel here in Muggle Paris," she deadpanned, brow pulling together in irritation. "Look, Mrs. Mal—Astor—"

"I know, I'm so sorry." Astoria suddenly burst, lurching forward and taking Hermione by the
elbows, and Hermione snapped her mouth shut in stunned silence.

The young witch made a desperate face, blue eyes pleading. "I've been...unsettled," she paused on that word, as if trying it out to see if it fit what she wanted to convey..."Yes, unsettled about something specific all day, and it's so curious bumping into you, here, and now—I can only assume it really isn't curious, but was just meant to be."

Hermione stifled a groan, mind racing to summon the most cordial rebuttal, when she caught the familiar buzzing of an invisible magical barrier.

Astoria glanced around the store, muttering a little more under her breath, which Hermione concluded to be other silencing and repelling charms to finally ward off spectators (Merlin only knew how they hadn't attracted attention yet...).

The young witch turned back to Hermione, eyes decided and determined. "This is an imposition, I know, and I apologize in advance for putting you in the spot like this," she started, and Hermione suppressed the urge to snort, because that would be equally uncouth, if not more-so..."You have every right to walk out that door." Astoria's gaze lifted beyond her unwilling captive, as if waiting to see if she would bolt...but Hermione only sighed and leaned back into the glass window.

"Thank you," the young witch breathed. "I'm at a crossroads at the moment. With life and marriage...everything. There's something I've done...well, I'm having a great deal of second thoughts about this one thing in particular—and I can't talk about it with anyone else."

Hermione straightened up, opening her mouth...

"One other person, I suppose," Astoria hastened to add, throwing up a silencing hand. "But I know his opinion already, but he doesn't understand...I need to know—you of all people, Hermione, would be more than justified to hate Draco, to never forgive him. Yet you have." She stepped closer, invading and remaining beyond Hermione's invisible personal space line for acquaintances. She pierced Hermione with a flashing look. "I need to know why."

Blood drained from Hermione's face as she sucked a slow breath, counted to ten, willing her heart rate to normalize. "Because he asked for my forgiveness," she answered simply, unflinching. It wasn't untrue..."He apologized for what he was responsible for and he sought reconciliation with me." She swallowed, resolute in how to continue. "And he took the chance, choosing to be my friend when he didn't have to."

Astoria quirked a brow. "Truly?"

Hermione nodded. "He sent me a letter before the last school year and we found commonalities to build a friendship on in the course of the school year."

She allowed a smile to ghost over her lips as Astoria chuckled slowly.

"I always assumed that was Nott's doing," she admitted.

"Oh, Theo invaded, make no mistake," Hermione confirmed, surrendering to the broadening grin as she continued. "And Theo didn't take no for an answer. But, Malfoy made the choice to be a friend without Theo's persistence."

Astoria inclined her head in consideration. "What about the Ministry's punishment?" she asked. "Did you agree with that?"

Hermione clamped her hands together as she paused, taking the time to select the appropriate
wording. "I didn't, Astoria. Theo, Parkinson, Goyle, they all got metaphorical slaps on the wrists, when they were just as involved in treacherous acts under the reign of the Carrows.

"Narcissa saved Harry's life and St. Mungo's refused her because of her name." Hermione's eyes were treacherously misting now and a mantra of oaths echoed in Hermione's mind, but she had to finish... "Lucius had already been sentenced to life in Azkaban, and the Ministry ruled to take everything from Draco—they acquitted him still ruled to destroy the Manor and empty the Malfoy vaults of every last Knut."

Something unreadable flickered in Astoria's gaze. She seemed to teeter on the brink of indecision before pitching forward, wrapping her arms tight around Hermione's shoulders before Hermione had a chance to analyse or ponder.

"Thank you. Thank you so much," Astoria murmured, pulling away as suddenly as she had embraced her.

"I'm so sorry to dash, but I have to go. I need to go before I change my mind again…"

"Astoria—"

But the witch had already released the charms from around them and stepped away from Hermione, nearer the door; all pretence of familiarity giving way to formality. "Goodbye, Miss Granger." With a glittering wink and flourish, Astoria Malfoy charged out the white door and marched left on the sidewalk, into the coming storm.

Hermione remained rooted in place by the windows for a long moment, flabbergasted. Uncertain what to make of any part of that conversation, she silently observed as the squall outside eventually blew itself out, settling into a drizzle.

Without wasting a glance over her shoulder, Hermione exited the over-priced bookshop, veering left to the Apparition point. Focusing on a quaint street café, the world around her pressed inward and spun until Hermione landed in the middle of Wizarding Paris. Just outside the front door of a coffee shop she had brought her parents to before…

A lump formed in her throat as she tarried at the entrance, assailed by a dozen insignificant memories. She swallowed hard, and entered the charming, classic Parisian establishment. Diagon Alley had a dingy, old-fashioned feel about it oftentimes, but Paris always felt the same, whether Wizard or Muggle…

Noting the rain had already passed by and the sun had begun to shine brightly in a final compensating burst before surrendering to nightfall, Hermione ordered a simple coffee and requested to be seated outside. She chose a small round table next to the iron-rod fence, affording the perfect view of the large rose garden at the back of the hotel across the street.

When her coffee arrived, she leaned back into her chair, drinking in the view of a climbing rose wall and large blooming bushes across the street. She could still hear a seventeen-year-old Hermione excitedly—anxiously—telling her parents that was the most expensive hotel in all of Wizarding Europe, appropriately named La Roseraie.

The air was a thick perfume of roses and rain, complementing the gentle kiss of bitter coffee from the cup she cradled near her face. It was bliss. It was a thick balm to her soul. Seven months away from Britain, only to bump into Astoria Malfoy, of all people. Of all the bookshops in all the cities in all the—
"As I live and breathe, Granger?"

"Malfoy!" Hermione squeaked, shooting upright in her chair, heart slamming against her breastbone.

The pale blond wizard did not bother masking his stunned expression, and for a half a moment, he stood before her on the cobblestone sidewalk, mouth slightly ajar, hands hanging limp at his sides under a dark robe. He blinked twice, snapped his mouth shut and cleared his throat. "This is… unexpected. You're in Australia?" The statement was actually a question.

"I am," Hermione started and shook her head, heat flooding her face. "That is, I was. But bushfire season is almost over, and Rolf asked me to take a meeting for him with the French Ministry tomorrow morning." She shrugged a shoulder weakly. "I thought I'd arrive early, see if maybe he could meet today…but since that didn't happen I'm here until tomorrow. And then back to London." Hermione clamped down on the inside of her cheek to keep from rambling anymore.

"I see." Malfoy's luminous grey eyes glittered in the sunlight. And in the radiance of his broadening smile -or smirk. "I recall you said last year that you were keeping your flat in London. Not subletting it?"

To her horror, Hermione burst out laughing before she could help it.

"What?" Malfoy frowned, brow furrowing. "Did I get wrong?"

The witch shook her head, a breeze catching in her curls. "No, no. That was correct—just…a little funny to hear such a common phrase come from you." She offered an affirming smile. "You remembered correctly, there wasn't any need of letting go of it. Rolf had ten portkeys directly to my flat made up for me before my assignment in Australia. One per month to check on things and pay the bills and a few extras, if I needed them."

"Convenient," Malfoy canted his head, lips pulling in a playful expression. "Wouldn't think Scamander had it in him to plan so far in advance."

"He actually got the idea from Mr. Greengrass, our offices are in the same building." Hermione fought back the wince, keen that she was about to start rambling again… "Apparently, Mr. Greengrass has portkeys on the ready for several of his employees at any time. Percy Weasley, for example, always has several for Paris, Madrid, Rome, Berlin and Athens."

"Mmm, explains it then…" Malfoy propped himself against the iron-rod barrier, lean and casual, his neat, cropped hair dancing lightly in the spring wind. "How was Australia?"

"Hot and dry," Hermione managed to respond (sheer force of will alone). "Not nearly as exciting as one would surmise. Magical fires leave an imprint, and it was a lot of scouring and then waiting once stumbling upon the one magical fire in a dozen natural bushfires. But that's the job Rolf asked of me."

Malfoy nodded, eyes sharpening in interest. "Were you successful in finding any ashwinder eggs?"

"Not so much," she answered. "They like finding a large, dark and secluded area to lay their eggs in the one hour they have to live, and a place meeting all those requirements in that time frame is a bit hard to come by in the Australian bush."

She paused and brushed a few curls behind her ear. "I can't complain, though. I got to know Monica and Wendell better and they seem to like Hermione Granger, graduate student in Zoology decent enough…" Hermione's heart jumped to her throat as Malfoy's face softened.
"I'm sure that was...well...It's not the same as when they know you, is it?" he asked.

A lump formed in her throat as she shook her head.

It was possible and very likely she was imagining the glossy sheen in his eyes as he leaned in, like one with a secret. "Mother would have liked the wreath," he said, making his voice low. "It was beautiful. And she liked you. She asked about you before the end."

She considered a moment before deciding on a vague enough response. "Well, I'm glad it arrived. It was raining and Rolf's owl isn't terribly fond of me," she finished with a half-smile, hoping to Merlin he wouldn't make too many other inquiries that could lead to lies to keep certain things unsaid...

"I suppose Theo informed you?" he asked, straightening up.

"Who else?" she shrugged, relieved. Theo was safe topic. "I mean, people owled, but who else would have mentioned..." She snapped her mouth shut, dropping her head to hide an embarrassed flush, pinching her nose. "Merlin, that sounded so...I'm so sor—"

"I understood what you meant, Granger," he cut in, reassuring her softly. "Back to London tomorrow, you said?"

Her hand dropped as she blinked, mind scrambling over the abrupt subject change.

He hadn't moved from his spot next to the gate, expression unreadable, but not impatient or unfitting...

"Yes," she rasped and then cleared her throat, opting to take the metaphorical life line he'd cast her. "As soon as the meeting is over tomorrow," she grinned.

"Fancy making some extra money on Monday? Or already back on the road?" He teased, but there was hint of something serious his question.

"Monday works," she affirmed, nodding slowly. "And I'm London-bound for now; Rolf wants to publish everything from Australia, what little there is anyway..." She rolled her eyes, "How can I be of assistance, Malfoy?"

"Wand cores!" He was actually beaming under that air of nonchalance. "I've started experimenting with alternative cores, and I'd like another brain to pick."

"Oh! Malfoy that's -" She clapped a hand over her mouth, realising she'd caught the attention of some pedestrians with that excited outburst. She settled her hand to her chin, beaming back at the wizard. "That's incredible! I'd love to be any help I can, but Rolf should be available if -"

The wizard dismissed her boss with an aristocratic wave. "Scamander was off his game last I bumped into him. Poor sod's still not recovered from Potter winning Lovegood's hand—which I noticed from the Prophet, you managed to make it back for their wedding."

The wizard dismissed her boss with an aristocratic wave. "Scamander was off his game last I bumped into him. Poor sod's still not recovered from Potter winning Lovegood's hand—which I noticed from the Prophet, you managed to make it back for their wedding."

She rolled her eyes at his insinuating undertone. "January simply couldn't be helped," she responded primly, arching a brow, and breaking into a grin when he raised a brow in return. "And, I'm surprised the Prophet was able to capture a shot of any specific person—half of wizarding Britain was there. I heard Harry grumbling he should have taken Luna up on her offer for a private nude wedding by the light of a full moon," she finished, giggling to herself.

Which did nothing to prepare her for Malfoy's joining laughter.
A sound so rare, so genuine, and rich that it shot through Hermione, warming her to the marrow. She swallowed hard as he brushed at non-existent dust on his robes.

"That would have been interesting, to say the least, Granger," he sniggered, catching her eyes again, and she was lost. Floundering.

She'd been away for too long, and Merlin, she'd missed this.

Malfoy suddenly broke eye contact, glancing across the street, gaze appearing to rest at the hotel. She saw his chest lift as he sucked a long breath. Something sad had entered his features as quick and unexpected as his sudden laughter moments before. "It's been brilliant seeing you again, Granger, it really has. But I…I have to go now. I've interrupted you and other patrons of this establishment long enough."

"Meeting Astoria?" she queried, hoping she sounded more curious than disappointed.

His jaw twitched and he pressed a hand flat over his robe, as if feeling for something within the folds. "Not exactly," he murmured, almost wistful. "I think she'd actually be very surprised to see me." He shifted, removing himself further from their barrier, even as his eyes sought hers. "Monday, then? Nine o'clock in the morning alright for you?"

"Perfect," she confirmed even as she began to fight off sorrow of her own.

Malfoy nodded and spun on his heel to cross the street, his dark robes billowing in the sweet spring wind.

Hermione simply sat. For exactly how long, she couldn't say.

Long enough to catch herself quoting the last verses of a poem she'd long ago memorised. "'And makes me end where I begun,'" she finished, shaking her head as if to shake herself from this poignant haze.

Seven months away. And nothing had change…But then again, had she really expected anything would?

She allowed herself one last long exhale before shoving a handful of curls behind her ear and marching herself to the register. She paid for her coffee and skirted out of the café, walking very much away from the hotel. It suddenly became necessary that she move, and the faster the better.

Head down as she walked, she come to an intersection and looked up just in time to keep from bumping into a girl in a lavender sundress and cream cardigan. The girl was giggling and twirling under the arm of a man. Hermione chewed the inside of her cheek as she stepped on to the road to avoid the oblivious lavender fiend. As she stepped back on the sidewalk, her eyes wistfully looked back, catching the girl curling back into the obliging man's arms. Rooted in place again, Hermione almost screamed aloud as the girl began to sing, low and sultry. "Quand il me prend dans ses bras, Il me parle tout bas, Je vois la vie en rose…"

It seemed Paris had not finished mocking her for the day.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm delighted and humbled with the reviews and kudos thus far. Thank you.

Alpha thanks to Kyonomiko. Beta love to CourtingInsanity. I did a little padding and editing of my own before posting, any errors you see will be mine.

I own no part of the Harry Potter Universe.

Sunday, 7 April, 2002

"Hermione!"

The curly-haired witch didn't have the chance to respond to the ebullient shout before Harry Potter yanked her by the shoulders, wrapping her in the warmest of familial embraces.

Harry heaved a contented breath, mumbling into Hermione's hair. "You're not allowed to be away for that long again."

"You saw me last month."

Having her face pressed into her friend's chest, she wasn't entirely certain if Harry understood her muffled response, until he moved his hands back to her shoulders and pulled back, levelling her with a look.

"My wedding doesn't count, I saw everyone from wizarding Britain and dozens more of Xenophilius' mad-hatter associates from all over wizarding Europe—"

"Harry, they weren't all crazy," a familiar voice said. Turning her large eyes on Hermione, Harry's new wife greeted her with a large smile. "Hello, Hermione."

"Hello, Luna," Hermione returned, leaning up on her toes to lay a pacifying kiss to her sulking friend's cheek before wriggling free of his hands. "You're sure Andromeda was alright with another guest for dinner—that's a lovely necklace, by the way." She maneuvered herself to greet the new Mrs. Potter with a hug that allowed her to smirk over the witch's shoulder back at Harry, whose green eyes glittered as he sauntered from the fireplace.

"A wedding present from Harry," Luna answered in her sing-song voice, dreamily lifting the alternating chain of sapphires, diamonds, Butterbeer corks for Hermione to better admire. "He wanted to add rubies, but I told him red stones would counteract Nargle repellent in the Butterbeer corks."

Harry draped an arm around his wife, lazily kissing her temple, keeping his voice low. "And I told you this necklace wasn't really about keeping Nargles away, love."

Hermione's cheeks burned as she took an awkward step away from the newlyweds, who seemed to
be getting lost in their own world as they gazed and smiled at each other…

"Ahem, Harry." Hermione coughed, shifting her gaze across the ceiling before looking back at the couple, now each with an arm bound around the either. "Are you positive it's alright for me to be here? I didn't even have time to get Andromeda a hostess present."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Luna reassured her, her ethereal smile dotting up her face. "We brought enough of Teddy's favourite drink for everyone and the pudding, and Andromeda seemed excited to have another adult to talk to when Harry and Teddy go off about Quidditch."

"Oh," Hermione blinked several times, not quite certain how to respond to that. Andromeda was too well-bred to be rude, but a one-on-one conversation with Luna could be challenging. "Well, are they in the kitchen?" Hermione ventured, her gaze searching beyond the sitting room and the affectionate couple. "I should probably say hello."

"Teddy had an accident and Andromeda's changing him," Harry supplied, pursing his lips, though the corners quirked.

Luna looked up at him in obvious question. "Is that what happened? It looked to me like he jumped off his broomstick before landing properly and tripped over a rock, landing in a puddle while yelling about the toilet—though I could be mistaken, he talks so fast it's hard to understand what he's saying from a distance sometimes."

Harry snorted outright, losing himself to a chuckle as he dropped his forehead into Luna's hair. "Yes, love," he purred. "That's exactly what happened."

Hermione bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. She was trapped in a room with newlyweds in a prolonged state of euphoric bliss with no chance of escape…

"Are you letting your hair grow, Harry?" she burst out, eternally thankful her voice broke through the magnetic pull of the couple's gazing as they both looked to Hermione as one. Hermione sucked in a breath, indicating to his even shaggier than usual head. "It...ah...it just looked longer than you'd been keeping it at the wedding, and it looks like it's even longer now."

The wizard opened his mouth, but Luna, dazed expression and all, beat him with a response. "But he's upstairs, love," Luna countered, looking as if her husband had just said something highly illogical.

"He could've come back downstairs and may have asked Andromeda questions that would have made her very cross at you," he said, glancing over in the direction of the stairs, "And we can't have her cross with two of us in one day."

"Now you're just being silly, Harry Potter," Luna insisted, a firm hint in her usual soft tone. "Teddy's
a four-year-old and can't sneak up on anyone because—"

As if on cue, the simultaneous sounds of a door slamming and child bellowing "HARRRRYYYY!" echoed down the stairs, proving Luna's argument as she pinned her husband with a satisfied smile. Harry rolled his eyes, grinning affectionately at the stairs.

Hermione winced at the additional accompanying sound of thundering foot falls racing down flights of stairs. One easily forgot how much noise a single child was capable of producing…

It was the unmistakable 'POP!' of Apparation that drew everyone from the sitting room and to the staircase…

Andromeda Tonks now stood at that bottom of the staircase, soft brown hair that was usually tamed back in some form of a twist was loose and askew, arms folded across her chest as she waited.

"Edward. Remus. Lupin."

Hermione thought it remarkable how three simple words had the power to freeze a child instantly—it was hard to contain a laugh at the look of mingled shock, horror, and awe on Teddy Lupin's face as he came to a grinding halt on a landing.

Andromeda threw a hand out, pointing up the stairs. "You will march back up the stairs this instant. You will open and re-shut the bathroom door, softly, and you will come back down the stairs like a civilized gentleman."

Teddy's hair changed from brilliant turquoise to yellow to red and then to a dull grey as his face narrowed before he turned on his heel, obeying his grandmother's command.

Andromeda waited until the boy disappeared completely before granting a look over at her guest, a genuine smile softening her features instantly as she reached out to Hermione. "Hello, dear," she said, pulling Hermione in for a tender embrace. "I'm so glad Harry invited you."

"So kind of you to have me on such short notice, Andromeda," Hermione answered, relishing in the feel of the witch carding her fingers through Hermione's curls until pulling back when Teddy sulked back on to the first landing.

"Can Harry and I ride the brooms a little longer?" the child asked expectantly.

Hermione backed up to grin at the child. Harry's eyes glittered, while Andromeda appeared hesitant.

"I'd be happy to overlay the grass with shield charms to keep him from getting dirty if the boys decide to try any further stunts, Mrs. Tonks," Luna volunteered.

"Oh, please!" Teddy, eyes bright and wide, pleaded to his grandmother.

Andromeda levelled the child with a stern look, while Harry seemed to battle excitement of his own with a sheepish scratch to his neck.

"Ya know, Teddy, we can fly another time. For now, we can stay in here and help with—"

"Outside sounds lovely while I finish up," Andromeda hastily cut in with a smile to Harry and Luna and another piercing stare at her grandson. "But, only after you say hello to Miss Hermione."

The little boy's hair flushed pink as he waved shyly.

The witch grinned, waving in return. "You've grown so much, Teddy. Can you beat Harry in a race
now?"
"Yes!"

The adults chuckled as the boy bounded down the last of the stairs.

"Would you like to see Miss Her—" He paused, mouth twisting in uncertainty. "Her-my—" He cut himself off again, starting to glance up and around for help.

Harry lay an assuring hand on the child's elbow, kneeling down. "It's alright, Teddy. She's been away for a long time." He threw a smirk up to Hermione. "Try it like this: Her – my – oh – nee," he said, slowly and with deliberate emphasis.

That seemed all the more distressing and overwhelming to the child, and Hermione bent over as well, wrapping an arm over his shoulder. "I have an idea: your cousin, Draco, calls me 'Granger'. That sounds much easier, doesn't it?"

Teddy's hair instantly turned to Draco's shade of platinum blond as he quite unexpectedly beamed. "Really?" he whispered.

Hermione nodded. "Grain-ger," she repeated clearly. "If it's alright with your grandmother, I think that's what you should call me."

Teddy's hair shifted turquoise to Malfoy blond in a repeating loop as he and Hermione cast pleading looks at the dignified matriarch.

Andromeda conceded with a sigh, waving Harry and Teddy out the back for fifteen more minutes of flying, with Hermione promising to come out to watch before dinner was ready, and Luna repeating her promise for shield charms over puddles, smiling knowingly at 'Mrs. Tonks'.

"She still insisting on addressing you formally?" Hermione asked, following Andromeda into the kitchen, looking about the room for a means of being useful, only to find the table already set for five, and a pudding sitting under a warming charm.

"Mm," Andromeda agreed, looking taking a quick glance into the oven, rising and brushing non-existent mess from her robes. "I've told her a few times to call me Andromeda as Harry does, but her only response is to tell me I'm very kind and smile that peculiar smile at me."

Hermione chuckled, drifting closer to the table. "Sounds about right—can I help you with anything?"

"No, we're just waiting a few more minutes on this dish. Thank you, though." Andromeda gestured for them to sit at the table. "But sometimes it's just nice to have some quiet adult conversation without a child in the room questioning every little comment."

"I'm sure," Hermione agreed, looking back over her shoulder as she sat down. "Harry seems like he's content."

"Very much so."

Hermione considered the witch's wistful expression. "Does it bring back hard memories of you and Ted?" she queried softly, before wishing she could take back the question entirely, uncertain if they'd reached this level of vulnerability in their acquaintanceship.

"Not at all," Andromeda answered soundly. "Ted was so serious about all I gave up when we married, it was a fight for fun at first. But, Teddy…" She paused to blink away the watery sheen in
her eyes. "Ted would have loved his grandson. He loved playing with Dora at this age."

"And Remus and Tonks would have been good parents," Hermione murmured, reaching out to squeeze Andromeda's fingers.

"Yes, they would have." Andromeda returned the pressure, eyes soft and kind. "But between Harry and Draco, I never worry about Teddy missing out. They each do their best to be part of my grandson's life, which is more than I could have hoped for."

Hermione swallowed hard, gathering some strength before broaching the subject. "I know I wrote you after the fact, but I'm so very sorry for your loss, Andromeda. Narcissa, I mean," she hastily clarified.

"Thank you, dear," Andromeda squeezed Hermione's fingers once more before pulling her hand back and laying her hands in her lap, something wise and pensive filling her features. "Do you know, it's peculiar, but I can't necessarily say that I am sorry. I don't mean that I wish she hadn't have been cursed or passed away, that's not it," she added at Hermione's raised and confused eyebrows.

"But," she continued. "Honestly don't know if I would have had the time with my sister that I did under any other circumstances." She twisted her hands together, knuckles slowly turning white. "The past war left us with such a quagmire of emotions and hurts, I don't know if we would have worked through things as quickly as we did. Or if either of us would have been so willing to set the past behind us and rebuild our relationship were the circumstances not so grave. Her illness and Draco in school kept her from running away to family property in France in the beginning, and the year between school and Draco's marriage, she was too ill to even think of living on her own."

Andromeda blinked in rapid succession, as if to wrench herself from spiralling down a trail of memories too personal and private to share with someone non-family. "Young Theodore reminded me you that you were already in Australia when I inquired about you attending the funeral." Her statement begged for explanation.

"Oh, Andromeda, that's very kind of you…I had been there almost a month by then, yes…" Hermione's cheeks burned the more she stumbled over that affirmation, and she found it necessary to look away and study the delicate painted flower pattern on the plate in front of her. Very intricate and detailed, possibly hand-painted—surely, the plate had been charmed to keep from chipping or breaking years ago, given Tonks' propensity for accident…

"Hermione?"

"Sorry," the young witch murmured, physically shaking her head at her behaviour. "Yes, I—"

But her explanation fell away as for one terrifying flash of an instant, instead of seeing wider, soft and kind eyes and lovely brown hair, Hermione saw frenzied hooded eyes and under long wild dark locks. She uttered a gasp before she could stop herself, straining to keep her seat from scooting backwards across the floor.

"Merlin, I'm so sorry Andromeda, I don't know…" She closed her mouth, shameful heat flooded her cheeks and neck now, and she swallowed hard, entirely uncertain how to proceed now…

She needn't have worried. The witch was already up from her seat, wrapping her arms around Hermoine's shoulders from behind, warm and comforting. "You know, there are so many things I think I should despise I'm surprised to find I don't. I don't despise the Snatchers for taking my husband from me. I can't find it in me to be angry at Remus going to Hogwarts for the final battle, or Nymphadora running to fight by his side. I already told you about Narcissa..."
Hermione's eyes misted over at this marvellous woman comforting her, this bulwark unshaken by the cruel hardships doled out to her.

Andromeda pivoted, dropping to her knees, taking both of Hermione's hands in hers. "But, what I truly abhor is the pain I sometimes bring to my friends and neighbours. Harry hides it well, but every so often I know he looks at me and sees Bella, the one who took his godfather from him. Molly will still have flashbacks of the final battle when I visit with Teddy, and I know I startled you terribly last year, even though you try so hard to deny it."

It was overwhelming. Hermione couldn't contrive a means of answering, a lump had formed in her throat, choking words and thoughts…

Andromeda stood upright again, squeezing Hermione's hands. "I'm sorry for what you've suffered at the hands of my family, Hermione Granger. You've shown graciousness and strength in your extended kindness to myself, my grandson, and to Narcissa while she lived. And you cannot imagine how grateful Narcissa was at the friendship you extended to her son. It gave her hope that the world would eventually be able to forgive him, too."

The witch tugged on Hermione's hands, pulling her to her feet, tucking a stray curl behind Hermione's ear. "Shall we collect the rest of our gathering for dinner?"

Hermione surrendered to a watery laugh, allowing herself to be lead out the kitchen, determining to make it through this dinner without allowing her emotions to strangle all semblance of joy from this reunion.

"Mother of Merlin," Harry breathed contentedly, rubbing his hand over Luna's arm as his wife cuddled into his chest on the back-porch swing. "I really thought no one could top Molly in cooking, but Andromeda never ceases to amaze me with the dishes she whips up."

"She told me once Ted enrolled them in cooking classes before they had Tonks," Hermione volunteered. "And something tells me she must have been a whiz with potions, she has such a sense for details and flavours. Does it take her long putting Teddy down?"

"I believe that since our engagement, whenever I've come over with Harry, she's used this time as a bit of a respite from our overly affectionate displays," Luna offered. "But she seems to enjoy the adult conversation once he's down, and the charms she's cast over the back-porch make it possible to enjoy the sunset or stars no matter the weather. I think she's even starting to agree with me about Nargles."

Harry released a long puff of air as Hermione blinked at the loaded and unembellished truth of Luna's admission.

Mrs. Potter cast an upside-down dreamy look up to her husband from where her head rested on his chest. "You know, we don't set out to make anyone uncomfortable, but you were so deprived of affection for so long, and it really is a beautiful thing to have fallen in love with a friend."

Hermione loathed the envious fingers winding and squeezing her in chest as Harry nuzzled his nose to Luna's and they shared some secret giggle. She looked out into the sunset, hoping the bright orange and pink of the evening would help dissipate the poisonous emotion before the entire evening was soured.

She didn't realize she'd begun muttering to herself until Luna addressed her.

"Did Draco teach you that poem Hermione?"
At such an unexpected question, Hermione gave the most logical answer she could formulate. "Pardon?"

Luna had eased herself up to sit right at Harry's shoulder, her fingers threaded through his. "Well, I suppose if it's making use of metaphor with an old-fashioned Muggle navigational device, you would have been the one to teach it to him—did your N.E.W.T. study group include Muggle poetry?"

"Not that I recall," Hermione answered, slow and measured, hoping to give the impression she was searching through memories.

"Oh. Well, Ginny tells me that Blaise frequently quotes Italian poetry to her, and I thought at the wedding some of the lines from the poem you recited looked and sounded familiar, but I hadn't put it together until just now that I've seen and heard Draco say it to himself oftentimes when I make some wood sample deliveries at Ollivander's."

Hermione shot Harry a questioning look, as if to ask if he really believed his wife could read lips. The besotted wizard gave a cheeky wink that was no help whatsoever, and Hermione was forced to answer Luna for herself. "It's a Muggle poem, but it never came up in our study sessions. I'm sure you're mistaken, Luna."

"No, I'm not."

Hermione wanted to refute the witch's claim, but the obvious throat clearing from Harry, accompanied by the furrowed eyebrows over his glasses let her know her efforts would be futile. She wrung her hands in a contemplative silence that was not at all irritated or curious before breaking through the newlywed's contented silent world.

"Where did you two decide to go for the honeymoon? Harry asked me for some ideas from some places on the continent I'd been to for work and I suggested some lovely and quiet places I thought you would especially enjoy Luna."

In hindsight, Hermione realized she should've been suspicious when Harry suddenly focused at a spot on the porch roof, squirmed on the swing and began scratching the back of his neck...and Luna beamed so bright the ends of her hair glowed.

"We didn't travel that far, actually, but Harry did tell me it was a place you'd shown him before..."

The wizard started muttering indistinctly, but something sounded along the lines of 'not exactly what I said', which Hermione felt warranted a pursed brow.

"I'm...intrigued," she answered with caution. Not untrue, but...

"We got to Grimmauld Place from the reception to catch our portkey, but all the people at the wedding were draining on Harry's aura, and he asked if I'd be amenable to partaking in the moonlight mooncalf mating dance after all..."

"Oh, Luna, I really don't..."

"And, Hermione," Luna continued, excited to share more. "You would be very proud—Harry performed a particular set of spells that he credits you with teaching him..."

"That might be enough, Luna," Harry tried, turning a bright shade of red.

"Repello Muggletum, Muffliato, Cave inicum," Luna continued, pride evident in her voice. "And for added measure Salvio hexia and Prot—"
"Protego totalum," Hermione finished for her, brows shooting into her hairline. "You honeymooned at the Forest of—"

"The Forest of Dean!" Luna clapped. "It was really very romantic. Harry borrowed a tent from Mr. Weasley at the wedding and it was a lovely quiet escape from it all..."

"Excuse me, Luna?" Andromeda cracked open the back door, peeking her head out, interrupting Luna's memorable narrative. Hermione really thought she should send the dear wonderful witch flowers tomorrow.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt, but Teddy was concerned his stuffed dragon may have Nargles."

"Oh, but that's silly." Luna rose instantly, gliding to the door. "They'd much prefer his stuffed wolf."

The door closed behind the two witches and Hermione sat counting—pinning Harry with a particularly disgruntled glare, but counting to make sure the witches were no longer within hearing range.

"Hermione..."

"What in the name of Merlin, Morgana, Circe, and all the Founders?!"

"It seemed romantic at—"

"What could possibly be romantic about that horrible place? The memories of my hands sticky with Ron's blood from splinching him? The locket horcrux, or being hungry all the time?"

"Hermione..." He was using that voice, the one that always walked hand-in-hand with some personal explanation to justify anything. "Would you just c'mere? Please?"

She gave an indignant huff, but did as he requested anyways. Because he wasn't really asking. It was one of those unspoken rules of friendship with Harry Potter—do as he asks and trust him, or at least his intentions.

When she was close enough to see into his eyes, green pools of love and warmth, a jolt of stubbornness had her crossing her arms over her chest, even as her heart readied to listen to one of her dearest of friends. "Stop looking at me like that. I want to stay mad at you."

"It was a quiet place..."

"I know it's quiet..."

"There was a really pretty spot especially..."

"I recall recommending several places, Harry. Even more lovely..."

"I wanted a beautiful memory there, Hermione. In that forest."

Her mouth snapped shut, her next argument fading on her tongue as Harry pulled her down to the empty space on the swing.

"Please listen, Hermione...I know you needed Australia," he started, voice shaky and contemplative even as Hermione drew her lips to a thin line. "I understood and didn't fight it when you said you would be gone for months instead of weeks this time. I know you needed that time with Monica and Wendell. I know how much you need them to still in your life." He took her hand, anchoring her to this moment, previous concerns that he knew more than he'd let on as to her reason for leaving
Britain. "I missed you, Hermione. **Merlin**, half-a-year is a long time to not have my sister around, but I wanted you to have that time. **Please.** Please don't be upset that I need my own ways of healing too."

Hermione released a slow, cleansing breath adjusting Harry's hold, lacing their fingers together. "I missed you too, Harry. You've really no idea how much I missed you."

"Nonsense." Harry bumped her shoulder and winked. "We both know that Nott replaced me eighth year—which reminds me, did you get that article I owled you in February?"

"The one with the looping photograph of Theo crashing into a witch in the stands? Was it Tracey Davis?"

"Yep!" Harry smirked and began recounting every last detail of said article, until Luna and Andromeda joined them on the back porch with a pot of tea and four cups.

Hermione tucked a curl behind her ear at one point, looking out into the darkening sky, wishing her heart felt as light as the conversation.
Chapter 3

November 7th, 1998

Contrary to popular opinion, the library was not Hermione's favourite room at Hogwarts. Vast and unfailing to provide answers (if one had the patience to thoroughly search), this temple to magical knowledge evoked more memories of lonely isolation and frustration for the young witch than anywhere else.

The library had been a haven in those friendless and homesick first months at Hogwarts. It had been essential to survival in the overwhelming months as an outcast after a certain incident involving a broomstick two years later. There had been countless fretful nights of research that terrifying year of the Triwizard Tournament, and it had proven most useful in the dark days of Umbridge and O.W.L.'s.

It was where she had buried herself and shed tears over Ron and attacks on Muggles two years ago. Where she had analysed and accounted for every minute detail and conceivable outcome in altering her parents' lives.

And it was here that she once again found herself alone, mourning, and in search of answers. In search of herself—how to mend the shattered pieces of her existence. As flawlessly as the room she currently occupied, leaving no traces of a battle and a war just months previous.

Hermione threw down her quill, not caring about the consequential ink spatter all over her homework assignment. It was blank anyways. It wasn't due for another two weeks, but that was not the point. She'd sprinted to the wide-open arms of Hogwarts in the aftermath of Australia's heartbreak, desperate to fill the bleeding void, and she couldn't bloody focus!

Battle scenes followed her in the hallways. Ghosts of laughter and memories past haunted classrooms, the Quidditch pitch, the Black Lake, and even Hogsmeade. Nightmares plagued her in the privacy of her enclosed and silenced bed, lest her screams wake her roommates.

And she was alone. Truly and utterly alone.

Ginny had only returned to pacify Mrs. Weasley, but she was too busy preparing for professional Quidditch scouts. Luna had decided to prepare for N.E.W.T.'s at home and be a presence for her ailing father. Neville had thrown himself into Herbology and the courtship of one Hannah Abbott. Harry and Ron had given themselves to the arduous process of becoming Aurors, and Hermione really hadn't bothered with any other returning 'eighth years'.

Sighing, she began massaging her temples, squeezing her eyes, as if to block out the distracting weight of...everything...Maybe she should have gone to breakfast, or ventured out to Hogsmeade
with some girls, or—

"Do you always find it necessary to take up the entire table when you study, Granger?"

Hermione swore loudly, jumping from her seat, fisting her jumper over her heart! She snatched at her wand and whirled around—

And nearly fell over in shock.

Three Slytherin 'eighth year' wizards had approached her table in an out-of-the-way nook, and were now standing at a safe distance, hands empty, palms upright. As in surrender. Or to show defenselessness.

The tall and lanky boy with short, sandy-blond hair stepped forward, proffering his hand. "Don't think we've ever formally met, even after all the years of being in every single class together and all that—Theodore Nott, but I prefer 'Theo' because Nott Sr. can't stand it, and anything to give him the metaphorical finger, if you catch my meaning. Here with me are Blaise Zabini and Draco Malfoy—"

he paused, gesturing to the handsome wizard with glittering obsidian eyes to his left and then a pale and nervous-looking wizard with an angular jaw and empty grey eyes at his right, "—and we're in need of a quiet place to study, and this looks like just such a place. Providing you're willing concede some portion of the table top for us to work properly, that is."

Hermione blinked and stared, mouth dangling open stupidly, her outstretched right arm going limp. She stared and blinked until Zabini cast a sideways smirk to Malfoy, who either didn't notice or declined to acknowledge it, instead choosing to shove his hands in his pockets. Nott trained his eyes on Hermione, only looking away to glance down at his still extended arm and then return his cool brown eyes to her.

"This is a common form of greeting throughout Western cultures, Granger. Your table manners suggest you're more than civilized enough to recognize what I'm doing. And, I would think we're well beyond the age of worrying about opposite-sex germs when briefly joining hands in greeting. In fact, I remember you seemed very keen to hold a certain Triwizard Champion's hand at the Yule Ball and many times in the library in the following months during our fourth year, so I don't think you're worried at all about that…"

"Theo," Malfoy interrupted. "Let's just go…"

Nott waved Malfoy's suggestion away with his left hand, keeping his right outstretched for a handshake. "No, no. This is happening, Draco. Granger's wilting away before our very eyes, the Gryffinidiots aren't intervening for some reason, Blaise wants an introduction to Weaselette, you're having trouble with Transfiguration, and I need someone new to laugh at my jokes and tell me how clever I am. You two are useless when it comes to boosting a man's ego."

He stepped forward, laying his bag on the floor against a chair at Hermione's table. "So, what do you say Miss Granger? Care to embrace inner-house unity, moving on and making new friends? Zabini's a prepossessing snob—and he knows it. Draco can be a bit brooding, but knows when to keep silent, while I—" he puffed out his chest and thumped it hard, "am delightful. I'm quite the fiend at Arithmancy, second in the class to you, and in desperate need of assistance with Care of Magical Creatures, because I really couldn't care less about what beast lives where or does what, so long as it stays out of my path, and—"

Hermione's right hand fell and she dropped her wand, her eyebrows shooting up into her hair—Nott's mouth continued moving, but no noise came from his mouth!
Nott came to this realisation about three seconds later, turned on his heel, stepped back and SLAPPED Malfoy upside the head, gesticulating furiously.

"OW!" Malfoy began rubbing the back of his head and returned Nott's smack with equal force.

Zabini dropped his face in his hands, groaned and stepped away from the wizards, covering his distance from the table in three long strides.

And then something wholly unexpected to probably everyone in the secluded nook, especially Hermione, happened. The curly-haired brunette laughed.

It started as a loud snort, and quickly escalated to outright laughter. Great, uncontrolled waves seized and rolled from her, and she lost track of time before slumping against the table, gasping and clutching her sides.

By the time she came to herself, the three Slytherin wizards were hovering behind separate chairs around the table, as if waiting for an official invitation. Hermione indicated that they should sit, swiped at her eyes and reached down for her wand, returning to her own seat.

"Does he always talk that much?" she asked, eyes shifting between Malfoy and Zabini.

Zabini rolled his eyes and Malfoy snorted. "We've all become quite adept at a wandless and nonverbal silencing charm in Slytherin," Malfoy answered, grey eyes almost sparkling.

"It's either that or kiss him," Zabini interjected. "But, as the gentleman said, I'm much more interested in cozying up with your friend Miss Weasley. She was a sight to behold last year, and I'm sure she's devastated in the aftermath of her second breakup with the 'Chosen-One'."

Hermione shook her head, ignoring the salacious grin spreading across the Italian's face. "First things first. I'm Hermione Granger, Muggle-born witch, unmitigated disaster thus far this year, and I don't particularly care to talk about it anytime soon. Problem with any of that?"

The wizards all blinked and shook their heads. Nott opened his mouth and moved to speak, and began snapping at Malfoy, as no sound passed from his lips. Malfoy chuckled and flicked his fingers. Nott muttered something under his breath and gave a mock bow before turning back to Hermione.

"Looking forward to breaking N.E.W.T. records with you, Granger." He began to pull parchment, quills and inkwells from his bag, restacking and shoving tomes back in Hermione's direction, and otherwise making himself very much at home. "Now, if you don't mind, I think I'd prefer it Draco keep the silencing spell over this nook, in case you have the urge to spontaneously combust with laughter again—"

"You'd already silenced this area?"

"Slytherin, dearie," Nott smirked. "Cunning and self-preservation in case you laughed in our faces, shouted obscenities, or started flinging books at us. You did two out of three, by the way, and these two idiots owe me five galleons each. I'm more than willing to offer you ten percent of my winnings for rising above and not resorting to violence."

Hermione could only stare at this chatterbox of a young man, mind whirring. Then, she lifted her chin with as much superiority as she could muster. "I'd never insult the books so, Nott. I have, however, been known to conjure a flock of little golden birds and give the order for them to attack when pushed to my limit."

Zabini blinked and scooted his chair several inches closer to the corner nearer Malfoy and away from
Hermione, waving his hand in a submissive flourish.

Nott raised his brow. "Intriguing and impressive, Granger," he said before focusing on ensconcing himself behind a small wall of tomes he'd now created.

Malfoy alone left his book bag untouched, keeping his focus on the brunette witch. When Hermione met his clear gaze from across the table, he tilted his head in a slight incline, as with a question.

Hermione blinked once. Then twice. And then allowed the corners of her lips to lift in a small smile, as if to answer in the affirmative. Something very much resembling a spark flashed in his eyes before he too began to set up his workspace.

Hermione vanished the ink splotches from her parchment and set to work on her essay with renewed vigor, feeling lighter than she had in a very long time.

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**Monday, 8 April, 2002**

International travel via portkey did nothing to negate jet lag. The journey itself was dizzying and rapid, over in the blink of an eye, and yet, it still took Hermione's body days to adjust to her current time zone. She had forced herself to stay awake until ten o'clock after getting home from dinner last night, only to wake up just after three o'clock several hours later.

After an hour of failed attempts to fall back asleep, Hermione dragged herself from her bed, tugged on a large, fluffy bathrobe and began to organise her journals and binders from Australia (having already spent several hours the day before meticulously cleaning the flat by hand). She allowed herself to get lost, reliving the scenes, replaying each event, unaware of the time until she paused to stretch. Happening a glance at the window, she was surprised to find the stars had faded and the sky was exchanging its deep navy for the pale pinks and blues of dawn.

Rising and stretching once more, Hermione padded back to her bedroom. There, she shrugged out of her robe, changed into loose fitting athletic wear, tamed her wild bed curls into a long plait, and set off for a brisk walk along her old route.

In the muted hues of sunrise, Hermione could just make out new blooms of window and patio plants. Construction of a new sidewalk on the other side of the road as she doubled back had been completed in her absence, and that peculiar family in the building directly across had painted their brick exterior again, settling on a deep grey—pairing that with the standard black rod iron gate, it gave the impression of something sinister. Something foreboding.

Shivering under an old, worn jacket, Hermione stepped lightly back into her building and up to her flat door. Trepidation loomed like a storm cloud her as she slowly prepared a light breakfast (toast, butter, marmalade and black tea with a splash of cream). She tried counting the number of tiles in her kitchen floor to keep her mind occupied while methodically chewing every little bite, and made a mental note to renew her Daily Prophet and Quibbler subscriptions when she went to the office this afternoon…

The sense of unease persisted under a stream of hot water in the shower. She focused all her attention on breathing, forcing out all other thoughts. Another shiver jolted through her as she threw open the shower curtain, the wall of steam dissipating and cool air kissing water-beaded skin. Clammy fingers sank into her, twisting her core, even as she feverishly dried herself, shimmed into a fitted work dress and cardigan and patted a charmed warm towel to her damp curls.
She used up the remainder of time left before her appointment thumbing through an old tome, Various Trees and Their Personalities. Words and pictures blurred together and nothing noteworthy stuck out. She glanced at her wristwatch.

Twenty minutes after eight.

Another half-an-hour to wait.

And so, she continued skimming in an unfocused daze, minutes crawling by. Her legs had far too much energy—they would cross each other and then uncross, and then decide to cross at the ankles, only to uncross and cross again.

Until, at last, her watch read ten to nine.

Breathing deep, Hermione rose and smoothed her dress. She grabbed her wand and purse and conjured the image of a faded and peeling golden letters on a sign.

*Ollivander's: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC.*

Her world compressed and spun until she landed just outside the ancient shop.

It had been restored as if there had been no war at all. As if all else would fall away and crumble over war and time, but Ollivander's would continue to be rebuilt exactly as it had always been. Still shabby and narrow, entirely too underwhelming for all the joyous memories and proud moments contained within.

The clammy fingers from earlier had migrated up. Squeezing her chest and throat. She swallowed hard, blew out a long, slow breath, and marched through the door.

A bell tinkled overhead, and she clung to that familiar sound as though grabbing for a lifeline. Stacks of narrow boxes reaching to the ceiling greeted her, but the shop appeared otherwise empty.

"Hello, Mr. Ollivander?"

There was no answer, and she cleared her throat.

"Mr. Ollivander?" She stepped further into the room, peering around a shelf of wands. "Malfoy? Anyone here?"

Her inquiries were met only met with silence. She clasped her hands over her wand, and took another few steps deeper into the shop.

Then stopped.

She inclined her ear to the back of the shop, thinking she caught the sounds of shuffling.

"Hermione Granger."

The hairs at the nape of her neck tingled as she stuttered a step or two back towards the door.

"Mr. Ollivander," she breathed, forcing a smile at the now-present wizard in deep violet robes. She had always thought him as old, but in the last few years, he had begun to look aged. Nevertheless, his pale eyes were kind and inviting, and they glowed from where he stood, even as the morning sun spilled through the front of the shop. "Good morning, I'm sorry to have just come in."

"Quite alright, you're always welcome here, my dear. Though, you've not darkened my threshold for
Hermione would never understand the relative quantification of time—she remembered Harry recounting the story of buying his wand, how the shop owner had said it seemed a mere twenty-four hours previous that Lily Evans and James Potter were in this very shop for their own wands. Yet now, seven months had become 'quite some time'…

"Yes, I've been out of the country for work. Only just came back yesterday."

"I see. And how may I be of service to yourself or Mr. Scamander today?"

"Actually, I have an appointment with Malfoy, is he back in his office? Or reorganizing some inventory?"

Mr. Ollivander's eyes dimmed and narrowed. "I would surmise that young Mr. Malfoy will not be in at all for the duration of the week. Possibly longer."

"Oh," Hermione frowned, confused. And uncertain if she were relieved or saddened by this development. "Shall I leave a message for him to contact me when he comes back in?"

"Miss Granger, you've seen this morning's paper, correct." It was not a question.

"No, I've not had a chance to renew my subscription yet…” Her excuse died in her throat as Mr. Ollivander raised his wand in his hand, and a newspaper flew to him from the back of the store.

"You'll want to look at the headline, Miss Granger."

The clammy fingers in her chest turned to frost, and they squeezed every molecule of oxygen from her lungs. With a steady hand, Hermione took the paper and read.

And read again before her hand trembled and shook the paper so that she could not make out anything in the article. The elderly wizard took the paper from her, brushing his long fingers against hers briefly.

"He contacted me yesterday to inform me of his absence today, Miss Granger."

"I see," Hermione gasped. Her eyes blinked furiously, lest the hot liquid building in her eyes spill onto her cheeks. "I'm very sorry, but I must leave now. Goodbye, Mr. Ollivander."

Squeezing her eyes, she Apparated where she stood, landing a heartbeat later back in her flat. She gasped and heaved for air, merciful air…

She pinched the bridge of her nose, forcing staccato thoughts into her mind, as a trail of logical breadcrumbs to follow through the haze.

"The office is out. Rolf won't know anything more than the paper if he's even read it yet. Harry and Ron wouldn't or couldn't say anything if they did know more...not yet at least…”

Her hand shot up and she marched determinedly to her fireplace, grabbing a handful of Floo powder.

"Nott Manor!” she yelled, vanishing into an explosion of green flames and smoke.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Reviews and Kudos are as gold, and thank you all for your generosity. :) Infinite love and thanks to the alpha and beta wonders of Kyonomiko and CourtingInsanity. Any and all errors to be found are mine.

I own no part of the Harry Potter universe.

"Theo!"

Hermione charged out from the flare of magical green flames and smoke, shaking soot from her thick curls.

The wizard in question jolted from the sofa on which he appeared to have slept, his trimmed golden locks all askew, eyes bleary. He threw a withering glare at Hermione, covered the side of his face with a throw pillow and sank back into the opulent sofa, mumbling as he lay.

Hermione snatched the newspaper from the coffee table, narrowly stepped around it, rolling the newspaper as she moved.

And began attacking the aforementioned pillow with astonishing vigour.

"Hey! What—"

"Shut up! You...you stupid louse, are you drunk?" Hermione gave the pillow another two hard slaps. There came a muffled plea, but Hermione only slapped down on the pillow again, harder. "Insufferable—" WHACK! "Irresponsible—" WHACK! "AR—"

Theo shot up, eyes flashing. He snatched her wrists and clamped down with the force of a vice, so that Hermione instantly dropped the newspaper in his lap. "I am not currently drunk, witch!" he spat. "I was drunk last night. After I lost count of the number of tumblers of Ogden's very finest Draco and I downed. I was drunk when I tucked a thoroughly sloshed pasty prince into a transfigured bed through yonder door..." He waved dismissively at the door leading to a secondary private study (not to be confused with the main study he and Hermione currently occupied). "And I was drunk when I finally passed out on this sofa last night, not bothering to transfigure it, because I reasoned Draco needed the sleep more than I did!"

Hermione's chest heaved as she glared. As she allowed her gaze to soften, so did his grip around her wrists. "Merlin. Your command of proper syntax remains impeccable even in the aftermath of inebriation. You're really very irritating, Theodore Nott."

"No, I'm delightful." He dropped her wrists, lips sliding into an easy and familiar smile that didn't quite touch his ears. "Not the greeting I'd imagined after seven long months, but I'm glad you're back. You've been missed, Hermione."
Something heavy settled in her chest. "Missed you lot too, Theo."

"Did you accomplish what you wanted to?"

A lump formed, absorbing whatever she could have said in response. He wasn't asking about
ashwinders. Or her parents. And she knew from swirling depths of his look that she didn't have to
say anything. He'd found his answer in her silence. Or the bobbing of her throat.

He sighed. "The hangover potion's where it usually is - in that desk drawer, the top right. Be the
marvellous dear you are and fetch it for me, please." He sank back into the sofa as Hermione crossed
the room.

Finding the potion as he had said, she grabbed two vials and if Theo noticed when she dropped the
extra on the coffee table, he did not comment. He downed the potion in one large gulp and winced.
"Ghastly. I really should work on tweaking that recipe, but it's still better than the rot you'll find at the
apothecary. What time is it, by the way?"

"Just after nine in the morning. Monday morning, in case you forgot."

"A day like yesterday won't be forgotten anytime soon. Also, you're two hours late, I owe myself ten
galleons," Theo added nonchalantly, as he were commenting on the weather.

"Late?" Hermione raised her eyebrows, placing extra emphasis on the 'r'.

"Mhm, I bet myself you'd be over here no later than a quarter past seven, depending if the article
made above the centrefold or not."

Hermione snatched the newspaper from where she dropped it and shoved the front page in the
wizard's face. "You tell me, Theodore."

"'Mrs. Astoria Malfoy Found Dead in Paris. Aurors Stumped'. Merlin, that's a short article…Aha!
'See Case Jurisdiction Battle. Darion Greengrass Calling for British Ministry Involvement. pg. 5'"
He glanced up from the paper, looking almost amused. "Two articles above the centrefold, then."

The witch wasted no time in rolling the paper again and bringing soundly across the back of his
head. "This is serious you insufferable wart," she hissed. "I just saw Astoria Malfoy on Saturday in
Muggle Paris, very much alive, I might add! I haven't had a chance to renew my paper subscription
yet. I went to the shop to meet Malfoy for scheduled consult, only to have Mr. Ollivander hand me
his own copy of the Prophet!"

Her friend had the decency to wince, his expression becoming apologetic and grave.

Hermione bore her eyes into his. "If he's sleeping off Firewhisky, he must have talked. Tell me all
you know. Please."

"Unfortunately for you, not much, to be honest," he admitted, raking a hand through his hair. "Draco
and I were to meet up for lunch yesterday, but he never showed. He'd mentioned taking some wands
home from work on Friday, so I at first assumed he'd gotten caught up in everything the night before,
and slept late. But by two in the afternoon and still no word from him, something felt off.

"I Floo'd to his house, arriving in the larger study, and it was as if a cyclone had been through there,
Hermione. Furniture overturned. Drawers open and emptied, contents scattered all across the floor…
I found Draco in his personal study, as he was in the process of making a similar mess. He was
tearing and ripping into everything. Kept muttering about wands, blood and snow. He wouldn't stop
moving to keep searching long enough for anything…so I stunned him, added a weightless charm
and brought him back here." Theo waved augustly around the room.

"I'm sure that went over well."

"It snapped him from his seeking obsession, but I barely summoned the Firewhisky in time before he lunged at me…the sacrifices I make for friends…" He glanced over at Hermione, as if looking for any form of sympathy, which Hermione was not inclined to provide.

"Go on," she urged instead.

Theo leaned forward, eyes raking over the newspaper once more before looking back to Hermione. "Well, very early Sunday morning, Greengrass along with two French Aurors came to the house for Draco. Father and son-in-law were then escorted to the French Ministry. Walking to the holding room for bodies, one of them explained there had been an anonymous tip trying to get through to the Aurors office since late last night, and one them had just an hour before come back into the office to receive it."

Hermione swallowed and clasped her hands tightly together.

"It seems," he continued, "the tip was that a woman had been killed in a hotel room at La Roseraie, and they'd found the inscription in her trunk 'Astoria Greengrass Malfoy'—probably the one Draco gave her as a wedding present—" his tone poisonous at that inference, "and they decided to have both father and husband verify the body. Draco said it looked like she'd been dead for hours, Hermione. Hours." He blinked unseeingly at her. "The Aurors said when they entered the room, she'd been dangling in the air by an ankle, everything else dangling, and all the blood drained from long slashes in her skin. He said she reminded him of the snow..."

The witch's mind spun. "I just...why? Why did it take so long for them to get there, or for that tip to go through? They said it was anonymous?"

Theo shook his head. "I don't know any of that for sure, they couldn't answer when Mr. Greengrass berated them with the same questions. Apparently, Saturday night shift is lower and more dispersed staff, there's not always someone in the building. Draco wasn't really listening while Greengrass was berating the poor foreign Aurors."

"Fair enough," Hermione muttered to herself. "Have there been other mysterious deaths like this in the city?"

"Greengrass asked. They said she's the only one. They're supposing this was an isolated and targeted incident for now."

Hermione felt her knees begin to buckle. She edged to a matching chair in the furniture set and sank down. "Merlin help us. I guess, well, I don't recall her always being in Paris. Which means her killer must have known she'd be there instead of London...Do you think she could have been lured there?"

"I don't think I'd exactly call it 'lured' per se." Something very dark flashed in her friend's eyes. "But, it would very much be my assumption that Paris this weekend had been planned in advance, and whatever she was doing there. Or rather, who she was doing there."

Blink once. Inhale. "What?"

"Warrington lives in Paris…" Theo offered vaguely, shrugging.

A swallow. "Who?" Gods, did she always sound so shrill when surprised?
"Cassius Warrington—you remember him. Slytherin. A couple of years ahead of us. Put his name in for the Triwizard Cup. And then on the Inquisitor Squad the next year—he wasn't thrilled taking orders from a fifth year Draco, I very much remember that. Although, to be honest, none of us were, Draco was a right foul little sh—"

"Please stop prattling on so." Hermione scrunched her face, trying to conjure an image of the aforementioned youth. "Warrington—the long-faced one who looked like a sloth?"

There was a dark chuckle from the sofa. "It seems Astoria didn't seem to have any problems with his looks. They were very friendly at a charity ball last summer, and—"

"It's been going on since then?!" Hermione winced at the shrill in her voice.

"I can't confirm anything, exactly" he sniffed. "I know what Draco has said and that I've seen them on friendly terms at a few functions in London since then." Theo paused, lifting fingers one-by-one as he continued. "I also know that Warring-git has lived in Paris since after he finished at Hogwarts. I know that he travels a lot with his job, and has managed to frequent London and the Leaky Cauldron in the last several months much more that he previously had. Furthermore, I know that the little tartlette Mrs. Malfoy has been keen to frequent France, visiting her Great-Aunt Allaire with much excitement, since last August."

Hermione's gaze fixed on the secondary private study door, bile rising in her throat. "I'm not sure I want to know how you know all this."

"Associates and friends. In the interest of looking out for Draco; nothing untoward or messy."

"Merlin." All this while she had been gone. Had Narcissa known? And what did all of this mean in light of everything Astoria had said in the bookshop? She shook her head. "So, Astoria was probably there to see him then. To spend the weekend with Warrington?"

Theo shrugged. "An Auror fetched Daphne once the body had been confirmed and they were in an interviewing room. Daphne claimed Astoria hadn't said anything to her being in Paris on Saturday… But, I would lean towards her being there for him. It's not an outlandish assumption."

"Any chance she could have walked in on a burglar?"

"Probably not. Her trunk was full when they found her. Stuffed with clothes, shoes, jewellery and other female accessories. There were some of her more expensive and special keepsakes in there too, Draco said."

"Money?"

"Just what was in her purse."

Unbidden, Hermione's treacherous gazed focused again on the door beyond, the image of Draco walking in the direction of the hotel in Paris, robes billowing in the breeze filling her vision. "Did he tell you anything else?" she whispered.

"The French are going to start with looking for Warrington. Daddy Greengrass and Daphne wanted to involve our Aurors, which set off a jurisdiction dispute and Draco said that's when he asked to be escorted back home."

"I see."

They sat in contemplative silence, Hermione's gaze unwavering from the study door.
"Hermione…"

Theo's voice shattered the silence. She looked back to her friend, finding his face twisted and pale; his eyes clouded and haunted. "Hermione," he said again, a new desperation and urgency in his voice. He was in front of her in two swift steps, hands wrapping around her arms. "Please tell me you're here. Running away clearly didn't help you. Please don't do it again."

Hermione stiffened and shifted, trying to pull away, even as his grip tightened.

"After Narcissa..." he choked, a glassy sheen coated his brown eyes. "He was so...for months. Months. And now this...he needs his friends. All of them."

"I'm here," she breathed, casting her solemn oath out as a life-line for him to cling to. She offered a reassuring smile and squeezed his elbows. "Not even any short-term trips planned. The only bullet point in my job description for the time being is 'publish research'. I'm here, Theo. No more running. I promise."

He dropped her arms, only to engulf her in a tight embrace, whispering 'thankyous' in her curls. "Shit. What a buggered up mess this is. And thank Salazar Draco was in London at the time. I haven't been able to shake the feeling we're being watched sometimes; can you imagine if Draco had been in Paris?"

Hermione's arms froze at his shoulders. Her heart skipped two beats, and she couldn't manage to breathe. "What did you—"

"Well, isn't this cosy?"

Theo withdrew immediately while Hermione's heart slammed against her breastbone.

"Drac—Malfoy…" she started, grasping for anything to say, taking an awkward and instinctive step towards him. "Hangover potion on the coffee table, just there…" She pointed dumbly—uselessly—at the vial.

Draco glared past her before padding further in the room, making a wide berth around the couch and snatching up the vial.

"Sorry if we woke you," Theo said from behind. "Thought I'd give you at least another half hour before checking on you."

Draco grimaced as downed the potion in one gulp and set the vial back on the table. "Funny that. I thought I'd sleep later myself, but an annoying tapping came at your study window, and wouldn't let up. I was all set to hex you so you couldn't sit down for a week, because you're the prick who gave me your private working study to sleep instead of a guest room, and then I noticed was one of Darion's owls." He stalked past Hermione without a glance in her direction, snatched up Theo's hand, and dropped a folded piece of parchment. "You should thank that owl for your current pain-free state of existence, by the way."

Theo's throat bobbed. "Did Greengrass get more news?" He was no longer in the mood for jest.

"Just…read it." Draco's face was pulled tight, utterly unreadable for the moment.

Hermione shifted on her feet, feeling out of place at the moment. As if she were intruding. Perhaps she could slip around them and—

"WHAT?!" Theo yanked his head from the parchment, crumpling it tightly in a balled fist. "Did…"
Draco, did she do this?"

Draco's only response was to shrug before his shoulders seemed to slump, burdened and defeated.

Unmistakable rage filled Theo's face. His hands tremored as he opened and smoothed the parchment, reading it aloud. "Draco, I was summoned to Gringotts yesterday. It seems there has been something come up in Astoria's accounts. All of her inheritance money is missing. The Goblins are not willing to admit any error on their part, and I'm putting Percy on this immediately. Am still working to have her body released to the Auror department here. Daphne has begun funeral arrangements. Will come by sometime this evening. Darion"

"That little tart took all the money and was going to leave you, is that what this is saying?" Theo seethed, ripping the parchment into quarters, and then flinging the pieces to the ground.

"Theo," Hermione murmured, hoping to calm him…

"Shut it, Hermione - you don't get to calm me down after the newspaper swots!" Theo's brown eyes burned and blazed. "That spoiled little witch took all the money that paid for everything. Bills, food, necessities. Everything, allowing Draco to save what meagre bit he could from his salary, after continuing to pay his apprenticeship fees to that old codger. She never worked or fought for anything, and she barely did anything while Narcissa was still alive, but you knew all of that already!"

Draco laid a hand over the fuming wizard's shoulder, which Theo shoved away.

"No! You don't get to try to settle me, either! Slytherin's look after their own. I don't care what the two of you decided in private about personal lives ahead of time. The bugger weaselled his way in all nice and smooth while that vapid witch was running away and leaving you with nothing. When you gave her all the freedom she wanted and all she's seen you do is work and sacrifice over and over for your mother."

"We don't know that's what she was doing," Hermione tried.

Futile in the end, for Theo fixed her with a glare hard as stone. "A trunk full of belongings and an empty bank account; the facts speak for themselves. And if he wasn't the one who killed her, I'd have been more than happy to take care of the job myself had I know about the money."

His words slapped Hermione across the face. Cold, hard and unfeeling. Lacking all remorse. An instant later, she was standing right in front of him, hands on his cheeks to command attention. "Don't say that. Godric, you can't even joke like that right now. And even so, you don't mean it. I don't you don't." Her thumbs swiped at angry tears that had started to spill from his eyes as she permitted her words to take on a soothing tone. "You're Draco's friend, his family. You wouldn't do something to make him lose you. You're a good man, Theodore Wyatt Nott. Do not forget that."

Theo raised his hands, wrapping them around her wrists. "You don't know what I've done before," he rasped, his voice breaking. "I probably could have find it in me to do it again. For Draco."

Hermione shook her head fiercely. "That was different. It was war. We all had to do horrible things. Things we never imagined or dreamed. But I know you; that you talk harsh, but you wouldn't do this." She emphasized every word in the last sentence, pausing between each word. Willing him to believe it.

His eyes fell shut.

Hermione released a long breath, maintaining her hold on his face. "And whatever you do, for the
love of Merlin, do not say anything of the like ever again. No matter what unfolds in this case. Have some semblance of discretion with your words, please."

Theo held a deep inhale before finally releasing it. His hands fell to his side. "Right. You're right." He opened his eyes, blinking them slowly. "This doesn't mean I take back—"

A door slammed, startling them away from each other. Hermione swept her eyes over the room, finding Draco no longer occupied the space he had—in fact, he was not to be seen anywhere about. Cold, sharp daggers sank into her chest, stealing her breath. She took an automatic stepped towards the door, where he was now suffering alone...

Theo pinched her cardigan sleeve. "I'll handle him." He blew out a slow breath. "Time for you to report to Scamander or start to work with your mountain of ashwinder notes. I'll keep you updated as I know things."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, about to argue his dismissal, but he shook his head, and strode beyond her, creating obvious distance between them. "We'll talk and catch up more later, alright? Just go on to work, I'll manage things from here."

She chewed the inside of her cheek before answering, replaying what may have caused Draco to leave so suddenly...to no avail. "No more getting drunk, Theo," she finally said.

He chuckled softly, sliding nearer the private study door. "Yes, Mother. Off with you now. I've some damage control to do." He waited until she'd walked back to the fireplace and grabbed a handful of Floo powder before turning around and braving through the study door.

Just as Hermione raised her hand to throw the magical powder, she thought she heard a loud crash, followed by Theo yelling something to the effect of "Not what it looked like!"

She released the powder, yelling out her destination before doing something truly stupid—like running from the fireplace, racing to the study, bursting through the door, and…

She stepped out of the fireplace, back to the confines of her own flat, in need of a healing cup of tea to calm the pounding in her head, and soothe the throbbing ache in her heart.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the comments and kudos! It's perfectly lovely of you all! Deepest alpha thanks to Kyonomiko and beta hearts to CourtingInsanity. I own no part of the Harry Potter Universe, I just enjoy the characters.

Friday, 12 January, 2001

"You're late, Granger. Teams have already been made and you have the displeasure of being paired with the dragon this evening."

"And a hello to you too, Blaise," Hermione answered, adding extra emphasis to the wizard's first name. "What are we playing—Merlin, not Pictionary?" Her grip on a covered cheese platter (and charmed to repel Floo powder, credit to Molly Weasley) tightened as she narrowly eyed the former-Slytherin trio gathered around a gaming table.

"Spades," Draco drawled, loudly shuffling a deck of cards.

"When did he get first name privileges?" Theo stood behind his chair, glowering and petulant, arms folded over his chest. "I thought I was the special one."

"Are we sure Spades is a good idea - you remember what happened last time, right?" Hermione asked, ignoring Theo's pout, and setting her cheese platter on a table ready with plates, glasses and obviously-Muggle beer bottles.

"Ah, but last time the fault lay with my choice of partner." Blaise made a face, sliding his dark eyes to Draco. "This evening is already looking up for me."

Draco appeared unaffected by his friend's words, continuing to shuffle and share a smirk with Hermione as he responded. "Seems to me you said something similar when you paired up with Granger the first time."

A soft chortle passed through Hermione's lips as she sat primly in the empty directly across from Draco.

"You still haven't answered me, witch." Theo huffed, dragging the chair to Hermione's left out so it gave a long irritated screech before he flung himself down.

Hermione blinked at him, unphased by his sulky theatrics. "It's his name, so there's nothing to say I shouldn't or can't use it. Also, if memory serves me correctly, you blackmailed me into the first name basis we currently find ourselves in." She darted her eyes across the table, deciding enough time had been wasted on this ridiculous outburst. "Same rules as before, gentlemen?"

Draco nodded, shuffling once more before he started dealing. "One truth per sandbag, question to be asked by the opposing team, a favour owed for each trick under, and lowest club from each player to start a new round." He pinned a look on his left. "Ace of spades shall not be played until spades has been broken."
Blaise declined to acknowledge that he was being addressed, sitting and buffing his nails on his shirt sleeve as Draco continued dealing.

"And no table-talk!" Theo burst out in a tone of accusation.

"Here, here!" Draco cheered, a gleam in his eyes to his partner across the table that had her pursing her lips to ward off a suggestive flush. "Theo m'boy." Draco clapped his friend on the arm. "Care to be proper host and pass around the food and drinks?"

"I am the perfect host, you twat," Theo ground out, brushing off Draco's hold. With a lazy flourish of his wand, Theo levitated a beer bottle and empty glass to every seat but Hermione's, magically opening and pouring them all simultaneously. "For instance -" three plates flew to each wizard, "- it would have been bad form to do this while you were dealing." Theo paused, summoning the cheese platter and studying it a beat. He looked up and sent various cheese cubes flying to all three plates. With a final wave, napkins appeared and dropped in each wizard's lap and he ended by levelling Hermione with a pointed look. "Wouldn't you agree, Granger?"

Hermione arched an eyebrow, keeping her expression otherwise neutral. "One could argue that pouting and withholding isn't very generous."

Theo glared as a snort and snicker sounded in the background. "As the saying goes, you started it."

"It's not my story to tell," she answered with a faux innocent upturn of her palms.

"Too right, Granger."

"Shut it, Blaise—Hermione..." Theo drawled, voice silken. He leaned forward with a winning smile. "Won't you be a love and share whatever delicious story there is behind the name change? Must be awfully juicy, mm?"

Hermione gave an exaggerated shrug and rose from her seat, eyeing the food and beverage table...

Which promptly vanished before she even took a step.

"THEO!"

The wizard sat up with a satisfied smirk. "Oops."

Hermione threw a look at her partner, who wasted no time in sending a stinging hex that had Theo jumping out of his seat, cursing the two of them.

"I brought the cheese," Hermione ground out, stomach rumbling as she sat down hard in her chair.

Theo's feral grin broadened. "Yes, and Blaise was telling us how well it compliments this beverage he brought to have us try tonight. As you can see from the foam and colouring, this will be a far finer drink than that light swill he brought for the Christmas party."

With a huff, Hermione picked up her cards and began to organise them. "You're a spoiled little prick, Theo. I repeat: it's not my story to tell." She pulled her hand closer to her chest, looking over at the wizards on either side of her. "Blaise, consider it an advance favour to you that I'm not talking. Theo, you'll be mopping my flat without magic and stocking my fridge with all organic produce for a month. Remember I also prefer grass fed meats. And don't forget the cheese - lots of cheese."

She shared a conspiring look with Draco.
Grey eyes glinted into hers as he called out, "Left of the dealer bids first."

Blaise gave a quick review of his cards. "Three," he drawled.

"Two," Hermione said next.

"Two for me also," Theo declared, taking a long sip from his glass.

"And dealer bids four."

Hermione's brows shot up as Draco finished recording the bids. He met her gaze, blinking calmly. *Trust me.*

Hermione dropped her gaze to her cards, allowing a half smile to tug at her mouth. She did.

Theo brought his glass down noisily. "Very nice, Blaise. And the cheese really brings out that cherry and fruity overtone."

"Cheers, mate." Blaise raised his glass to his partner before taking a slow drink himself.

Hermione rolled her eyes and straightened in her seat. "Two tricks out there, gentlemen. Lowest club first hand—let's begin."

Theo produced a card first, laying down the two of clubs. Draco followed with the five. With an uncontainable smug expression, Blaise tossed down the king of clubs, flashing a confident smile to Theo.…

"You can't lay down a spade, Hermione!" Theo exclaimed as Hermione nonchalantly withdrew her hand from the centre of table.

"No clubs," she said to Blaise, before staring directly into Theo's narrowed eyes. *Oops.*

Her partner audibly groaned. "I hope you were counting that one, Granger."

She cocked her head at her partner, brows lifted. *Trust me.* Draco sighed, motioning for her to start the next hand.

Hermione pulled at the three of diamonds and lay it in the centre of the table. Theo produced the king of diamonds with a haughty flourish, while Draco revealed the ace of diamonds void of emotion, save for a glittering look to Hermione. With an irritated huff, Blaise tossed down the two of diamonds.

Draco led the third hand, which Theo won with a smug grin, only to sulk in his seat as Draco took the fourth.

He led the fifth hand with a club, Blaise growled and slammed the ace of clubs on the table, which Hermione breezily trumped with another spade, leaving Theo to scowl as he lay down a three of clubs.

"You were counting on both of those tricks," Theo accused.

Blaise didn't answer directly, muttering into his drink instead, shooting a dark look left to Hermione.

"It's not her fault, you git!" Theo burst, drawing the surprised attention of everyone at the table. "You're the arrogant sod who bid on CLUBS—"
Hermione cleared her throat loudly. "I'm no expert Malfoy, but would this be considered 'table talk'?"

Her partner shrugged, smirking. "I believe it is - if the two of you will kindly shut it, it's the lady's turn to start."

Hermione bit down hard on her bottom lip to keep from smiling, though it did little to stifle the flutters in her stomach. She led the sixth hand with the queen of hearts, a trick she'd actually counted on, but it worked out, as Theo trumped it with a three of spades.

Draco produced a six of spades with a sly gleam in his eye. Blaise tossed a four of hearts into the middle, taking another long pull from his drink, avoiding Theo's glare.

"That's five Malfoy," Hermione noted, collecting the centre cards. Her partner simply raised his brows and focused on his hand.

Blaise won the seventh hand, and Theo the eighth.

"Finally," Theo mumbled through his hand as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

Hermione raised her brows across the table. Draco's only answer was to gaze back at her, unblinking. Trust me.

She released a slow breath, returning his silent bidding with a slight nod.

"Eye talk is still table talk," Theo groused as he led the ninth hand, which he was pleasantly surprised to win with a club—Draco apparently still had a club to play and Hermione had used up her spades.

Draco took the tenth hand with a very confident ace of spades, allowing Hermione to happily document they'd collected the six needed tricks.

But when he won the subsequent final three tricks to be had with a king, nine and eight of spades, two arguments erupted all at once, which may or may not have involved standing, angry air jabbing and accusations:

"Two of those bags are yours, Malfoy—"

"Nonsense—you should have bid higher without any clubs."

"But I didn't have many spades either!"

"Semantics, Granger. You always bid too low."

"Set by one, you cocky prick!"

"Those are the cards to bid on, Theo!"

"Well, I'm certainly not acting as Granger's personal house-elf! You're the arrogant sod who counted on CLUBS and lost us fifty points the first hand!"

"ENOUGH!" Draco yelled, shooting a contained ball of blue fire from his wand. Those standing took their seats as Draco cleared his throat. "Alright, team Grangfoy won this hand; however, we accumulated three sandbags, which means one truth from Granger and two from me—don't look at me like that Granger, two of the bags were mine and we both know it." He turned to his right, "Theo, would you do the honours?"
The wizard's brown eyes glittered. "Is it true you slept with your stuffed dragon the whole first month our first year?"

Blaise cursed under his breath, muttering about a wasted question while Hermione rolled her eyes and grinned.

"No," Draco replied. "I slept with Maximus until the end of first term. I was going to put him away after the Halloween feast and try to make it the rest of the term without him, but a troll in the castle effectively shattered that idea."

Hermione coughed in her hands, shifting to face Blaise for her question.

"Is it true you get those portkeys at Christmas to dash off for scandalous holiday fun with Victor Krum?"

Theo choked behind Hermione, and as she wasn't sprayed with posh beer, she could only assume it was on cheese (she could not bring herself to feel a shred of sympathy for him). From her peripheral she noted Draco lean forward in his seat.

Inhale. "Where did you hear that?" Exhale.

"My source is the same as yours, Granger," Blaise answered.

"How did this even - you know what? I don't want to know the circumstances Ginny would have divulged information like this, but to answer your question: no, I don't."

Heart beating wildly, she chewed the inside of her cheek, looked down and then around. Theo and Blaise bore curious, nearly impatient, expressions. But *Draco...*

Draco's grey eyes were iridescent with understanding. And strength.

"The truth is," she started, breaking her train of thoughts. "I go to Australia to see my parents. Even though they don't know me."

The ensuing silence was weighted and... awkward. Incredibly awkward. Blaise's arrogant mask fell and Theo was rendered speechless.

In a matter of seconds, a glass of beer and plate of cheese appeared before Hermione and all three wizard's glasses had been refilled.

"Sorry, Hermione."

He meant it to say more. She knew that. In the two years of friendship, he hadn't asked about her parents, but then again, she hadn't volunteered information either.

"Don't be, Theo," she answered gently. "I don't talk about them with anyone other than Harry because," she gulped a breath, "I erased myself from their lives end of sixth year. Gave them different names and moved them to Australia. The know me as Hermione Granger, a university student in London who has the money for random vacations in Perth. And who is obsessive about dental hygiene while on vacation. The last two Christmases I scheduled an emergency teeth cleaning on Christmas Eve and spent most of Christmas Day under a disillusionment charm sitting on rocks near their house reading books they gave me ages ago."

Again, silence. Minus Draco clearing his throat (but then, he'd known about this since *that* day at Hogwarts...).
Theo muttered to himself before clearing his own throat. "What about the first year? With the portkey from McGonagall's office?"

Hermione squeezed her eyes. Merlin trust Theo would remember that...

"I have one more truth!"

The witch actually jumped in her seat at the unexpected outburst from across the table. Three sets of eyes watched as Draco took a quick sip from his glass and curled a hand around his chin.

"I'm actually just going to throw this one to you lot, because I've been thinking about it a lot lately. I've been wondering if I should allow Mother to move back to Andromeda's house."

That weighty silence fell over the room again, crashing against the collective understanding of the Malfoy heir's reality, leaving confusion in its wake.

"What about wanting her close by?"

"What about Teddy needing more space?"

"Does that mean she's well enough to be more active?"

"If that little witch has been complaining about her being there, I'll—"

"Wait, wait, wait." Draco raised a silencing hand. "Much as I appreciate the sentiment Theo, Astoria hasn't said anything about Mother living in the house. Astoria's not home enough anyways and her suite is on the other side of the house." Draco's shoulders sagged, and he leaned into the table.

"Mother's lonely. I can tell she's so lonely, and I think it's making her go downhill faster. Astoria's house elf reads to her while I'm at work; they're going through gardening books right now. On good days Mother can paint for a few hours at a time. She's learning to crochet...

"But Healers are too expensive to keep onsite all day, every day, or until I get home. We don't know how much longer she has, but I've been trying to make the Black family money last for all her potions and the three days a week a Healer is onsite to monitor her." He stopped, eyeing each of his friends in the room for several seconds before allowing a rueful smile to etch across his face. "So, to answer your other questions: nothing's changed on Aunt Andromeda and Teddy's end. She comes over as often as she can and stays as long as she can, but Teddy needs to be outside, be able to be a little boy, and Aunt Andromeda is essentially the boy's mother. She needs that time and space too...It's a bit of a conundrum..."

"Yeah, I -"

"Mate, that -"

"PLIMPIES!"

Hermione and Theo's sentiments were lost in Blaise's unexpected contribution to the conversation.

The wizard shrugged off their stares. "Granger gets to use my first name because in one of their nattering sessions, my witch blabbed to her about a certain time we were...swimming...and plimpies started attacking my feet."

Theo snorted, Draco smirked (in spite of himself it appeared) as Hermione just sat back, enjoying a more diluted version to the story.
Blaise fixed his gaze on the levitating blue ball they had all forgotten about, until Draco vanished it away. "To be precise, they swarmed before attacking. I ran back to shore for my wand to hex the blighters. And for some reason Ginny finds this memory amusing."

He rose from his chair, graceful, pretentious and oddly enough, smug. "Your favour, Granger, is that I'll allow you to continue to call me by my 'less intimidating' first name, as you put it, as much as you like—and I won't call you one of Theo's revolting names in return."

"Where are you going? You sunk us fifty points and you're abandoning ship?"

Blaise cocked his head and Theo's incredulous accusation.

"Game's over, mate."

"It is NOT!"

"No, you're Nott," Hermione murmured slyly, earning an approving arched brow from Draco.

Theo crossed his arms over his chest. "Still didn't answer my question," he pouted.

Blaise had already begun a slow saunter back to the fireplace. "I think there's enough time in the evening for me to surprise my witch at a Weasley family dinner. Maybe have Molly offer to name her next grandchild after me. Maybe say or do something to have my witch's face turn twenty shades of red before the evening's up..." He turned with a flourish tossing a lazy salute back to the table before disappearing through the Floo in an explosion of green and soot.

"Well, that ends the game, then," Hermione said, turning and snatching up three cubes of cheese and eating them all at once, chewing exaggeratedly at Theo.

Theo made a face, rising from his seat. "Well, my house-elf is polishing through silver and whatnot in the attack that will never see the light of day, and Merlin knows I wouldn't interrupt that if my life depended on it, so anyone else want something from the kitchens?"

"Sure."

"Please and thank you."

Hermione took a long and slow sip of her drink as Theo left the room. More out of thirst than anything, of course. Blaise would likely berate her for not appreciating the bold flavours, but Merlin. She just needed a drink.

"Not half bad is it, Granger?"

Hermione set her glass down, allowing herself a deep breath before she answered. "Not at all." She scooted her chair closer to the table, gathering and summoning all the cards to put them away. "I'm sorry to hear that about your mother." She glanced at him, finding pain and indecision marring his face. "Do you really think moving her back to Andromeda's would be best?"

His chest heaved as he buried his face in his hands. "I don't know." It was muffled, but she understood. He lifted his face, eyes meeting hers. "I just don't know what to do. I've gotten to the point where I've considered visiting Father in Azkaban to ask his advice, but -" he stopped short, shuddering visibly. "He wasn't too keen the last time I was there asking him for advice. I doubt he'd be thrilled to see me again."

"He's your father, though," Hermione heard herself saying. "I'm sure he misses you." Whether she
said it for herself or for him, Hermione couldn't be entirely sure at this precise moment.

She heard him snort as she slipped the last remnants of their game into the card box.

"Did you end up getting your teeth cleaned in October, too?" He shrugged in an air of nonchalance when she pinned him with a look full of emotions. "I forgot to ask you about it our the first game night in November and hadn't thought about it again until tonight."

He seemed almost ashamed of himself for that lapse in memory, but she could only smile at him as she shook her head. "They couldn't squeeze me in, but I worked in a different chance meeting, and went ahead and made the appointment for Christmas Eve."

A heavy pause.

And then...

"Salazar, Hermione."

It was so soft she almost didn't catch it, but she couldn't ask anything to follow up as he opted for a drink from his glass and Theo waltzed back into the study, whistling, and looking quite pleased with himself, a veritable feast floating behind him.

"Draco, I've had an inspiration!" Theo waved and directed the food to arrange itself buffet style for them to make their own plates, even as he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"Yes?"

"Medi-Witches. They do more of the daily care activities, and I bet you could get two to four of them working shifts around the week for the same price as one of those Healers. Let one go, and find some Medi-Witches who could be around more often to keep Mother company and still be taking care of her. It would give you peace of mind, too."

Draco began to stroke his chin in thought while Hermione clapped her hands with excitement.

"Oh, but that's a brilliant thought, Theo! Malfoy—you should ask for Penelope Clearwater at St. Mungo's!"

He blinked at her in question, hand now still on his chin.

"She was a Ravenclaw," Hermione elaborated. "Penelope was several years ahead of us. In Percy Weasley's class I think. She paused, reigning in her excitement at the doubt clouding his eyes. She tried again, softer this time. "I bumped in to Percy Weasley when I left the office this afternoon, which is why I was late, by the way. It seems your father-in-law is looking for new office spaces, and Percy was nothing if not thorough in asking all about the area and proprietor, rent, and anyways —Percy is dating Penelope Clearwater, who is a Medi-Witch."

Draco tapped his chin once, still looking doubtful.

"Drop my name," Hermione implored, balling her hands into fists and plastering them to her legs to keep from reaching across the table to him. She swallowed hard. "Tell her whatever you like, I don't care. Tell her you're friends with Hermione Granger. Maybe even throw in that you sometimes play pick-up Quidditch with the Chosen-One, Boy-Who-Twice-Lived, Harry Potter himself."

He blinked once. Twice. And gave a slow nod as he released a heavy breath.
"Wonderful!" Theo crowed. "Now, fill your plates and tuck in everyone!"

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle to herself as Theo pulled her from her seat to grab a plate first. In this quagmire of emotional highs and lows, it was more than a little comforting to have moments where she didn't feel so incredibly alone.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thank you readers and reviewers <3
This chapter is dedicated to Hystaracal. And to alpha Wonder Woman Kyonomiko.
And beta Catwoman CourtingInsanity.

I own no part of the Harry Potter universe.

Wednesday, 10 April, 2002

To say the work day had been unproductive would be a gross understatement. It had been an exercise in self-restraint and discipline to not spend hours rereading every last article pertaining to the life, affair, and murder of Astoria Malfoy née Greengrass. Pub owners, waiters and waitresses of fancy restaurants, hotel clerks and shopkeepers had come forward with 'news' (read: gossip) of the torrid affair/happy couple.

Hermione wondered if the *Prophet* had offered to pay for any of this 'information', or if it was all for free publicity. Or if any of it was true. After all, one participant in the affair was dead and the other was still declared 'missing' (though, presumed alive).

The occurrence of Draco's name had been curiously minimal in the newspaper; the only time when the 'journalist' reported that all owled interviews had been returned blank or in ripped piles, and that he had not been sighted around wizarding London.

Merlin bless Theo; this morning's addition had featured a letter to the editor he'd composed. A scathing letter expressing his outrage at the 'incessant badgering' of his friend, and that the next *Daily Prophet* owl to fly through any window of Draco's house or Ollivander's wand shop would be immediately transfigured into a toad. Hermione wasn't quite certain how that letter had passed inspection for publication.

In addition to all this questionable reading, owls had been frequenting Hermione's office all throughout the day with various deliveries of their own.

Hagrid had sent a parcel of rock cakes along with a brief missive:

*Hello Hermione,*

*Rolf said you'd made it back home in his letter on Monday. Thought you'd like to know I've been given permission to accompany you lot to the dragon conference again this year. Hope to see you this summer.*

*Hagrid.*

There had been something scribbled in haste from Harry.
Dinner plans for this week will have to be on hold. It's all a bit up in the air at work right now, as I'm sure you're aware. Lots of speculation as to who will get the case if jurisdiction comes to us. Thinking it will be Katie and Robards, but just to keep it safe, let's plan for next week, yeah?

-P.S. Luna wanted me to pass along that you should start wearing bracelets infused with lavender. She says it's very calming.

Just as well dinner was canceled; she'd already reached her limit for coupling newlyweds this week. And If Harry didn't have recent news regarding the case next week, she'd likely find reason to decline then.

Ginny's letter had been longer, and gave Hermione reason to simultaneously flush and groan.

Hello you,

I've heard from Blaise you're home. Sorry for the message it sends that we're communicating through third party and letter for the mo'. My game schedule has been pretty ridiculous lately. You'll have to take a look at your schedule and tell me when you're available to come to a match. I'll make sure you have tickets.

How are your parents? From the photographs you sent all seems to be well. You really do look like your mum; it must be exhausting having to remember glamour charms everytime you see them. Did you ever end up having a hot one-off with a bronze surfer? One of my teammates met a wizard from Sydney at a club last week; said he was quite the looker. I hope you were just as lucky at some point in the last seven months.

Awful news about Malfoy's wife, yeah? I only met her once at her wedding, but I'll be with Blaise at the funeral. Hope to see you before then, though.

Ginny

A vague letter describing a couple of dinner dates she'd had in the last seven months should pacify her friend, but Hermione was disinclined to say much else to the subject. What Ginny didn't know about these things wouldn't hurt her.

Ron's letter had been a bit of a shock, but a welcome one nonetheless. They were still friends, after all.

Mione,

Glad to hear your back. Maybe you'll be around long enough to come over for dinner sometime. It won't be able to be anytime soon, sorry. But I'm not really sorry, because it's over something good. Elaina wanted us to tell you in person, but she's always sick these days, and don't know when that would happen.

Hermione paused, reading the last sentence over again three more times, a hypothesis forming before continuing with the letter.

So I'm just going to tell you here and now: Elaina's pregnant!

(HA! She'd been correct…)
I'm going to be a DAD! Shit, I'm SO BLOODY EXCITED! And you're in the running to be godmother (but don't tell Elaina I said so, because she definitely wanted us to tell you that in person).

Also, thought I'd warn you: Mum's a bit upset again about you missing the wedding in January. I thought it was all smoothed over, but she's been in some state since Harry's wedding. Good luck when you see her next.

Take care of yourself, yeah?

Ron

P.S. REMEMBER! Do NOT let on you know anything about maybe being godmother next time we see you. Elaina's mood-swings are brutal.

She sat chuckling to herself, still processing that bit of news when Theo's owl entered her office in a grand sweep.

Meet me at the manor when you're done for the day. I've some news for you.

Theo.

The summons was so few of words that Hermione deemed it necessary to cast a series of revealing spells over the parchment - finding nothing. It was purposely brief, which was cause for concern in Hermione's mind. Frowning, she cast a tempas charm and decided five o'clock was a respectable hour to be leaving an office. She gathered everything quickly, locking her office door and the business main door behind her (Rolf had been at the Ministry in meetings all day).

Pity the builders had set up anti-Apparition wards on the building; she'd have to waste precious minutes milling through the going home crowd she was usually successful in avoiding to make it to the Apparition point. There may even be a line…

"Hermione?"

Everything froze at the sound of a female voice calling her name. A voice sounding eerily similar to the late Astoria Malfoy née Greengrass.

She whipped around to find Daphne charging towards her.

"Sorry if you prefer 'Granger'," the witch huffed as she caught up to Hermione, "but we're not in school anymore and I think we can dispense with the childish use of surnames."

"Oh, of course." It truly didn't matter one way or another what the witch called her, but even if it had, Daphne was clearly in no state of being to argue with. Hermione couldn't recall seeing the witch without makeup or hair charmed to perfection from third year on at school. Given that she'd been with wizarding celebrities only in the last four years, Hermione could only assume that was still the case. But today…

Today, Daphne Greengrass was the physical representation of frazzled and grief-stricken. Hair bunched and messy in several places, as if it had been pulled all throughout the day. Red-rimmed sunken eyes. Chapped cheeks from tear tracks. Voice rough, presumably exhausted from -

"...doing as horrible as one would imagine." Daphne tucked a handful of hair behind an ear and adjusted her leather shoulder bag as Hermione blinked in confusion and then flushed in appropriate mortification.
"What? Sorry!" Hermione paused to swallow and clear her throat. "I'm terribly sorry, but I missed what you first said."

Pale, unadorned lips curled into a wry smile. "You seemed uncertain how to begin a conversation," Daphne explained, "I was simply making it easier and answering one of your questions before you decided which to ask me first: I'm doing as horrible as one would imagine, and please don't tell me you're sorry. Everyone's sorry, but no one is able to do a bloody thing to help."

Hermione cleared her throat again, mentally debating how to respond...

She was mercifully spared, for Daphne looped an arm through hers, directing the two of them to the building double doors, asking, "Have you seen Percy about, by any chance?"

"I haven't." Hermione gave a slight shake to her head, tacking a hasty, "sorry," at the end of her response in the negative, uncertain and somewhat apprehensive as to how the emotional witch would respond.

"Damn," Daphne cursed softly, slowing their pace to the main doors. "He's probably already at Father's; I was hoping to catch him before going over there."

"Should we go back and let you try -"

"No," Daphne clipped, waving her free hand. "I'll just start there first once we reach the Apparition point. And add that to the list of things gone wrong today..." She trailed off with a deep sigh.

With a hesitant bite to the inside of her cheek, Hermione grasped the invisible tendril of conversation hanging between them. "Things gone wrong?"

"My fiancé has a string of away games and can't be here for one; which isn't Oliver's fault." She gave a hard shake of her head, swallowing. "I know it's not his fault, but it doesn't change that I want him here. Then, there's the matter of the French Ministry," Daphne continued, tone brimming with desperate irritation. "Apparently, since I'm not Astoria's mother - who has been dead since just before my fifth birthday - nor am I her father - who is either too distraught or too busy going over business things with Percy - NOR her widowed husband," her voice had reached a shrilling pitch that Hermione fought to not wince at "- I'm not granted to be privy to anything." Her hard gaze slid to Hermione as she blew open the building doors with a nonverbal wandless burst of magic. "Relationship status of 'sister' isn't close enough for their bureaucracy to receive information firsthand, but who the bloody hell am I supposed to hear it from?"

Hermione bit down on her lip as Daphne picked up the pace, marching them steadily to the Apparition point, witches and wizards parting like the sea around them.

"Father just keeps arguing he wants the case to be brought home and let Robards handle everything. Then he huffs off to his home study to plot out what's next on the agenda for Percy, as if Percy can't handle everything for himself like he already does. And Draco," Daphne scoffed in such a way that made Hermione's breath catch and furl, preparing for a defensive counter. "Draco has been stone silent," Daphne hissed, eyes flashing. "That is when he's not brooding and snapping; I have a funeral and reception I'm apparently in charge of planning, and it's all an awful mess."

Anger, sorrow and weariness clung to Daphne's flashing eyes as she tightened her hold on Hermione. "In the first place, I don't know when we'll receive a body to bury. And then I don't know if Father wants her buried on the other side of Mother, or if Draco wants her to be buried near his mother in that little plot of Andromeda's - I'm guessing he won't, but perhaps he would like a headstone to represent her there - " at this Hermione swallowed hard, forcing her lips to remain in a
They passed a coffee shop on the right, witches and wizards surprisingly scurrying through the door, instead of lingering to catch juicy hints for gossip later. Perhaps the look and sound of Daphne was enough to send them all about their business.

"And then there's the fact that my sister is dead." Cold, hard and completely true. The simple statement was as nails on a chalkboard. Daphne made a strangled sort of gasp and Hermione sucked a sharp breath as they came to the mercifully empty Apparition point. Daphne pulled her arm from Hermione's and took a step away. "My little sister," she whispered, voice thick and reverent, "flawed, selfish, bright, and so full of life...she's gone. And the awful thing about it is that I'm not sure if I'm more angry with her for running off like she did, or with the wretch who took her from me, or that we don't know who in the name of Salazar that wretch is!"

Hermione didn't need to think twice; she let her work bag fall to the cobblestone sidewalk as she launched herself forward, wrapping her arms around the broken witch, squeezing tight. "It's awful, I know it is," she murmured, hoping to soothe. There was no side or stance to take at the moment. There was only a shattered witch trying to hold the broken pieces together and find a way to make sense of it all and press on. She adjusted her grip to hold up Daphne's drooping bag, whispering again, "It's a vile, loathsome, horrible mess right now. It's bleak and dark. It's awful that your family should have to suffer like this."

Daphne moaned like a wounded animal, sinking into Hermione's embrace...Theo and his news could wait a moment or two longer.

"It'll work out," she started again. "You'll talk to your father, tell him what you need. He'll answer your questions. You'll have everything you need for a proper burial soon." She left Draco out of the mix of it all sorting itself out. Perhaps Daphne wouldn't comment on that. "It'll come together. Just take it all one thing at a time." She loosened her hold and Daphne straightened herself, pulling herself upright, offering a weak smile.

"One thing at a time," the witch agreed, swiping at her eyes, smoothing her hair. "I best get back to it then. Thank you, Hermione."

Hermione nodded, heart conflicted and heavy as she summoned her work bag, closed her eyes and the world pressed and shoved until she landed in her living room. She tossed the bag on the sofa, ran a hand through her curls and grabbed a pinch of Floo powder.

"Nott Manor!" she yelled, allowing everything to become a swirl of magical fire and ash.

"THERE YOU ARE!" Theo lunged and snatched her from the fireplace before she felt her feet touch the ground. The wizard ignored her cough, brushing soot from her robes. "I expected you here ages ago, as soon as you received the owl!"

"I got held up." Not a lie...She swallowed down thoughts and feelings of her previous encounter, searching Theo's face and stance for a hint of what was so important. "What's the news about the case? Have they found something?"

"Not that I'm aware..." Theo's eyebrows furrowed, confusion surfacing in his eyes

"But you said you had news for me."

"I do."

Hermione frowned. "You just said there's nothing new."
"Not about the murder," Theo supplied. "At least, not that I know of. Draco's been back and forth from France the last two days and not feeling particularly chatty when he's home. He's not giving the cold shoulder anymore, but I haven't felt it appropriate to press him for anything further. I know as much as you know at this point."

Doubtful, Hermione thought as the memory of Theo's whispered gratitude echoed in her mind. "What is this news that you summoned me for then?"

"I'm seeing someone."

A blink. A pause. A studious stare across her friend's face. He wasn't beaming like he should be with news like that. "Congratulations?" She wasn't entirely sure the appropriate response to his lack of enthusiasm.

"Well, I suppose I'm not precisely seeing her at the moment - we're on hold."

Another two blinks. "But there is a witch, correct?"

A tender smile crept up his pinkening cheeks. "There is."

"Well, I'm happy for you then." She lifted her brows in a crooked grin. "Am I supposed to guess the identity of this mystery witch."

"If you'd like." He gave a shrug that tried to convey nonchalance, but the way he bobbed back and forth on his feet revealed the depths of his excitement. "It probably wouldn't take you all that long to, actually. You made inquiries about her health back in February."

February...Quidditch article...

Airy giggles bubbled from Hermione's chest before she could stop herself. "Merlin, Theo!" She lifted a hand to her cheek as she giggled again. "I didn't realise you were so desperate for a reunion."

"Desperation had nothing to do with it." Theo's eyes narrowed in mock defense. "I subbed for Draco at the last moment in one of Potter's impromptu Quidditch matches. I had no idea Tracey would be there, and personally, I think it's a ridiculous waste of time and resources that our illustrious Daily Prophet would send someone to cover a game of amateurs."

"Oh, Theo..." She broke off into giggles again, tugging curls behind her ears. "Is this the part where I ask you some foul and inappropriate question like is she still the best snog you've ever had?"

He smirked. "If it is, and you are, then I'm going to decline rising above and answer with a vague and insinuating 'bloody hell'."

They allowed themselves a moment to chuckle, their mingling sounds of glee washing over Hermione's tumultuous heart before she gathered herself and asked, "Why didn't you just write me about this development while I was in Australia?"

"I started to." He tilted his head, looking thoughtful. "Just as a laugh. You sent me a teasing letter, saying Potter had sent you the article, and I started to send you something funny in response, like how I was taking her to dinner to make up for it, but then...I didn't."

She studied a silent heartbeat. "Because you're keen on her, aren't you?"

"I am." He blew out a long breath. "She didn't come back for eighth year, and I'd read somewhere she was seeing a curse-breaker, and then I read that she wasn't sometime in January. I had actually
been thinking about writing her, and it surprised me so seeing her in the stands that day. It was a complete accident crashing into her, though, I will hold to that to my grave."

Hermione shook her head, marveling at the timing of it all. "Am I the last to know?"

"You're the first I've specifically told." He gave a half-shrug at her questioning look. "Blaise caught me leaving the manor all dressed up for a date a week ago today, actually, and the bugger wouldn't let up until I gave him all the details. I had planned to invite her to a game night and tell everyone together, but…"

Reality as cold as a northern wind blew all around them. "I understand." She frowned, remembering something. "You said it's on hold though?"

"It is."

"Which means…"

"We're not seeing each other for the time being." His lips settled into a tight, thin line.

"But why?"

Theo exhaled a short breath through his nose, shoving his hands in his pockets. "We've mostly been meeting at out of town locations. Trying the feel of us out, seeing if we wanted it to proceed further and the like. It's had a nice feel to it, and I thought it'd be a perfect coming out for us to tell you lot together when you came home and we were gathered for a game, Pictionary or charades. But this with Astoria…" He gave a hard shake of his head, dark blond locks falling over his forehead. "It feels like a singular and targeted occurrence, but better to be safe than not, right?"

A lump rose in her throat as chilling understanding shot through her veins. "D'you think it could be someone targeting children of Death Eaters? Going after your significant others?"

His mouth twisted, concern settling in the wrinkled bridge of his nose. "I don't think so," he finally answered, though the words seemed to be wrenched from him. "The times I thought I felt someone watching, it's only been when I'm with Draco. When I think about it, it's odd that Astoria's inheritance money was able to simply vanish from her account. The fact that it's now missing while everything else in the room was otherwise untouched is strange as well."

"The money could be a diversion." Her voice sounded as unconvinced as she felt, though.

And Godric bless Theo - the wizard offered a quarter smile in return. "Maybe," he whispered, toeing the leg of a plush chair. "Anyways, my reasoning for putting this relationship, or near approximate of, on hold is partially for safety, but mostly because it's important enough to me to tell you lot in person. I would have liked it to have been when there wasn't some dark cloud looming, but I couldn't keep it from you any longer." He gave a useless shrug, sighing. "And for as much as I'd like to tell Draco, the few times I've seen him since Monday, it's seemed inappropriate timing for such a jubilant announcement."

"That's fair…" Hermione visibly winced, fingers clenching into tight fists, inexplicable fluid stinging the corners of her eyes.

Theo responded with a comforting nudge to her shoulder. "Don't start thinking you're going to have less of me, Hermione Granger. Because you're not- and I know, I know that I'm Nott." He narrowed his eyes in a tease. "But you're not alone, and I'm not so easily swayed. We're friends, we're family, and that's that. You're stuck with a delightful natterbox in your life forever and always."
The smile she gave him was watery and perfectly ridiculous looking, she was certain, but it conveyed everything she could manage for now. There was more in what she was feeling at the moment; Godric, there was so much more. And Theo knew there was, but he hadn't pushed her to say anything since Draco's wedding...

"Come on," he nudged her again, drawing her from the dark churning depths of emotional turmoil. "We're going to eat at Finnigan's pub tonight. We're going to get lost in a crowd, you're going to have a quality brew. And if you're lucky, the familiar faces of Thomas and Jordan and some other former-Gryffindorks will be there as well. Should be a diverting evening to say the least."

Her chuckle was shaky, but she followed her friend to the fireplace nonetheless.
Thursday, 24 December, 1998

Snow had fallen late on Hogwarts this year, only just yesterday covering the grounds in a thick, white, powdery blanket. Clouds had gathered and hovered the entire week previous, withholding their Yuletide magic as judgment for the atrocities committed this year. Hogwarts held a weary, anxious breath in anticipation, her students unsure how they should react after...

Hermione tightened her scarf and wrapped her arms around herself—out of habit rather than necessity. She'd cast an extra warming charm over her coat before leaving the Gryffindor common room, as the castle refused to be anything but cold from December until March.

She glanced down at her watch and released an irritated huff. She'd spent hours scouring the castle, and now only had half an hour before her portkey from the Headmistress's office was set to leave...Perhaps if she'd had Trelawny's fortuitous 'inner eye', she would have accepted Harry's offer of the Marauder's Map at the beginning of the year...

"Oof!" She collided something solid and warm—definitely not a wall.

"Steady, Granger." Zabini grabbed her shoulders for a steadying moment, removing them before she could even be certain he'd reached for them to begin with. "Why the long face—thought you had a portkey to catch?"

Hermione frowned up at the absurdly handsome wizard. "I do, but I've been trying to find Nott for hours."

"Ah. Draco tell you at breakfast?"

"He didn't have to. *The Daily Prophet* took care of that."

Zabini inclined his head. "Did you try the Quidditch Pitch?"

Hermione's eyes widened as she shook her head.

"I saw them leaving the common room just before dinner with their broomsticks…"

The witch didn't stay long enough to see if he was about to suggest anything else. Tossing a clipped 'thankyou!' over her shoulder, she broke out into a sprint...Stumbling as soon as she stepped outside, sinking into a foot of snow. She didn't even bother with brushing frozen wet flakes from her coat. She rose and trudged onward, heading for the Quidditch Pitch, in fixed determination.

Nott had been in hiding since yesterday morning, coinciding with the arrival of an ominous looking
owl, who bit both Hermione and Malfoy for attempting to take the letter while Theo's hands were sticky from an earlier fiasco involving marmalade. She hadn't felt she was quite the level of friend to ask him the contents of that obviously disturbing letter before he stormed out of the Great Hall, Malfoy and Zabini following in his wake.

She'd just about worked up the courage to inquire about Nott's whereabouts to Malfoy at breakfast when an owl delivered her newspaper, bearing the plastered headline: 'Thoros Nott Commits Suicide in Azkaban'.

The words flashed over and over in her mind now as she quickened her pace...

There they were!

It was a new moon tonight, but the stars shone gloriously, and there was an unmistakable floating orb of blue flames illuminating the figures of two people sitting on a snow-covered Quidditch Pitch, forgotten broomsticks off to the side. She was all but sprinting now…

"Nott!" she gasped, heaving as she came to a sudden stop in front of them.

"Granger?" Two wizards gaped at her, eyes wide and bright under the blue flame. Nott seemed to come out of his shock first.

"I thought you had a portkey tonight," he deadpanned.

"I do," Hermione agreed, gasping again, ignoring the thousand icicles stabbing in her lungs. "But I —" Her mouth snapped shut, realising she had neglected to figure out what she'd actually say...

"That is, well, I just -"

"Save your pity speech," he clipped, his gaze now focusing beyond her. "And I don't want you staring at me like some house elf, either. So, have a happy Christmas and be on your way. See you when you get back."

"I didn't come to make a spectacle of you, Nott." Hermione chewed the inside of her cheek, wanting to be poignant and brief. "I've been trying to find you for hours now. I just wanted to see if you were alright."

Malfoy hadn't looked away from her at all, his eyes gleaming in the blue firelight, and she felt the sudden urge to shuffle her feet under his scrutiny. Theo's eyes travelled lazily back to hers as he laughed humorously.

"I should be, shouldn't I? Thoros was awful. Never any semblance of a father-figure unless there was discipline involved. Lucius looked the portrait of paternal perfection in comparison…The only reason I wasn't branded like Draco was because he wasn't important enough and I embarrassed him. Planned on never seeing or hearing from him again once he was carted off to Azkaban for good this time."

He stopped. And swallowed hard. "I shouldn't...I shouldn't feel anything now that he's gone for good. Maybe just relief...But I shouldn't..." he whispered, voice hoarse and thick.

Hermione stepped nearer, the toe of her winter boots almost making contact with Nott's shoes. "And yet, here you are," she said, keeping her words hushed and low.

"Here I am," he repeated. "Hiding away from the world. Behaving like a child, mourning that his toy broom was taken away because he's now ready for a real broom...Feeling like I've only just now been orphaned, when I never had much of a family to begin with."
His admission washed over her. A reverent silence swelled and covered the night in the wake of Theo's broken admittance...Malfoy had allowed his shoulder to rest against his friend's, altering his gaze between Hermione and his own hands. Nott was cradling his face in his hands, and Hermione knelt down in the snow, directly across him.

She sat in silence for several frozen moments more—it seemed wrong to break stillness with meaningless words. And then, she finally swallowed. "I think the fact that you're mourning him at all...It shows you're already a better and greater man than your father could ever have dreamed of becoming." She tilted her head just so, a small crooked smile playing at her lips. "And we've both seen what a wimp Malfoy has been in the past with regards to discomfort, so the fact that he's willing to sit out in the dark and cold with you tells me that you very much have some family, and you're not alone."

Nott uttered a strangled sort of sound, but kept his face in his hands.

Hermione decided it was now or never. She reached in her coat pocket and pulled out a small ring with the greatest of care as Malfoy's eyes seared into her. She felt the weight of his stare as she removed the shrinking charm on the ring, and caught from the corner of her eye him nudging at Nott when her gift had finished reaching its full size.

It was actually a wreath. She had crept off to one of the greenhouses after breakfast, looking for a few specific blooms and, in the end, she was really very pleased with her gift: a twined ring of almond blossoms, rosemary, and deep crimson roses. She'd woven a small nest of black, silver and evergreen silk ribbons, and lain a single yellow rose bud in the centre. *Hope, remembrance and mourning and friendship.*

"Here..." She touched it against Nott's bent knee, and he finally looked up.

His breath shuddered as he took the gift from her hands and stared blankly. She thought that his eyes had taken on a liquid sheen, but nothing spilled over, or tracked down his face. He said nothing as he began to finger the buds and the ribbons.

Hermione slowly stood, gently brushing snow from her coat. She looked over to Malfoy, as if for approval at the gesture...

And stopped breathing. Or simply forgot to breathe at all.

How could she possibly remember to, when eyes of iridescent greys and blues were looking *right into hers?* Penetrating. Warm. Lustrous. Soft. Radiant. The corners of Malfoy's lips lifted by a fraction on either side, and Hermione suddenly remembered she ought to breathe. And return such a beautiful smile as heat flooded to her cheeks.

"Happy Christmas, gentlemen." Without waiting for a response, she spun and began trudging back to the castle over a thick carpet of snow, deciding it would be a very bad idea to allow her heart to continue to flutter so at the memory of those penetrating eyes.

It had only been the reflected starlight and firelight after all.

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**Friday, 12 April, 2002**

"Hello, anyone here?"

Hermione looked up from a long sheet of parchment and lay her quill beside it. "Hello?" she answered.
"Hermione? It's Percy."

"Oh, just a moment." She pushed her chair back from her desk, rose from her seat, paused to stretch, and walked out of her office into the modest wait area at the front of Scamander's Beastly Incorporation (not exactly the company name Hermione would have chosen). "Hello, Percy, how are you today?"

The former-Gryffindor in crisp business robes had kept close to the office front door, as if to wait for further invitation. He smiled at her, a bright, yet nervous, looking smile. "Alright, thank you. I popped in because that coffee house next door has been sending over regret baskets all week, and today I've won the short straw with taking one of them home with me. There's far too much for me to eat alone and I thought I'd see if you'd like to share an afternoon tea with me."

"Oh!" Hermione's eyelashes fluttered, surprised. "Yes, thank you. That'd be a welcome break. Shall I close up here and walk with you back?"

"If you don't mind, I'd love an excuse to step out of our office…" He trailed off, visibly hesitant at his presumption.

"Run back and fetch the basket, and I'll get my office ready. It's the first door on the right."

"Wonderful!" he said, hurrying out the door.

Hermione walked back into her office, twisting her mouth and looking around. It wasn't very big—her desk, bookshelf and chair took up most of the room. But the afternoon sun cast inviting light through the large window…

With a flick and wave of her wand, her parchments and books piled themselves together and flew to their designated area on the shelves. She transfigured her inkwell and quill into a small vase with a single yellow flower in it and ushered it next to the stack of parchments on the shelf. Next, she transfigured her old and very-well used work desk into a square table for two, and waved it to the centre of the room. Her desk chair and the extra one of the corners of the room she transfigured into something more comfortable and casual, moving them across the table from each other…

"Looks very nice, Hermione."

She startled forward one-and-a half steps, a hand raking through her curls.

"Sorry." Percy stood sheepishly in the doorway, a large basket levitating behind him. "It'd probably be a lot better for your health and business if Scamander invested in a bell for the door."

"Probably." She grinned. "Come in and let's unpack that basket."

They each took a chair and one-by-one, Percy began summoning items from the basket. There was a plate of buns, warm from a stasis charm, apple scones with clotted cream, finger sandwiches, a plate of mixed fruits, silverware, plates, cloth napkins, an assortment of teas and a cheap, but still nice enough, teapot and service set.

"Earl Grey alright or would you prefer something exotic?"

"Perfect, thank you. This all looks incredible. When did the coffee shop open?"

"Mid-November, construction was quick and efficient, too." Percy summoned water, boiling almost instantly and dropping in two tea bags to steep. "One week there were panels and a Coming Soon sign and the next, it was open. They brew a nice stiff cuppa for an afternoon kick if I'm in the office
Hermione, who had forgotten all about lunch, took an eager bite from a sandwich quarter, chewed it thoughtfully and proceeded to finish it off in another two bites. "Well, invite me to join you the next time you go down for an afternoon cup; I'll join simply for the sandwiches if the tea ends up disappointing."

The wizard chuckled and mumbled an affirmative response while helping himself to a sandwich and some fruit.

Hermione took a more delicate bite from her second sandwich quarter, chewing slowly. "Actually, I can't remember an instance just the two of us ever sitting down to tea before."

"I believe this is the first time," he answered politely, his posture almost painfully formal.

"That's not very neighbourly of me; Mr. Greengrass moved his business into the building early last year—February or March, wasn't it?"

"March. It's always touch and go if I'll be in the office that day, and then you were out of Britain for a long stretch. Welcome home, by the way." He offered a stiff smile, if possible, he straightened even more in his seat as he poured tea into their cups, nudging the cream and sugar closer to her. "Or, do you feel more at home in Australia, closer to your parents?"

"Difficult to say." Hermione started, adding a splash of cream to her cup, stirring twice clockwise and once counter clockwise. "Some days things seemed almost perfect. It's been almost four years now since Monica and Wendell met me, and with this seven-month stretch, they had moments of being very open and real with the details of their lives…but sometimes that only made it worse." She chewed her lip at the question in her companion's eyes and took a slow sip of her tea. "They're still the same people they were before, but it's hard to think of them as my parents when they have no memories of being my parents. If that makes sense."

Percy took her in before taking a sip of tea himself. He set his cup down and canted his head. "You'll always be an outsider looking in on their lives." It was not a question. "An intruder. No matter the time or efforts you invest."

Something squeezed in her throat as she nodded. "Yes," she agreed.

A pensive stillness settled as they each continued working on their tea and food plates. Unspoken questions hung in the air, clinging to the atmosphere, thick and suffocating…

Hermione cleared her throat, set her cup down and decided to just throw caution to the wind. "So, I'm certain this'll sound stupid, but honestly—how have things been this week?"

"Thank Godric," Percy breathed, his posture relaxing. "I was wondering if we'd be dancing around the topic the whole time, which would have made for an unnecessarily awkward tea."

Hermione offered a crooked smile and took up a sticky bun while Percy wiped his fingers on a napkin, canting his head.

"It's been…different than what I expected…I guess that would be the best way to put it."

Hermione stopped chewing, her brow lifting in question.

The wizard began to shake his head. "That came out wrong, sorry. No one expects or plans for tragedies like this…And, this was tragic. Astoria would come by the office a few times monthly, and
she was beautiful. Very beautiful," he added hurriedly, cheeks tingling pink under his freckles. "She was friendly and engaging with everyone. Would always remember names and little personal details to inquire after. Always had a compliment for someone's clothing or hairstyle…" He trailed off, sighing, as if lost in a memory.

"Mr. Greengrass obviously hasn't been in all week," he continued as Hermione left her bun unfinished on her plate and pressed her fingers to her napkin in her lap. "I've been starting off my mornings at his home this week, sorting out what meetings I should reschedule for him or if I would be able to attend in his place. I usually check back in with him again in the evenings, but yesterday I went over after lunch and didn't leave until well past dinnertime."

"Busy, then, I take it," Hermione offered. "I'm sure he's very grateful to you."

A deeper pink bloomed in his cheeks, stretching to the tips of his ears. "Well…I wouldn't go that far." He shrugged.

Hermione shook her head, flashing a genuine smile. "Don't sell yourself short. This was a horrible shock, and I'm sure it's been a great comfort him knowing you and all of his staff have stepped up and can keep things afloat in his absence."

"It's the least we can do for him. It's nice to be recognized as an asset...and appreciated for it," he added almost to himself. "Although, there have been a few responsibilities I think I would have preferred he entrusted to someone else."

"Oh?"

Percy raked his eyes across the room and looked behind him, out the door, and lifted his wand. "Muffliato," he whispered, looking back to Hermione. "You know all the leaks in the Prophet this week. The ones from restaurants, shops, jewellery stores and hotels?"

Hermione gave a curt nod, uncertain about the direction of this conversation.

"Well, throughout the week," he continued, "I've been tasked with tracking down every last individual in those establishments who sold information to the Prophet, and by this time Monday, they each and every one of them will be without a job."

Hermione frowned, knitting her fingers together, as Percy shrugged his shoulders with an air of indifference.

"I mean, I suppose that's fair of him. It's not news, and it really doesn't add anything to the issue at hand…I suppose when it comes down to it, he can't really act any different than his true nature."

"Pardon?" Hermione's back stiffened against her chair.

"Well, I just mean Slytherin—anything to achieve your goals at the end of the day."

"Perhaps for some..." Hermione's eyes slowly began pulling together, but her tea companion hadn't noticed.

"You know, I've been surprised at the Prophet—wild speculation from minor tips all week long, nothing concrete or of any value."

"Sounds per usual to me," Hermione interjected, voice turning to ice.

"Well, the fact there hasn't been a report of anyone else being interviewed by the Aurors, anyone at
all—can you believe that?"

"They could just be keeping it from the papers, hot on a lead and the like."

Percy shook his head. "No, no. Mr. Greengrass wouldn't be so irritated if they had. And he would have told me, because he would have cancelled everything to sit in on it." He focused his eyes back on Hermione, alight and inquisitive. "It's why he's fighting and working so hard to have case jurisdiction in Britain, though I don't see our department doing any better. It seems no one even knew she was there, or they're simply not asking the right people the right questions."

Hermione's heart slammed against her breastbone as an image of pale blond hair and a billowing dark robe floated off in the direction of La Roseraie. "Oh," she managed, swallowing hard. "Sounds like you have some thoughts on the matter…"

"Well, they're all so focused on finding Warrington, and I agree he could be useful, but as I said, Astoria was delightful. I actually introduced them." He pointed to himself, eyes wide and brow raised, as if proud of himself. "It was last summer at a function. The man's never been married and was obviously smitten from the beginning. Shouldn't Aurors be starting with someone who actually had a grudge against the woman?"

With Theo's furious ravings echoing in her mind, Hermione fought to lift a single eyebrow, keeping her face as still as possible. "Such glowing praise; would people like that even exist?"

"Of course they do," he chided, as if it were entirely obvious. "Her husband for one. Then there are Zabini and No—"

"I'd tread very carefully if I were you, Percival Ignatius Weasley," Hermione countered sharply, quite finished indulging these speculations.

That seemed to snap him from his Sherlockian excitement, and he sank into his seat, unable to meet her eyes for a moment, cheeks aflame again. "Right. Sorry. I forget that you've made friends with the lot of them."

Hermione maintained her narrow gaze across the table. "I also believe in innocence until guilt is proven. And even then…mistakes have been known to happen."

Percy held her gaze, blinking slowly.

And then his face broke out into that boyish grin again. He let out a loud laugh, tossing his hands in the air. "Ron was right—the ends of your hair really do spark when you're angry."

Hermione shook her curls, glancing down at the ends before brushing handfuls behind her ears sheepishly. "Oh, Ron. Do you see or hear much of him?" she asked, grateful for the chance to change topics. "He sent me a note a couple of days ago, but he seems happy."

"Have seen much of him, but from what I hear he is," Percy mused aloud. "He's living out his every fantasy at the moment. Married to a dragon-tamer who gave up a brilliant career at the reserve in Romania to be his wife and sire his offspring. Have you heard he and Elaina are—"

"Expecting..." she supplied with an incredulous shake of her head.

"Oh, yes." He didn't seem surprised she already knew, rolling his eyes as he added, "Twins to be precise."

Hermione blinked in stunned silence. "He failed to mention that."
"Gracious," Percy hummed. "That's the most important titbit of it all according to Mum." He paused considering her with an odd curious tilt of his head. "I don't remember seeing you at their wedding back in January now that I think about it."

"I couldn't get away. It was as simple as that." She allowed a rueful quirk of her lips. "And before you ask, your mother sent me copy of the *Prophet* edition featuring their wedding, and it was not due to any so called 'lingering repressed feelings'. I sent them a lovely wedding present, and the new Mrs. Ronald Weasley responded with a lovely 'thank-you' card. She's already too good for him."

Percy chuckled quietly. "And Potter's wedding was so crowded it's a wonder we saw each other at all."

"It was huge, wasn't it? And I don't know who was the better sport about the whole affair—your mother for wanting to host it at the Burrow, or Luna for conceding to it."

The wizard across the table released an undignified snort. "Anything for her surrogate son whom she loves more than her own children…And to de-gnome the yard."

"Of course." Hermione giggled. "Was Penelope there? I didn't see her - "

"We're not seeing each other anymore," the wizard interrupted.

Heat flooded Hermione's cheeks. "I'm sorry, Percy. Recent?"

"Last fall," he answered, tone dismissive. "Just wasn't working, constant conflicts with her Medi-Witch schedule and such."

Hermione smiled, a little too brightly, she decided after the thought. "No matter. If Ron can land a dragon-tamer, anything is possible."

Percy snorted again, giving in to soft laughter. "Whatever you say."

She offered a soft smile in return. "Victorie is nearly two now, that right?"

"Mhm. Mum's just about beside herself thinking of all the grandkids around the Burrow come Christmastime."

"I'm sure; George and Angelina?"

Percy shrugged a shoulder. "Oh, probably a Halloween proposal and spring wedding. Ginny's still very committedly non-committed to her pompous Italian prig."

Laughter bubbled from Hermione's chest. "Oh my, yes…I'd expect nothing less from the two of them…"

"Bit annoying how Zabini has mum wrapped around his little finger. She may almost love him as much as Potter." Percy suddenly went quiet, looking down into his now cold tea. "What about you, Hermione? Seeing anyone at the moment?"

The slamming of Theo's study door reverberating in her mind…Tousled platinum hair that simply had to be as silky as it appeared…Vivid grey eyes...She swallowed hard, shaking her head. "Some first dates in Australia, but nothing more."

She looked up to find Percy lost in a contemplative smile. "Ruddy fools."

Hermione couldn't think of any sort of response. She forced a weak smile in return, ignoring the
twisting in her gut as they finished their tea.
Monday, 15 April, 2002

"Malfoy?"

Hermione pressed her ear and cheek in to a wooden door, listening. When no response came by the time she’d silently counted to six, she knocked again, louder this time.

One…two…three…four…five…

She pulled her face from the door. "Malfoy?" She drew a sharp breath, counting again, her fist already poised to knock again.

One…two…three…

The old wooden door suddenly opened, revealing one Draco Malfoy, hair askew and dark crescents under his eyes. His look darted from Hermione's raised fist to her face…

A hint of a smirk—a tired smirk. "I'd rather not be hit today, if you think you can manage that."

"Oh!" Heat flooded her cheeks as her fist dropped and she clasped her fingers together over the front of her grey work-dress. "Right, sorry. Just prepared to knock again if I needed to."

The smirk collapsed into a frown. "How long have you been out here?"

"Not long," she rushed, hoping to sound assuring.

His frown only deepened, and she tried again, allowing a gentle smile across her lips.

"I promise I've not been out here long. Mr. Ollivander kept me at the front of the store several minutes before he stepped out. And I've only stood here knocking half a moment in comparison."

His lips settled into a thin line as he stepped aside. "Well, come on in."

"Thank you." She crossed the threshold into his workspace and breathed deep.

A quick glance told her very little told her very little had changed in this room since last September. With its low ceilings and thoroughly stocked (but organised) shelved walls, the rectangular office had always had the feeling of entering a life-sized trunk. Tomes, journals, reference books and instruction manuals resided on the bookcase to the left—the bookcase itself stretching the height and width of the left wall. Labelled piles of wooden cylinders were all neatly arranged shelves lining the adjacent
wall. Jars of magically stored wand cores followed, and last along the wall were wand shaping tools themselves, clean and polished.

Draco’s writing desk and personal bookcase with his own journaled observations, parchments and files occupied the right side of the room. His large work table still sat in the space between, close to the window to catch the golden rays. He’d already set up a chair for her in the usual spot to his right, a respectable distance between the two…

Hermione’s breath hitched as her eyes doubled back over the windowsill. A single hibiscus lay on the wood, a ribbon bow tied around the flower. And leaning against the glass was a woven wreath of purple hyacinth, tea roses and baby’s breath.

Something warm brushed against her arm and she looked over to meet a pair of grey eyes, weary and sad. "Mother would have liked the flowers."

A treacherous knot formed in Hermione's throat, refusing to be swallowed. "I'm so sorry. Your mother was so gracious and kind whenever Andromeda invited me to join them for tea. I just…I can't imagine." She paused for a steadying breath. "And now Astoria, are you sure you should be at work today?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead he took her elbow, leading her to the chairs, motioning for her to sit. He gripped the back of his chair as he just stood breathing, his shoulders stiff and tense. Burdened. He finally sighed, and dragged his chair so that he could easily (and still gracefully) fall into it.

"I came back in on Thursday. I've been back and forth between here and France all last week, but I just hated doing nothing." His face pulled into a grimace. "Rather, I should say, nothing of value. Daphne keeps rethinking of Astoria's outfit and accessories for the burial, and stupidly keeps including me in this oh-so-critical decision." The traces of a sneer etched his face, transporting Hermione back to a different time, a different Draco Malfoy.

His hand twitched, and rubbed briefly against his left forearm. "And then, of course, the barrage of questions for updates. Things like when the French Ministry will release her body, flowers and food for the reception after the funeral, and would I mind if she transfigured books from the library into chairs to ensure we have enough for everyone in attendance…" He trailed off in a strangled sort of laugh, rubbing his forearm with more force.

Hermione remained still in her seat, remembering her encounter with Daphne. "I suppose," she started, then paused, hesitating, "everyone has their own way of coping. And mourning."

Draco grunted, and Hermione swallowed, pressing her hands in to her legs.

"Do you know when you'll be able to have the funeral?" she queried.

"Thursday or Friday, not sure yet. We'll be able to confirm tomorrow, though I really couldn't tell you why the Aurors still need her body at this point."

"I'm curious myself," Hermione ventured weighing her thoughts and looking to him for permission before continuing. At the flicker of curiosity in his eyes she ploughed onward. "I don't know how things like this work in the wizarding world, but Muggle investigations include a team of forensic specialists and scientists. They study the body, the wound or wounds, obtain blood or other fluid samples to run tests. But, here…it's wands, or that's what I'm assuming. It's the same spell doing the same thing, and even if they each left their own magical traces, it's not like there is a file of magical fingerprints of each witch and wizard to compare it against…"
She stopped short, noting Draco's eyes had widened, likely in shock or horror. "Merlin, I'm so sorry. All of that was incredibly insensitive." Her cheeks flamed and she ducked her head, unable to meet his eyes.

Only, to her utter amazement, he started to laugh. Soft, but warm and filling her with courage to risk looking up. Sapphire flakes in his eyes shone, if only for a moment before settling in their lakes of grey. "You really do know it all, Granger."

It was all he said, but oh…

Insufferable sun shining through the infernal window...Hermione raked her curls over one shoulder to offer the skin access to the chill in the room. "Really though, how are you?"

The wizard leaned over, resting his elbows near his knees, blowing out a slow breath. "There isn't a way to put this that doesn't have me coming off looking like a prick, I suppose." He cleared his throat. "The truth is, I feel guiltier over the fact that I don't feel much of anything."

Hermione scooted her chair a breath closer, angling her posture towards him as he straightened up, grimacing. As if disgusted with himself.

"When Mother died, I wanted to feel everything. All of it. Every shattering moment with a sober mind. I needed it. The emptiness, the sorrow, the incredible pain. We would chart the constellations together long before Hogwarts, and she told me about each family member named after the stars...She was so proud of her heritage, of being part of 'The Most Noble and Ancient House of Black'. She charmed my stuffed dragons, lions, bears and dogs to dance for me as she would sing to me before bed. She was the reason I lived through sixth year at Hogwarts…my every waking thought was for her and because of her. And I needed to feel every ounce of the weight in her death."

His eyes glistened and he paused, as in reverent memory. He blinked, and the moment had ended.

"But Astoria, well, you were at the wedding, it was no joyous union…" He was rueful, with a tinge of…was it regret? "She was never unkind, but we roommates under the same house, and that was a choice we both made. I…we…made a few attempts at a friendship throughout the engagement," he corrected himself, but he'd started drawing idle circles over his left forearm, and Hermione knew the first was probably more akin to the truth. "I used some money I'd saved up to buy her an engraved trunk. Darion called it an exceptional present, but it was a symbol of her freedom. I wasn't tying her down."

Hermione sat neutrally, permitting a thoughtful silence, knowing that he still had more to say in the way he sighed and now raked a hand through his hair. There was something calculating, almost fearful, in the way he studied her, and it lit a terrifying spark in Hermione's chest.

"We had annulment clause in the marriage contract." He paused, gauging her reaction, searching, but, to her credit and pride, Hermione managed to calmly incline her head in question, and offer a light smile, encouraging him to continue (and soon, before the thundering of her heart could be heard all the way to Hogwarts…). He seemed confused, but allowed it to pass and drummed his fingers over the table. "I'd already been in the process of making financial preparations for all that entailed, but I just needed a little more time."

Hermione allowed her brow to finally furrow, swallowing, though her mouth felt as sand. So many questions revolving around the words 'annulment clause', but, she asked instead "Has the Ministry still not released the remainder of the Black family assets to you as the last remaining heir?" It seemed the least invasive of the two questions.
"As if they were ever going to that; they—" He abruptly stopped and his eyes narrowed. They widened again as understanding filled his expression. "Theo…" It was neither a question, nor a statement. More like a growl. "I'm not holding my breath for that money," he bit out, posture straightening. "And, at any rate, there's hardly anything left. I was going to have to start dipping into our joint account sometime this year if Mother were still with us."

Hermione squirmed at the icy blast from his grey eyes; an unseen barrier had fallen between them and she couldn't decide if it was from the money or…

Ah well. It didn't matter. That wasn't why she was here.

She cleared her throat, looking at the work desk. "Well, I'm here to work. Shall we begin?"

He nodded, seeming almost relieved as he angled his chair closer to the table. He waved his left hand over four wands lined in an open leather pouch. "While you were in Australia, I started making wands with woods Ollivander doesn't typically use." He drummed his fingers again, tilting his head back to the office door. "The wizard is brilliant and uses almost forty different wood types, but after our debates with different wand cores, I thought I'd start small by branching out with different wood. I obtained samples of Dragon wood, Juniper, Olive, Rose and Teak, making three wands with each: one for each standard Ollivander wand core."

"That's brilliant." She smiled genuinely, reigning in the beaming pride swelling within. "Did you get to do some travel of your own to obtain these samples?"

"Wouldn't that have been diverting?" he mused, the ghost of a smile tracing his lips as he shook his head in the negative. "I sent out for wood portions needed from international greeneries. And I commissioned the now Mrs. Potter to obtain the local samples. The Juniper, Rose and Olive wood wands have all been matched with witches and wizards -"

"Really?!" she squeaked, not even bothering to contain her excitement this time; he'd consulted her enough that she knew the significance of that matter-of-fact statement.

His cheeks twitched as with suppressing a broad grin of his own. "Just a bit of luck," he murmured. "Some fight at a Quidditch match in February and several wands ended up snapping in the thick of it all." He waved a hand dismissively, and Hermione permitted his nonchalance in favour of his continuing.

"I started focusing on different cores last month, especially something to be as powerful as a dragon heartstring core. I've looked into erumpent horn and hair, but the sample sizes weren't large enough to channel magic any more impressive than a child's fake wand…" He cast a sideways look at her, smirking. "And since they have enough trouble not exploding themselves into extinction, I decided to focus elsewhere. At the moment, I've been working with griffin feathers, dragon scales and ashwinder ashes."

"Oh, wow." Hermione floated her hand to the pouch, skimming her fingers lightly over the soft leather. "Are all of these them?"

He gave an affirming nod, beaming and boyish. The mysterious coldness from moments before melted away in a single instant. "I decided to make them all from firwood, as that's why new post-year-of-torment-and-hell wand is."

Hermione nodded, tracing over each wand, admiring the craftsmanship and thrum of magic in such delicate pieces of wood.
"So, from left-to-right," he started, pointing to the first wand, stilling her caressing movements, "there's the erumpet combination core, ashwinder ash core, dragon scales, and then griffin feather. I keep them in this pouch to keep them separate from any other wands Ollivander may require me to make. A thought occurred to me at home the weekend before last to concentrate on the dragon scales wand and griffin feather, and some—"

"GODRIC!" Mind racing, Hermione jumped up, ignoring the unpleasant scraping of her chair against the floor and the shock splayed across his face. "You had them home with you the weekend Astoria died? This very pouch of wands?"

"Yes. I always bring them home; I don't like leaving them here overnight."

"Were they ever out of your sight that weekend?"

He snorted. "I draw the line at sleeping with or showering with my work."

"Prick," she hissed. "I mean, Theo said when he came to your house Sunday after you missed your lunch appointment that you had turned your studies inside out, looking for something." Her gaze narrowed, focusing on him. "He said you kept muttering about wands."

And just like that, without any warning, without any explanation, the icy wall between them returned.

"Theo talks too much." Draco's expression sharpened, his eyes searing and penetrating, as if searching.

"Malfoy," she sat again, making her voice as gentle as she could manage. "Were you looking for these wands?"

A growl. "Yes."

"They were missing? You couldn't find this specific pouch, nor the four wands inside?" She needed confirmation of all the facts, not just assumptions.

"Correct," he ground out, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I thought a distraction would be good when the Auror escorted me home from Paris with a portkey, but they weren't where I thought I left them. They didn't come when I tried summoning them...and I tore the private study and main study apart. I even searched my bedroom on the off-chance I had taken them to look at something while in bed, and had just forgotten about it...No luck. I went back to the study to look some more, and that's when Theo came." He shrugged his shoulders, slumping in his chair. "But come Monday, I found them in a corner under some scattered parchments and things when I started cleaning the mess. I must have forgotten to look in that spot."

Hermione canted her head, frowning. "But, you don't believe that's what happened, do you?"

He didn't answer, and his gaze focused on the wand pouch. The muscles in his neck tensed and his veins had become visible.

She swallowed. "Answer me, Draco."

His head snapped up, morning grey eyes fluttering across her face. He was searching again.

Her breath shook. She tried again. "What aren't you telling me?"

"The griffin feather wand wasn't at the end," he answered finally, neutral and clinical. "Instead, it
was here," he pointing at the third spot from the left, "with the dragon scale wand at the end."

Heart lurching, she snatched at one of his long sleeves before she could stop herself. "$Please$ tell me you've told the Aurors about this."

His eyes glittered as a bitter laugh filled the little space between them, and he shrugged from her grasp. "$And why would I do that, hmm? What possible good would it do to tell the French Aurors that an apprentice wand maker misplaced some experimental wands. And that then when he found them, probably after simply overlooking them in the first place, the wands were in a different order than he remembered? They'd just think I'd had a few too many glasses of wine." He folded his arms across his chest. "$Why$ give them more information than necessary when the case is only going to be handed over to the British Ministry?"

"That hasn't happened yet—"

"It's inevitable," he interjected, voice hard and numb. "$Our Aurors are getting this case. Darion has started to put up too much of a fuss in this wait. The French have put their entire Auror department and they haven't come up with anything of value, through no fault of their own, I'm sure. If someone wanted Astoria dead, it was as simple as knowing where she'd be, Apparating to her room, a silencing charm, locking charm, and a couple more spells later and she's dangling from her ankle, body slashed as if from magical swords."

She wanted to gag. She'd come through a bloody war, but the mental image was nauseating. Draco seemed equally affected by his words. Blood drained from his face as he visibly paled. His head fell into his palms. "$It's all another horrible nightmare," he muttered, weary and defeated, fingers tightening in his hair. "$It could be anyone from Britain who'd lived through either war. Anyone. But I'm not about to divulge useless information that might give our Aurors any reason more reason to point the finger at the former-Death Eater jilted husband."

Hermione's mouth felt as sand. "$Warrington," she offered weakly.

Draco lifted his face. "$He's a wanker as much as he is a front. They'd been seeing each other for almost a year now. If he wanted to kill her and/or take all her money, he's had ample opportunity before now."

Something twisted in Hermione's chest, and she loathed herself for the next question to float in her mind. "$How long had you known about them?"

"I came home early to relieve the Medi-Witch one evening last August. I thought I'd stop by the kitchens and grab a sweet surprise for Mother before going up and heard $them$ in the kitchens. Sounded like they were making dinner or something…but their intentions with each other and the evening were crystal clear from the little banter I caught."

Hermione squeezed her eyes, frozen strings winding and squeezing with equal force on her heart. "$Maybe…They could have quarrelled at the hotel that night. Maybe she had a change of heart over the money."

He breathed a short chuckle, and she could see him shaking his head in her mind's eye. "$Doubtful, Granger. Warrington's done very well for himself and he lost nothing in the war. She may have just been a dalliance to him, but he certainly did not need the money. And even if he had, Astoria would have given him as much as he wanted, no questions asked."

Hermione shook her head fiercely, brown curls bouncing around her shoulders. She stood from her
seat, stepping around to work some of her tension out on the back of the chair, her knuckles whitening at the strength of her grip. "I still think it'll only be worse for you if you don't come forward with this now—what if our Aurors decide to take custody of these wands and perform Prior Incantato?"

"Of course they're going to do that!" He stood also, straightening to his full height, his eyes boring into hers. "I've been going out of my mind with the inevitable fallout of this—I'm terrified, Hermione. I haven't been able to touch these wands all week for fear of what I may find!" He took a single step closer. "Darion, Daphne, Astoria and me—all of our wands were tested in the interview last Sunday. I guarantee when case jurisdiction is brought back to Britain, my wand will be only one recalled for testing…And any wand I've come in contact with in this whole bloody shop—including these!"

She started reaching out to him again, but he flinched and backed away, as if from a fire. "I've already seen who'll get the case: Katie Bell and Robards. I'm a convicted man walking."

"Not if you come clean with things early—"

"Things? Interesting use of the plural," he folded his arms across his chest, expression cold and hard. "Is there anything more I'm keeping from your infallible system of justice?"

Hermione lifted her chin. "Well, Theo's been thanking the Founders you were at home, in London, all day Saturday. You. Tell. Me."

Draco's eyes narrowed, darkening under thin slits. "And did you set dear Theo straight with all the facts?"

"Didn't have the chance—an angry hungover wizard interrupted me," Hermione countered, fists forming loose balls, confusion coursing through her. "Why haven't you told him where you were? And I'm sorry, but your reasoning for telling the Aurors about the wands is ludicrous. The French kept out of our war. You have to go to them with anything and everything while this case is still in unbiased hands." She stepped forward, closer to him, willing him to feel her desperation. "It'll only do you harm to withhold information, Malfoy."

"Oh? Shall I be informing them of Theo's deadly wrath fuelled by his loyalty to me?"

Her heart stammered and stopped for an awful second as his question slapped her across the face. "You…you don't mean tha—"

"Shit, of course I didn't…Salazar. SHIT, Granger, I…" His voice cracked and he crumbled to the floor, swearing, burying his face in his hands. "I didn't mean that. Salazar, I didn't mean that…I'm just so…I can't…I just…"

The witch sank to her knees, undecided if she should slap him for his careless words, or embrace him because she well knew that he was already punishing himself.

She opened her mouth, his name on the tip of her tongue—

The office door suddenly banged open.

The witch and wizard jumped to their feet…

"Harry!" Hermione croaked, cheeks flaming.

"Hermione?" Harry's bright evergreen eyes blinked rapidly behind his glasses. "What're you doing
"Magizoololgy consult, Potter," Draco clipped, posture stiff, hands clasped behind his back.

"Okay. Right then..." Harry blinked a couple more times, needing a moment more to recover from the unexpected before turning to Draco. "I'm going to need you to come with me, Malfoy. There's been a development in the case."

"Development?"

Harry's eyes shifted to Hermione as he inclined his head. Hermione looked back to Draco, tongue poised to offer a hasty goodbye…

But Draco had reached out, wrapping his warm fingers around her arm as he stared Harry down. "Talk. Granger stays." Harry seemed to hesitate, debating if he should argue. Hermione tried to step towards the door, but Draco's grip only tightened. "Granger stays," he repeated.

Harry shook his head. "I can tell you about the development here, but Hermione can't come with you to the viewing room at the Ministry. Family only."

"Viewing room?"

Harry nodded. "We found Warrington and he's been being interviewed in our interrogation room. Family members of the victim are allowed to watch from the viewing room. I need you to come with me now." Harry turned with a flourish, marching from the room.

Hermione's eyes flew to Draco. His face had become as stone, void of expression. He squeezed her elbow before dropping his hand and silently following out of the office.
Tuesday, 16 April, 2002

Hermione blinked down at an untouched, long-since-turned-cold cup of coffee, frustrated and deflated. "We're missing something; there has to be *something* we're overlooking."

A soft snore answered from across the room.

"Theo!" The witch charmed a pillow to make swift and sure contact with the wizard's face.

"What the—Hermione!" he whinged.

Satisfied her friend was once again upright and adequately alert, the witch released her magical hold on the stuffed object, allowing it to drop into his lap. "No. Sleeping. Not yet. We need to go over everything one more time."

"Merlin, *no,*" Theo groaned, dropping his face into his hands, massaging his brow. He looked up, blinking blearily. "Potter didn't answer your last owl because he's either gone to bed or decided to take his wife *to bed* to work out his frustrations with your constant owls. Blaise left at least an hour ago. We've been over everything Draco told me today with a fine-tooth comb. We need *sleep!*" With an exhausted heave, he rose from the couch, gaze fixed on the fireplace.

Hermione snatched up her wand. *"Immobulus! Silencio!"* She jumped from her seat and stormed to the frozen and silenced wizard, who (she felt certain) would be throwing her a look of death, were he able to move the muscles in his face.

"Draco told *you* everything," she started, jabbing a finger into his chest. "I have to go through it all once more tonight. *Please.*" She drew a shaky breath. "You heard what I read from Harry's owls: he confirmed that finding Warrington was the biggest lead in the case thus far. Cassius Warrington was found on *British* soil, which was the final stroke of fortune Mr. Greengrass needed to place jurisdiction in the hands of *our* Aurors. Harry also confirmed that it *will* be Katie Bell and Robards overseeing the investigation. I will *not* sit idly by and trust the system to do its due diligence, because I know it won't! We have to be vigilant!"

The immobilized wizard huffed a hard puff of air. Hermione dropped the spells, immediately grabbing for Theo's elbow sleeve. "I'm sorry, alright?"

"No you aren't," he countered, flashing narrowed eyes stilling to a look a of cool ire. "But I know all there is to know with you -" (Hermione hissed a sharp inhale he didn't seem to notice) "- so, we'll go over things *once*more tonight. ONCE more, and then I sincerely hope I don't have to see your drawn and pensive face for at least twelve hours." He stalked back to the couch, flopped down dramatically, tilting his face back to stare at the ceiling. "Which beginning shall I start from: Draco arriving to the
viewing room, or Warrington's so-called beginning in this harrowing tale?"

"Warrington's, please," Hermione answered, padding over to her reading chair, grasping her cup as she sat.

"Fine." Theo folded his arms across his chest, drawing a long breath. "Act One, Scene One: The Slytherin Sloth meets the Raven Trollop. The setting—an otherwise forgettable charity function. The date—an otherwise unimportant day in June. The wanksod lost a bet to one Marcus Flint, and had to attend the aforementioned function in the toothy git's stead, make a generous donation to some ridiculous cause, and make nice to Oliver Wood. While partaking in the aforementioned civilities with Wood, his girlfriend, now fiancé Daphne Greengrass, enter Stage Left: Ginger git number three —"

"His name is Percy."

"Silence, peasant." He lifted his face, loosing a glare to her across the room. "This is my narration, and hence, my name-calling." He lay his back down with a huff, continuing, "As I was saying, ginger git number three enters the scene to hobnob with his former fellow Gryffindork; the trollop baby Greengrass, otherwise known as Astoria, in tow. And it was as if the heavens opened, the stars aligned, and Warrington suddenly understood what all the poets meant when they spoke of love -"

He was determined to be impossible... "Please demonstrate some semblance of control over your mouth, Theo," Hermione cut-in, concentrating on swirling her mug clockwise instead of the irritation that was her present company.

"Ah, ah—

my narration still," he clipped, and she glanced up to notice he'd lifted a condescending finger to motion for her silence. "Warrington reported some rubbish that he was immediately attracted, but the witch was married, and that was the end of it…Really very noble and sacrificial of him, wouldn't you agree?"

Hermione snorted, deciding no comment would be in her best interest.

Theo's drawled recollection continued. "It was apparently an excruciating three week following in Paris, and Astoria haunted his every thought…It's now the end of June, and he decided on a whim to attend a summer party, and lo-and-behold -" he gasped theatrically "- the fair maiden, Astoria Malfoy, was also in attendance. And this time, he cannot help but succumb to his carnal instincts and seek to seduce her—nay! Win her heart!"

"Theeeezoooooo," the witch groaned, momentarily doubting the necessity of this final review. And her selection of friends.

The wizard snapped up in his seat. "I was there, I know what I saw," he deadpanned. "The shitty slothy snake oozed charm—whispering in her ear, brushing against her arm, eyes fixed on her. And young Mrs. Malfoy did nothing to spurn his attentions."

"Fine." Hermione conceded, albeit unwillingly. "Please continue, oh Gracious One." 

"The torrid affair began quickly thereafter, mostly with him finding reasons to come to London, usually a ruse to rendezvous with his new plaything. The little wench, one Astoria Malfoy, went to Paris once with Daphne, managed to slip away for whatever naughty activities your irritating mind could imagine, but didn't make any more trips out of the country until after Narcissa passed away. The star-crossed lovers found love…" Theo rolled his eyes, tone saccharine… "And this time, Astoria was going to stay with him for good. A great statement to get the annulment moving along, or something of the like."
"Did he know about the money?"

Theo glared again. "I swear, you're trying to test me with all these little memory questions." He released a tired sigh, shaking his head. "I shall answer your question in the negative. Warringsloth pleads he knew nothing at all about the missing money. That they'd only planned on her having a trunk of necessities, and he'd buy her anything and everything she wanted in Paris."

Hermione swirled the cold beverage in her cup again while Theo took a long sip from a glass of water on the coffee table.

"Am I allowed to proceed further?" he quipped, narrow brows lifted sardonically. "Or shall we linger on the money?"

"Move on for now," she answered, ignoring her friend's sarcasm. "At this point, I'm only halfway to believing anything he's said."

Theo muttered something indistinct under his breath, took another sip from his glass and continued. "Astoria contacted him when she arrived in Paris just after noon that day, probably nattered about wanting to do some shopping or some rot while he spent the day at work. He was to meet her at the hotel, take her to dinner and they were going have a steamy night in Paris, before honeymooning across the continent, as it were…"

"Warrington confirmed the room number with the front desk when he arrived. The 'Do Not Disturb' sign hung from the door, which he apparently thought was odd, but didn't begin to panic until he knocked several times and received no response. He was specific to point out he heard not even the smallest of sounds, like splashing bathwater, music, shuffling furniture, etc. Warrington said he knocked several more times—that he was all but yelling her name, but still, not a peep from the inside. Incompetent fool said 'Alohomora' wasn't even working, so that's when he resorted to blasting the door open."

"'When a man loves a woman'," Hermione muttered.

"What's that—you've heard all you need for the night? Fancy you're finally ready for some shuteye?"

A heavy sigh. "Just get on with it."

The wizard raked a hand through his hair, grumbling and swearing before picking up where he left off. "Warrington blasted open the door. Told the Aurors the room was dark, except for the light from the hallway, only seeing her when he cast a Lumos…" Theo's face pulled into a grimace. "Go over this part again, too?"

Hermione nodded mutely, swallowing hard.

"Right then… Astoria was apparently barefoot, dangling mid-air by one ankle. Legs and exposed abdomen white as snow, which is when he noticed the pool of blood on the floor beneath her…He said he actually collapsed, falling into some of the blood himself…and that's when he panicked and made an absolute arse of himself—his exact word, there, according to Draco…Warrington states he cleaned the blood from himself, checked the hallway, left the room, and repaired the door."

Hermione shook her head as Theo paused for another long swig of water. "Warrington says he concluded he would be the obvious main suspect since the hotel staff had seen them together often enough. He Apparated home and barraged the Auror's office in Paris until finally getting an answer. As soon as someone answered, he Apparated back to the hotel gardens, Disillusioned himself and Apparated to the hotel room floor, so that he could make sure they found her. The arse idiot has been
in hiding ever since…until Monday—"

"Where was he hiding?"

"He stayed in a Muggle hotel in Paris until Monday—ten points to myself for flawless memory." Hermione couldn't find it in herself to even quirk her lips in a smile as the wizard buffed his nails on a sleeve.

"Monday," he continued, "Warrington chanced a trip to his office for a portkey and managed to snag one without being caught. The aforementioned portkey landed him in Muggle London, and from there he Apparated to a rarely used Greengrass cottage in the country, where he'd conveniently spent an iniquitous Valentine's Day weekend with his little minx, and the wards let him walk right in."

"Where he was hiding in plain sight all week long," Hermione mused. "No one had a single clue or lead, and Warrington just now up and decides to make himself known by walking about in broad daylight in Diagon Alley?" Hermione blinked incredulously, swirling the coffee cup again.

"I'm not inside the git's head; I don't know what he was thinking. To be honest, I'm not entirely certain he's done much thinking at all since meeting his little tart." Theo shifted, edging close to the end of his cushion, flitting his eyes to the fireplace. "Draco said Warrington repeated many times how much he loved Astoria—possibly some inkling of that sentiment is what led him to make himself painfully obvious to find so near the Ministry. I, for one, think he was a ruddy fool to begin with."

Hermione rolled her eyes, scooting forward in her seat as well. "Did they administer Veritaserum?"

The wizard shook his head. "Our illustrious and omniscient Aurors decided to take him at his word for now. They're keeping him in holding, so that could change at any time."

"How are they able to just keep him? He's not charged with anything or under arrest."

Theo groaned, throwing himself back into the couch. "Merlin, your infernal questions; I just want to go home..." He sat up again, eyes flashing haughtily at her. "Warrington's a first-hand witness who's been in hiding—they're calling it 'probable cause', probably the smartest thing they did today."

Hermione scoffed at his irritation. "Was anyone else interviewed by our Aurors?"

"No. Just Warrington."

She could see the metaphorical smoke fuming from his ears, as if he were a cartoon character. It was almost comical. *Almost.* "Was anyone allowed to submit questions to ask him?"

Theo inclined his head, gaze glinting and curious. "A new question…interesting."

Hermione cleared her throat and looked away, hoping that he would not make further inquiries...

"I didn't think to ask," he answered, Godric be praised that he didn't press further. "And Draco didn't volunteer that information. I do know that Greengrass was shaking and had to be restrained at several points during the interview."

"Understandable given the circumstances," Hermione murmured shaking her head and blinking hard. She placed her mug on the small round table adjacent to the chair, stood up, and padded over to the couch. She hesitated before sitting lightly on the other side and looking Theo directly in his bleary brown eyes.
"Did Draco stay to talk to the Aurors about anything else?"

Theo's dark blond brow pulled, confusion and worry conquering his previous irritation. "If he did, he didn't tell me."

"Okay..." Hermione sighed, defeated. "Well, it's plausible everything the night of could have happened as Warrington said...if he had no idea about the money, it would add credibility to his story. Have they searched the cottage yet?"

"Mhm. Sent a team of Aurors there and then to every place he'd visited this past week—no sign of a single missing knut."

"Ugh!" Hermione's face fell forward, her fingers tore and tangled into her curls. "You were right, Theo—NOTHING! And now I'm just..." A frustrated scream tore at her chest, straining to break free, even as she pursed her lips tight.

The wizard said nothing for a long moment, and Hermione found she could do nothing but stare at the rug on the floor, tugging and pulling at her curls.

"Something will come up," he murmured. "Someone somewhere is keeping information to themselves, but it's only a matter of time before it's found out."

A chill as cold as ice shot down Hermione's spine, spreading to her fingers and toes. Sinking into her marrow. Bile burned her throat as she tried to force away the mental image of Draco gliding across the Parisian street that specific Saturday. In the direction of the hotel.

She took three shallow breaths, trying to swallow...

"Hermione?"

Theo's voice was muffled and faded. As if from a distance...When had he moved so far away?

Warmth itself wrapped around her wrists, coaxing her hands from her hair. "Don't fade on me yet, witch, you need to focus just a bit longer."

She blinked twice, not understanding...

Theo squeezed her wrists. "You have to adjust your wards so I can leave," he whispered, a crooked smile toying at his lips.

_Oh._ Hermione nodded mutely, and Theo dropped his hands. She pulled out her wand, focusing on the imperceptible protective runes and equations around her flat... "There you go," she whispered.

The wizard stood, rubbing the back of his neck. "I know it looks bleak and dark right now, but we just need a fresh perspective after some sleep. You owe me for keeping me to this abysmal hour and not even providing alcohol." He sauntered to the fireplace, grabbing a handful of emerald powder. "Personally, I think you should repay my selflessness by reinstating my Floo privileges." His brown eyes twinkled as he levelled her with a look.

"Not a chance."

"It was one time," he countered. "And it was for your birthday."

"One week early?" Hermione deadpanned.

"That's the point of a surprise birthday party!"
Hermione folded her arms over her chest. "I don't like surprises, and if you'll remember, everyone was so cranky at being subject to a mass hex by the birthday girl, it wasn't much of a party."

"They got over it—you should too."

Hermione gave a dismissive wave and watched as he disappeared into bright green flames. With two additional flicks, her wards were reset and she padded off to her bedroom, longing to drown in a dreamless void.

"Hermione!"

The witch winced at the boisterous greeting, the wizard's voice bouncing off the walls of the office foyer and settling in the space between her throbbing temples.

"Hello, Percy," she murmured, stifling a yawn.

"You alright? Looks like you didn't get much sleep last night."

"Fair and accurate assessment." Why expend limited energy contriving lies? She knew she'd probably wince at her own reflection right now — wild curls in a loose bun, the oldest and most faded denims in her closet, and an old, oversized jumper of her father's she'd taken before…

"Ah, should you be coming in today?"

Hermione canted her head, pondering. She concluded in the end that it was adorable how the pristine appearing Weasley wizard had stepped back, lest he catch some horrible disease, and yet angled himself to communicate some measure of concern. "I left a book here I need for a section I'm working on today. I'd hoped to just pop in the building and slip in and out without being seen…Or recognized…"

Percy released a soft chuckle, stepping closer. "Apologies, then. Would purchasing you a cup of coffee at least be a start in making amends?"

"Umm…" Hermione waved up and down the length of herself.

"To-go, if you'd rather."

"I suppose…" Hermione hesitated… "Sure," she resigned, conceding to the nagging voice in her mind begging for instant caffeine. "Let me grab my book."

And with that, she made her way to the office front-door, cast a silencing charm on the door and tip-toed up the foyer. Muffled male voices were coming from the second room on the left — Rolf's in-house consult.

"Alohomora," she whispered, stepping up and peering through the doorway… "Accio." A maroon tome in the left corner of her desk flew to her hands… just where she had placed it to not forget it when she left work to meet with Blaise and Theo yesterday.

Softly shutting and locking her office door, she crept back through the office foyer, slipped out the door, lifted the silencing charm and made her way back to the front of the building, winding her arm tight around the large book.

"Got it."
Percy smiled, pulling the door and waving for Hermione to exit first. "After you, then."

They veered right once outside, following the cobblestone sidewalk in silence. Hermione's gaze remained bleary and she loathed the sun for harassing the world with its brilliance at only a quarter-past-eleven in the morning.

She came to an abrupt halt when an arm in a long blue sleeve shot out in front of her…

Following the arm back to the shoulder…Percy.

Percy Weasley.

Percy with his hand on a door.

Oh, right. Percy reaching out to get the coffee shop door for her.

Percy looking at her with a dimpled hesitant expression that vaguely reminded her of…Ron…

Sweet Merlin, no.

Her nose scrunched and she opened her mouth to say something…

But Percy had already focused on the door and pulled it open, nudging his head for Hermione to enter first. "D'you need a minute to think?" he offered.

"No, we can go right to the counter if you know what you'd like."

Percy nodded and took the lead. He offered a stiff smile to the middle-aged witch behind the counter, reminding Hermione of his days as a Prefect and then Head-Boy. "One egg sandwich with pumpkin juice to-go and whatever the lady requests."

Hermione bit the inside of her lip, battling a giggle the wizard would not think amusing. "Grande latte with an extra shot, please."

"Would you like a shot of Pepper-Up in there too, dearie?"

Percy sniggered on her left.

Hermione glared. "No, thank you," she clipped as Percy leaned in to settle the bill.

His eyes twinkled as they stepped away from the counter, even as her own eyes narrowed further.

"It's not funny."

"Oh, but it is." He sniggered. "You remind me of Mum the morning after purchasing Fred and George their wands for Hogwarts—Merlin, that was a mistake! They had every spell book in the house, testing their wands all night long." He began stroking his chin, a distant look in his eyes, caught up in the memory. "Hindsight, it may have best for Dad to have taken the two of them to get their wands the morning of the Hogwarts express, while Mum took the rest of us to King's Cross."

"Possibly…"

"Did you sleep at all last night?"

"If you mean during some hours of darkness before dawn, then, yes." Hermione offered, absently rubbing two fingers underneath her right eye.
Percy shifted to face her better. "Publication deadline?"

"No. Just a lot on my mind, I suppose." She offered a crooked smile, hoping that vague answer would suffice.

"Grande latte extra shot!"

Hermione shifted to the counter, squeezing the tome to her chest, grateful to remove herself from the wizard's pensive expression—as if he were trying to discover something.

She made it halfway back to him and looked around. "Do you mind if we sit until your meal is ready?"

Percy shook his head and they were soon seated on opposite sides of a plush green booth. "Have you happened a glance at the _Prophet_ yet?" he asked, red brow quirked just so.

"Just a glimpse of the headline," Hermione admitted, drumming her left-hand fingers over the cover of the maroon tome. "Thought I'd start my day with something decent and factual instead."

The wizard snorted. "Wise decision. It's a lot of rubbish anyways. The Prophet mucked up everything about Warrington's arrest—painting him out to be some grief-stricken madman, giving himself up after a torturous nine days on the run…"

"Oh?" Hermione's eyes fluttered as she willed herself to think. "Did they report any evidence in support of said claims?"

"No, because there is none," Percy drawled, raising his hand as to tick items from a list. "First, his wand was clean—no dark magic or traces of those curses coming from it."

"He could have used a different wand and tossed it right after," Hermione interjected.

"Second," Percy huffed, ignoring her banal hypothesis. "Where's the money? His properties in France, the business, his villa in Spain and now all Greengrass properties have been searched. Not a trace."

"Tossed in the Seine after killing her for pure spite since he didn't need it…"

"Third is motivation," he said, expression turning austere, ignoring her obvious retort. "It always comes down to motivation, and Warrington had none. He lost nothing in the war, he wasn't even in Britain. He was already giving Malfoy the metaphorical finger by having an affair with his wife, settling any old Slytherin rivalries. And while Mr. Greengrass raves and grunts like an enraged father, Daphne believed Warrington when he said he loved Astoria."

Hermione had lifted the tome from the table as he spoke and now hugged it to her, blinking and swallowing once. Twice.

Much harder the second time.

"Everyone lies when they have something to hide," she said, words heavy on her tongue.

"Egg sandwich with pumpkin juice to-go!" the witch behind the counter barked.

Hermione grabbed at her to-go cup as Percy slipped out the booth and walked to the counter. She slid out of her seat, side-stepping slowly to the door, when he met her halfway.

"I hope the drink is satisfactory, Hermione," he offered with a stiff nod, cheeks tinged rose again.
The witch returned the gesture with a tight, tired smile. "Thanks. See you later."

She turned and walked for the Apparition point, awkwardly adjusting her full arms for her wand before everything pressed and collapsed.

And for the remainder of the day, she blamed the twisting of her insides on Appariting twice on an empty stomach. It had nothing at all to do with her last words to Percy: *Everyone lies when they have something to hide.*
Thursday, 18 April, 2002

It seemed almost irreverent that a funeral should take place on such a quintessential British spring day. The vivid colours of the countryside flora seemed a direct assault on the flowing black robes of witches and wizards. Chattering birds under a bright cloudless sky mocked the tear-stained cheeks of gathered mourners.

The gathering comprised of faces unfamiliar to Hermione who, on the whole, had oriented themselves in two half circles on either side of the tombstone, avoiding where the young woman now lay buried. Abiding by the unspoken law of chairless funerals, the small crowd angled themselves so that they could always cast a sombre look upon the tombstone.

The tombstone itself was most impressive. Large and ornate. A soft grey and freshly cut, with intricate flowers carved across the front. The script was elegant and pristine. And so large, Hermione could read everything from her far back position in the crowd:

ASTORIA MALFOY (née GREENGRASS)

8 AUGUST, 1982 — 6 APRIL, 2002

BELOVED DAUGHTER. DEAREST SISTER.

The funeral had been announced in yesterday's paper. Tasteful, brief and solemn. No salacious speculations of Warrington, Paris, the first failure of a Malfoy marriage in centuries. No proverbial stones cast at the young Mrs. Malfoy caught while awaiting her lover. Not a word of poetic justice. And if there were any reporters in attendance at the graveside service, they were indistinguishable in this intimate gathering.

The Daily Prophet had some measure of decorum after all.

In a surprising act of benevolence, the Ministry had assigned two Auror teams to guard a perimeter around the service—or perhaps covert monetary persuasion had been involved. Either way, Harry and Ron kept a watchful eye a respectful distance beyond the tombstone, with Robards and Bell protecting the rear.

Warrington remained in custody at the Ministry.

Hermione stood next to Rolf on the fringe of the gathering. A supportive presence without intruding upon the true mourners.

Mr. Greengrass, immaculate in formal obsidian robes, would normally be described as handsome.
Today he appeared lost, shattered, broken. Daphne leaned heavily on the arm of her fiancé, Oliver Wood, sunshine dancing off her emerald and gold engagement ring. Theo and Blaise flanked Draco, with Ginny unwavering as she leaned into her Italian wizard.

And Draco...

Draco was impeccable in his dark robes, light hair combed back, fluttering almost imperceptibly in the gentle breeze. He stood as flint, solemn and rigid, attention fixed on his wife's tombstone...Save for when Theo caught Hermione's eye moments after she joined her half circle, so that she stood nearly diagonal them across the gravesite.

Theo offered a stiff nod and must have nudged Draco because the widower's face jerked, eyes scanning the intimate crowd. His search ended when his gaze fell to Hermione; grey eyes rested on her. Great piercing fathoms from across a chasm. He didn't blink and Hermione couldn't find the strength within herself to even swallow.

Until he finally blinked once. Then again. And again. And redirected his attention to the tombstone.

Mr. Greengrass looked around, not meeting anyone's eyes in particular, but appearing, instead, to be assessing and contemplating. He looked to Draco, and then to Daphne. His daughter nodded, and the wizard stepped within the circle, an arm's reach from his youngest daughter's tombstone.

"I look around this gathering, into the faces of family, friends and colleagues, and there is not one of us that has come through these last several years unscathed. It is cruel that one so dear, so young and full of laughter should be stolen from us. Astoria was my vivacious water sprite; always looking for adventure and amusement."

He paused, smiling wistfully at the gathering. "It may seem strange, but one of my fondest memories of Astoria is from the summer between her second and third year at Hogwarts, while vacationing in wizarding Paris with Daphne and myself. She'd apparently slipped out while Daphne and I were reading, and confessed she had every intention of making it back to the hotel room before it was time to dress for dinner. In her excitement, she'd gotten herself turned around and couldn't find the entrance back into wizarding Paris, and had to activate her emergency portkey, which brought her immediately to her worried-sick father. Yet, even in her apology, Astoria's eyes shone with all she'd seen that afternoon. She was an artist, chasing after her passions and inspirations; capturing and showcasing the essence of all she thought beautiful and precious."

A spark of fury lit and coursed through Hermione at an alarming speed. Blazing, burning, and boiling. Threatening to consume...Someone near the front coughed, breaking through Hermione's rage. She sucked a deep lungful of air, forcing herself to pay attention to the grieving father.

Mr. Greengrass had paused, now pulling a parchment from the folds of his robes. "I beg your indulgence while I share something. Astoria read a poem at her grandmother's funeral some years ago, and for several months following, I thought her the author. She laughed at my error, as only Astoria could, kissed my cheeks, and said she had come across it in a poetry book one of her cousins gave her for Christmas."

Hermione strained to keep her eyes from narrowing, fighting a glare as she never had before. It did no good to scowl upon fresh earth—the vapid young woman was no longer alive to sink in shame.

She ground her teeth and focused again on the grieving father.

The man's hands shook as he unfolded the parchment and he glanced down for a moment. "It seemed fitting to share this with you all today." He cleared his throat, and began to read, voice
holding strong and steady for the first several minutes.

"The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.
The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.
I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread."

It was here that the man's voice faltered and cracked. He paused for great gulps of air, alternating the parchment between hands as he swiped at his eyes.

Daphne's body wracked with sobs as she buried herself into Wood's chest. Her fiancé's grip around her shoulders tightened, and he bore the expression of contained rage. Rage that someone dared bring such pain to his witch.

Hermione wondered if her rage was as obvious as his.

Mr. Greengrass gave a loud cough and cleared his throat. "My apologies, nearly done." His voice came out watery and much more hushed as he finished the reading.

"Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.
But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?"

A pensive silence befell the gravesite. Not even the birds flapped or sang to shatter it. Mr. Greengrass lowered the parchment, slowly refolded it and stepped back into his space beside Daphne. Daphne tore out of Wood's grasp, flinging herself into her father's arms.

Great sobs and cries rippled through the crowd like a wave, and there was a general outbreak of relatives and friends embracing one another. Rolf swallowed hard beside Hermione and began to shift his weight on his feet, as he did when he became nervous and uncomfortable.

Hermione wound her hands together, squeezing tight, forcing her lungs to cooperate, and just breathe normal. She stared ahead, hoping that anyone happening a glance at her would think she was gazing at the tombstone, willing the red in her vision to fade away.

Daphne still clung to her father, leaving Wood to fend for himself next to Theo, who was on Draco's right. Wood and Theo stood as twin pillars beside each other—severe and unyielding. Ready to support the people on either side of them.

On Draco's left, Blaise had bound a protective arm around Ginny, dropping soft kisses into her loose red hair.

Draco himself was as a statue. The creation of a master-artist after years and years of skilled labour. Dignified and imposing. Beautiful and terrifying. Hands loose at his sides, no tremor or clenching about them. Eyes as steel, fixed on the tombstone, unblinking. As still as death itself.

Only then did she allow silent tears to pool and stream down her cheeks.

Sunday, 28 October, 2001

Hermione,

I know you begged for time and space before writing you, but you should know that Narcissa passed away in her sleep last night. Draco woke up with a funny feeling yesterday and owled Ollivander he'd be working from home. She slept most of the morning, waking up around noon. Andromeda, Blaise, Teddy and I were all in the room until just after supper. She seemed comfortable and peaceful, smiling at Draco most of the time she was awake.

She asked about you once before falling back asleep the last time, and I thought you'd want to know that.
The funeral will be Sunday morning at ten o'clock, at that little plot of land Andromeda and Draco Slytherined you into coming along with last month.

I wish you weren't gone yet; I wish you weren't gone at all. Not for this long. Draco hasn't eaten or slept since Wednesday night, and Salazar, I'm no help. I'm almost as much adrift as he is. He won't talk, and when he does, it's in these cryptic verses I've never heard before. All he'll tell me is it's a poem he memorised a couple years back. He's in a buggered-up fog of poetry, Hermione Granger. I can't reach him there. I don't know what do. So I'm writing you.

I know what you said, but I wish it were different. You have no idea how much I wish it were all different.

Love,

Theo

Although not even a week old, the letter already appeared worn and frayed. Hermione read it three times through after first receiving it, just to convince herself of the facts. The fourth time was slow and thorough, tears sliding down her cheeks, dotting the parchment and smudging the ink.


She refused to squander time and curiosity over what the bloody hell poetry verses Draco had committed to memory—that was of no consequence in light of current circumstances.

What to do with the letter, for example. It clearly was not an open invitation to the funeral—Theo wasn't family to do the inviting. He made no specific mention of Andromeda or Draco asking if she would come. Andromeda hadn't written to her asking her to come. Neither had Draco.

And yet, Theo had written. Because he was hurting. Draco, his brother in all but blood, was devastated. Andromeda had to be heartbroken.

And because he knew Hermione had never been one to allow those nearest to her to suffer alone. To not somehow feel her support, even if from a distance.

Or in the silence.

She read the letter through again twice just before making a decision. She packed a quick overnight bag and activating one of her portkeys back to her flat in London.

She read Theo's letter over and over again as she tossed and turned back in her own bed Saturday night, torn if she should really be here, at all. Going through with this...

She read it again this morning as she sat down with a cup of coffee, assessing the weather. The heavens had opened and the world wept for the family of Narcissa Malfoy. A steady constant rain that created low and mournful sounds in the wind. An appropriate display of inner sorrow and turmoil, but it posed an issue with Hermione's plan.

The plan was simply to Disillusion herself just before leaving her flat. She would Apparate to the private cemetery a little early, so that no one would be around to hear the faint 'POP' and crunches and snaps of fallen leaves and twigs when she landed. If she arrived with enough of a buffer, she would conjure her flowers and immediately leave for the office to make one final gift. If, however, there wasn't enough time, she would wait until they'd finished and all left before beginning the offerings of flowers.
Rain brought in the extra consideration of whether or not she should take an umbrella...

Brow furrowed, lips drawn into a thin line, she decided that someone could happen a look in the tree-line and see rain falling around an invisible something, which would only draw attention to herself—exactly what she wanted to avoid. She could simply bundle up in a few layers to keep warm and her rain apparel should be adequate to keep her dry.

Hermione took her time showering, drying off, and wrapping her towel around herself as she patted, pressed and scrunched her curls dry with a fresh towel. She dressed in slow, purposeful movements. Dark, slim pants first, so she could tuck them into thick socks and black wellies before leaving her flat. Next, there was the bottom layer of a long sleeve grey shirt, followed by a heavy black jumper.

Checking the time, she sat at her small vanity to apply a touch of makeup and secure her curls in a loose braid. Lastly, she pulled out her rain jacket, enlarging it so that the hood hung over her eyes and the hem of the jacket skimmed the top of her wellies.

With a few waves and flicks, her towels were dried and folded and back in her linen closet. She shrunk her bag to the size of a galleon and dropped it in her pocket. With a deep breath, she cast a Disillusionment charm over herself before conjuring the image of trees and headstones in her mind.

The apartment vanished and an instant later, she landed in a muddy puddle, which splattered up her boots and jacket.

Casting a look around, she found she'd arrived before anyone else, just as she had hoped. A large tent had been erected over a mound of fresh earth and headstone, shielding the surrounding area from the rain. Five headstones stood in a watchful line to the right—Ted, Tonks, Remus, Sirius, and Regulus. Andromeda had wanted to start a new family plot, even in the absence of bodies.

Hermione sidestepped a few puddles and shifted closer to the tree-line, debating if she had enough time to slip up to the tent and offer her tribute before they began arriving…

When Andromeda landed under the tent first, just as Hermione had taken a hesitant step forward. Teddy clung to his grandmother's neck, his hair a vibrant turquoise.

Draco appeared next, swathed in black, dark bags under his eyes, as if he hadn't slept in days. Something deep within Hermione twisted and ached as Teddy reached out for his cousin, the little boy's hair changing to platinum blond as Draco cuddled the child to his chest.

Blaise, Astoria and Theo followed. Hermione frowned as Astoria quickly created as much distance between herself and the wizards as she could, moving to stand within an awkward proximity of Andromeda—not close enough to be of any useful support, but near enough to be counted in attendance.

Everyone cast uncertain looks about each other before focusing on the headstone.

Deciding everyone had arrived, Hermione stepped as lightly as she could, tiptoeing around puddles and over sopping piles of leaves until she reached a point in the treeline she dared not move beyond. Wrapping her arms tight around her middle, she leaned against large tree trunk, hiding under a canopy of bare tree limbs and branches.

Time moved at its own doleful and unquantifiable pace as Hermione looked on at the intimate gathering, a speck of envy twinging within her. She swallowed hard, huddling closer to the tree as the wind swirled and picked up. It howled through the limbs and branches, slapping raindrops against her jacket and hood…
This had been a mistake. She was a stalker. An outsider, haunting a private moment that she had no part in.

The wind raged harder.

Hermione's cheeks were wet, hot fluid streaming down—the only indication she had begun crying. She was alone, again. Gasping and crying.

She had no place.

And suddenly, there was movement under the tent. Breaking through the hypnotic stillness in the midst of the storm.

Draco shifted a struggling Teddy in his arms, patting the boy's head in soothing movements. Andromeda stepped up to the headstone, leaned down and dropped a kiss to it. She ran an affectionate hand over the right curved edge, as if she were tracing the edges of her sister's face… collected Teddy, embraced her nephew and Disapparated from the gravesite.

Astoria stepped up to the tombstone next, bowed her head, and turned back to her husband. She reached an arm halfway out, as in offering support, but quickly withdrew and vanished next.

Theo and Blaise stepped up, flanking their friend, linking arms around and squeezing the Malfoy heir's shoulders. The storm began to calm, settling back to a hard drizzle, and Draco stepped out from the grasp of the wizards. Blaise moved next, pressing his forehead to the tombstone. He stood up and squeezed Draco's arm before Disapparating. Theo stepped to the edge of the tent, stooped down and fist a clump of earth. He tossed it on the mound and blew a kiss to the headstone before he too vanished.

An instant later, Draco crashed to his knees, scraping them over dirt until he knelt only breath away from the tombstone. His shoulders quaked, and he buried his face into his hands. Until, all his strength gave and he sank into the large carved stone. As if wishing, by some miracle, his mother would materialize and embrace her son one last time.

Hermione stepped one foot forward. And then again. Pulling back her hood, allowing the cold rain to mingle with her hot tears. She pressed her lips together in a tight line, her breaths sharp and shallow through her nose.

She withdrew her wand from her rain jacket and raised it high. Straining to hold her arm steady, she released a long breath, and then breathed in, holding it.

Exhaling slowly, she pulled her wand down in a straight line, as far as her arm could reach. A single hibiscus appeared in the dry air above the tombstone. She raised her other arm as she allowed the bloom to make an unhurried and deliberate descent to the wizard's head.

Draco's head snapped up as soon as the stem skimmed the fringes of his hair.

Gulping once more, before she could lose her nerve, Hermione swooped her wand, as if tying a knot in the air. And smiled as a ribbon appeared around the flower in Draco's hands.

The wizard scrambled to his feet…

Hermione squeezed her eyes tight…

And immediately transported herself to the Apparation point outside her office building. She sprinted to the building door, holding her breath as she ran.
She ran still after crossing the threshold, not stopping until she stood under the sign reading ‘Scamander's Beastly Incorporation’. She slipped through the unlocked door and walked through the foyer, passing her office, and knocked on Rolf’s door.

"Come in," a friendly tenor voice answered from within.

Hermione twisted the knob. "Hello, Rolf." She offered a weak smile.

"Merlin's beard!" Rolf's pudgy face elongated in shock as he jumped to his feet. "What's happened? Hermione, you're soaked!"

"It seems I am." Hermione glanced back at the trail of water leading from the foyer. "And, I've left a water trail, too," she murmured, turning back to the wizard. "Sorry, Rolf. Really careless of me…"

"Well, that's quite alright, but are you well?"

A strangled sort of half chuckle tore from Hermione's throat. "I'm, well…The thing is, I've just left a funeral, and conjured something simple for the gravesite. But I need some wood from the storeroom to make a wreath for the family."

Rolf nodded, green eyes softening. "Of course. Anything you need, Hermione."

"Thank you. Would Tilly mind getting out in the rain to deliver it once I've finished?" She cast a wary glance at the large brown owl dozing at the edge of Rolf's desk.

The wizard dismissed her concern with a wave. "No matter. I'll leave out an extra treat or two for her before going home tonight."

"Okay. Right then." Hermione forced a tight smile. "Oh, and no worries, I'm going to the appropriate offices to pay my October bills and will head straight back to Perth from there."

"There's no need to hurry if you need to spend some time here."

"Thank you, Rolf." She was a parrot…A sodden, blubbering parrot. Unbidden tears sprang to eyes again and she shook her head. "But it's not my place," she whispered, as if to remind herself. She closed the door and cast a quick drying charm over herself and the office floor. She turned on her heel, so that she now faced the back wall, and the storeroom door. She opened it, stepped up to the threshold, and lifted her wand.

"Accio hawthorn!"

A long branch flew into her waiting hand. She stood there examining the sample and then walked back to her office without a word, deciding the sample branch would suffice for her needs. She slipped through the door of her office and stepped up to her desk.

In no time at all, she had elongated and braided the wood, softening and bending it until the tips met and a circle had formed on her desk. She conjured flowers next—baby's breath, purple hyacinth and tea roses, and began weaving them into the braided wood. She forced deep, steadying breaths in her nose and out her mouth; focusing on her intended messages.

Hibiscus at the graveside, a gift for the deceased witch. *Delicate beauty*. Because that's as she had seemed to Hermione the few times she accepted invitations to tea, even the very last month. Perhaps *especially* then.

Hawthorn wood to acknowledge the duality of the situation. Narcissa was free from suffering; even
so, she had been deeply loved. And she would be missed.


As a final touch, she slipped in a rose bud of woven black, silver and green silk ribbon and cast a stasis charm over the wreath.

She gave her creation one final scrutinizing review before padding across the hall to Rolf's office. Smiling at his praise, she gave the wreath to his large brown owl, instructing it to deliver it to Mr. Draco Malfoy, wherever he may be.

The owl stared out her owner's window, blinking as the steady rain continued to fall, and looked back at Hermione. With an angry ruffle of her feathers and two harsh flaps to further communicate her displeasure, she fluttered up, snatched the wreath and flew out the now open window.

Unfathomable weight pressed down on Hermione's chest as the owl flew into the rain. Impossible, inescapable, and unbearable. She loathed that it would never be her place to deliver such comfort in person.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Just so you know, I'm nervous uploading this, because I kinda sorta love this chapter.

Alpha love to Kyonomiko. Adoration to CourtingInsanity. All mistakes are mine.

I own nothing.

27 December, 1999

Granger,

Sincere apologies again for the lack of correspondence since the end of the school year. Though my lack of participation in the general holiday merriment may lead you to believe otherwise, it really was good seeing you at Theo's Christmas party the other night. I blame Sir Ogden that I don't remember much about the time of your departure, but I hope I was coherent enough to remind you of what you agreed to back in June: no rooftops. Never again.

I hope it was a happy Christmas.

DM

P.S. Per your inquiry, I have been informed the wedding date is set for 24 June, 2000.

2 January, 2000

Malfroy,

I apologize for the delay in returning your owl to you, but she seemed rather tired from her journey to find me. I've let her go on several hunts while she's been staying with me, and she seemed to enjoy the owl treats I found for her here in Perth.

Per your inquiry, no rooftops this year. I made an appointment to have my teeth cleaned instead.

Thank you for the wedding information, I shall try to plan accordingly.

Happiest of New Year's to you, Malfroy.

HG

22 March, 2000
Granger,

Two sightings already and it's only been since December; Scamander taking it easy on you finally? Surprised you could make the time for such ridiculousness in the midst of all that work and travel.

All that aside, I've been put in charge of keeping up with my own guest-list, and it seems you fail to understand how a RSVP works. You are to mark 'Yes' or 'No', not write in a third option of 'Maybe', attaching a long note explaining all that may or may not be keeping you from the event, and that you really don't have to eat anything at all, so no need to worry about fixing enough food. We went to school together for seven years, and believe me when I say there will be plenty of food for you, should you be able to come. I hope you do.

DM

P.S. Is this Middle Earth somewhere in America where the dragon conference will be? And I don't believe I'm familiar with 'hobbits'. I've already done some searching in the archives here, and even asked Madam Pince, but she only looked at me as if I suddenly sprouted wings. Perhaps you can enlighten me?

23 March, 2000

Malfoy,

Godric, I'm so sorry. I'm afraid I was rather sleep deprived at the time I answered your RSVP. Apparently, I also sent Harry some letter about the wonders of Muggle eye surgery so he won't have to wear glasses anymore, and Andromeda a long list of information I'd found about teething and toilet training in Muggle books (she's politely informed me that she'll wait until Teddy's a little older before asking me to babysit for her again).

To address your Middle Earth question, it's actually from a fictional series, but that specific book is The Hobbit. The author is J.R.R. Tolkien. And if you'd told Madam Pince you'd heard of hobbits from me, I'm sure she would have done a great deal more than look at you funny.

I enjoyed hearing about all your adventures in the archives in January, and was most disappointed we couldn't continue the conversation at The Three Broomsticks last month.

Again, I really will try my best to be there in June.

HG

Saturday, 24 June, 2000

Married.

A dozen or more exchanged letters since she'd received that godawful RSVP, and Draco Malfoy was now married.

Miss Astoria Greengrass became Mrs. Astoria Malfoy in a ceremony that had been all of fifteen minutes, under a tasteful white tent set up on the luscious grounds of a Greengrass family estate. The
tent was draped with fragrant chains of pink, red and white roses, and no doubt cloaked with several layers of magic to keep summer bugs away, maintain an adequate temperature within, and refill alcoholic beverage glasses once drained.

Hermione sat at an empty table in a corner, giving her near-empty wine glass contemplative swirls. Blissfully hidden behind dancing guests who were lost to their own world of music, laughter and fine wine.

The ceremony had been a solemn but quick affair.

From where Hermione sat, Draco's focus appeared to have been on the front row of chairs, where Narcissa Malfoy sat in a plush, lavish chair. The stunning, yet not so very blushing bride in a white Muggle wedding dress, raven locks twisted and piled high, walked down an aisle of flower petals (likely charmed to stick to the grass, as not a single petal shifted as Astoria's dress trailed behind).

The bride and groom were stiff and formal as they repeated their wedding vows (very reminiscent of traditional Muggle ceremonies, in Hermione's opinion), dropped hands the instant the last pledge had been echoed, and exchanged a the briefest and coldest of first kisses as man and wife.

The reception had been going on for hours.

Blaise had long since disappeared with Ginny. Theo had spent much of the afternoon switching between witches Hermione guessed to be Astoria and Daphne's cousins. Harry and Ron had been invited, but they both volunteered a Saturday shift ("for the money!") and couldn't come. Neville and Hannah had been dancing the afternoon away, high on love and an upcoming one year anniversary. Andromeda had left with Hermione's main dance partner, an energetic toddler, forty-five minutes ago for said dance partner's nap.

Hermione hadn't been overly concerned with spotting the bride and groom in the sea of dancers. She'd stood in line to congratulate the couple with all the other guests at the beginning on the reception, being careful to not allow a single muscle in her face to twitch out of place seeing Draco up close, impeccable and dazzling in formal dark robes. Astoria was charm and class as she pressed her cheek to Hermione's and oozed gratitude over Hermione's thoughtful wedding present.

She looked back down to her drink, watching as the liquid danced and skimmed up the glass. It was almost hypnotic and maybe if she finished off this second glass, she could swirl her third glass so that a funnel would form, and she could shrink herself and take a tumble down into the funnel. Maybe—

"Planning on finishing that glass, Granger, or will you just keep making circles with it the rest of the reception?"

Hermione blinked up, startled and surprised as Draco Malfoy slipped into an empty chair next to her. "Pardon?"

Draco smirked, lacing his fingers together over the white linen tablecloth that likely cost more than the whole of Hermione's outfit. "When I left half an hour ago to escort Mother to her new quarters, you were sitting there with that glass filled to roughly that same point. Which means you've finished the previous glass and have nearly downed this one, which would mean you didn't properly savour the surprisingly bold flavours in this sweet white concoction that Daphne raved about until Astoria caved in."

He stabbed a finger over the foot of Hermione's wine glass, drawing her attention completely from the mesmerising eddying liquid. "Or," he drew out the syllable in a way that was reminiscent of an all-knowing toddler, brow arching as he leaned in. "You're sitting here lost in thought, because, swot
that you are, you're probably thinking of all the information you're likely missing out on at the dragon conference, and will never, *ever*, learn again."

Hermione chortled and made a face, which only seemed to serve as fuel for Draco. He slid the glass out of her loose hold, straightened upright in the chair and took hold of his strong, perfectly angled chin.

"Let's see, you said Headmistress McGonagall was all too happy to allow Hagrid the time to attend this dragon conference in America with yourself and Scamander, but, I would surmise if he takes any notes at all, they'll be far too indiscriminate to your approval. Probably even a little hard to read at times—"

Her brow furrowed and she opened her mouth to protest, but he spoke again quickly, cutting her off.

"Wait, I'm not besmirching the beloved Grounds Keeper and Professor you hold in such esteem," he clarified, returning his finger to the glass, adding two more to the crystalline foot, resuming a slow swirl, having a strangely soothing effect. "He's been more than kind and helpful if I've needed it this past year I've spent on staff. I'm merely pointing out that, enthusiastic to assist you as he may have been, his efforts would fall short of your standards."

Hermione snatched her attention from the glass, centring it back to the wizard bearing a smug grin.

"Wouldn't they, Granger?"

She huffed, but it was all for show, which he knew, as that smug smile broadened. "Rolf's notes will suffice for a day," she countered, ignoring the indignant quip she'd have rather given, because Hagrid's notes, putting it delicately, were on the sparse side, with varying degrees of legibility.

"But," Draco ventured, "Even they will still be lacking the quintessential Hermione Granger side margin questions and reminders for later." The beautiful sod had the audacity to give a cheeky wink that had Hermione torn between crying or puddling on the spot.

"Oh well," she breathed, giving a slight shrug, and Merlin only knew how she managed to string those two words together. Needing *something* to do while her brain was still trying to remember what they were talking about in the first place, she wrapped two fingers around the stem, sliding the glass back to her. "If I remember what your original question was, I'm just a bit tired. Time zone changes and then Teddy was very energetic. And enthusiastic, I don't think his hair has become my brown mane yet, but he pulled it off very well."

Draco chuckled, and *Godric*, had February really been so long ago? Would seeing him always be this blissful agony?

"I think Aunt Andromeda was more than happy to share him with someone else for a while. He's become quite the handful now that he's mobile. I asked if I could give him a broomstick for his birthday and got a very resounding 'no' from Mother, Aunt Andromeda, and the Healer on duty that day." His face suddenly fell as pain seeped into his expression, having a strangely numbing effect on the throbbing in her chest.

"How is your mother?" she prompted. "I should have been asking in my letters, and I'm...I'm so sorry I haven't been."

He waited, tilting his head, and shifting in his seat. "I don't know, I really don't." He folded his fingers together again, meeting her eyes with a look of utter sincerity. "And you don't need to apologize. In fairness, we kept the letters light, and I never asked about work."
She allowed a brief chuckle as he paused, seeming to search for appropriate words.

"The truth is," he finally ventured. "I know that Aunt Andromeda and Teddy need this transition. The Healers get in the way with their routine. Teddy needs the freedom and space around the house, and I think she's been missing me while I've lived at Hogwarts for another year. Aunt Andromeda says she ate better the weekends I would stay with them, and most of May till the end of the school year, the Headmistress granted me permission to use Floo from her office every night to have supper with Mother."

"Oh, Draco—" She snapped her mouth closed, pursing her lips.

His eyes widened, and he couldn't seem to contrive a response. She hadn't addressed him by his first name since—

"Hermione! Draco!"

Theo appeared quite seemingly from nowhere, clapping Draco soundly on the back before dragging a chair out between them to form a triangle and summoning three new glasses of wine, passing them out. "A toast, children!" He grinned broadly, darting his eyes between the witch and wizard. "To new beginnings!" He focused on Draco. "To the end of Hogwarts forever for you and the start of your apprenticeship with Ollivander, even if I still think he's a MONEY LOVING OLD SOD!"

Theo yelled into the crowd.

Hermione hissed at him as Draco groaned, but rolled his eyes, keeping his glass raised.

"And for Granger?" He blinked, arching a pale brow in expectation.

Theo faced Hermione, nodding and raising his glass again. "And to Hermione now promoted to taking solo assignments after a year of following in Scamander's shadow."

"Here, here," Draco chimed.

Hermione permitted a humble grin at Draco's affirmation, but there was absolutely nothing she could do to stop the heated flush in her cheeks. "And what about to you, Theo?"

Theo's sandy-blond brows waggling as he tossed Draco a *knowing* look. "A gentleman doesn't really kiss-and-tell, Miss Granger—"

"Never stopped you before," Draco muttered, sharing a glance with Hermione.

"Nevertheless!" Theo exclaimed, snapping the fingers of his free hand, commanding their attention. "To the best snog I've had since Tracey Davis—"

"That doesn't count," Draco objected, smirking over at Hermione. "We were brewing batch supplies of Polyjuice Potion sixth year, and the witch gave him a full-on snog in the middle of the common room while he was Blaise in a test run."

Hermione chortled so that her glass wavered in her hand. Theo glared at his friend.

"It counts, mate," he groused. "But here's to wherever the night leads, my friends!" He waved his wine glass with an exaggerated flourish, taking a long sip, while Hermione and Draco sampled their drinks with prim sips.

Eyes bright, Theo passed his drink to Draco, who quirked his brows in return. Hermione stifled a giggle as Theo rose, mussed up Draco's pristine hair ("THEO, YOU TWAT!"), and waltzed back to
the dance floor. "Dance, children!" And with a wink, he disappeared into the crowd.

Draco slammed his drink on the table, grumbling as he carded his hands through his hair, working furiously to smooth his perfect locks. It was all so ridiculous and comical and…Draco.

Hermione bit her lip so as not to irritate him further by outright laughing, and carefully lay her glass on the table.

"Did I fix it?" Draco asked, staring right at her with a look of poised uncertainty. Theo must have dug hard, because one lone tuff stood straight up.

"C'mere," she breathed, rising from her chair, floating a hand up to his face. She pursed her lips into a contemplative line, unable to breathe as he leaned down.

Fine and feather light. Gods. She wanted to do infinitely more than smooth down this stray lock.

She could actually sink her fingers down into these silken threads...Cup his cheek with her other hand and trace the smooth edges of his jawline all the way up to his ear. Repeat until both hands met and laced together at the nape of his neck.

"Alright now, Granger?"

She blinked and withdrew, clearing her throat. "You'll do," she supplied, not trusting herself with anything more complimentary.

Oh, how that smile he flashed shot straight through her.

"I'd better go look for Mr. Ollivander and see if any of Theo's toast reached his ears." He proffered his arm, face falling suddenly, formality replacing familiarity. "May I escort you to a partner or a table with some company?"

"No, thank you, though." Hermione smoothed her skirt, sinking back into the less than comfortable chair, inching her hand back to her original glass. "Still haven't decided if I'm going to finish this or not."

He nodded and was lost to the crowd, but not before she caught the faintest upturn to corners of his lips.

Gone.

A dull weight sank in Hermione's chest, where it had not so very long ago soared with dragons, hipogriffs, griffins, and fairies. When two, no three, fingers skimmed through his hair.

But now he was gone. For his honeymoon.

The wedding guests were happily (drunkenly) chattering and laughing, preparing to disperse.

Hermione swallowed the welling lump of anguish in her throat, entirely ready for home. A long and solacing stream of hot water under her shower head, the consoling warmth of her sheets and duvet, and the numbing effect of a combined sleeping draught and Dreamless sleep potion.

She searched through the crowd, only to end up fruitless in her efforts. Theo must have already left with the 'best snog since Tracey Davis.'

Ah well.
She stepped lightly along the edges of the tent, flashing tight smiles at the foolish strangers who thought she wanted to mingle. Almost to the end of the tent, near her freedom—

"There you are, Hermione!"

Theo's hand snagged her arm from behind playfully tugging her back from her escape. There was an easy grin on his face, contrasting the growing frown on the voluptuous witch leaning into him from behind, lacing their fingers together. "We're meeting up with Ginny and Blaise for an afters pub crawl in Muggle London, c'mon!"

A side glance at the witch pressing deeper into his back said Hermione was most definitely not part of this witch's night plans. Not that it mattered.

Hermione allowed her lips to quirk up slightly as she shook her head. "Thanks, but I'm tired Theo, and I've a portkey back to that dragon conference in America tomorrow. I'm just going to head on."

She raised her arm out of his grasp, squeezing his free hand. "I'll see you in a few weeks." She sidestepped managing a friendly face Theo's after's date and soon-to-be bed-warmer.

She bent over, snatching at the bottom of her floor-length skirt, marching steadily to her freedom—

"HERMIONE! Wait!"

She stifled a groan as her eyes closed in irritation. None of this was Theo's fault after all.

He caught up to her in no problem, stepping in front of her, blocking her path to the Apparition point. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just tired." Liar. "Teddy danced me out, and I've been up late with the conferences, that's all…"

She looked beyond him, catching a glimpse of the vivid oranges and blues of sunset, trying to cut this short.

"No, it isn't." He stepped closer, gaze searching and fixed, relentless to capture her attention. "You keep doing this…this silence and disappearing—"

"I'm busy, Theo. Lots of travelling and adjusting to time zones. We've been over this before." She winced at the flicker of hurt in her friend's eye and softened her tone. "I wouldn't be any fun tonight. Please just let me go home, and you can get back to the best snog since sixth year."

"She can hang for all I care," he declared, taking hold of her arms just under her shoulders, effectively eliminating any wild ideas of sprinting to the Apparition point and setting up wards to block him from following. "You're my friend. And you have to stop justing things with me. It isn't just traveling because you're not like this when it's just you and I, and I've seen you just after spending time with Potter…"

He trailed off, eyes blown wide, understanding as bright as the sunset dawning across this face. "Hermione…" His grip on her arm tightened, and Merlin, she wanted to vanish. Now. "Hermione, it's not—"

"You're Nott," she mumbled, ducking her head at the obvious deflection.

Theo growled in the back of his throat, tucking his hand under her chin, gently lifting her face, forcing her to meet his serious brown eyes. "Hermione." He didn't say anything else. He didn't have to.

Her chest heaved and she pulled her head back slowly, slipping behind the mask of a crooked half
grin, and a dark, watery chuckle. "So, who wins? I'm sure you and Blaise have a bet going."

"Shit, woman." His voice cracked and anything she could have said for a response dissolved like a cloud as he moved in, wrapping his arms around her. "Shit, shit, shit." He rubbed large, rhythmic circles under her hair, across her back, a valiant endeavour to ease the burden of her secret.

"When?"

Hermione considered his question, lifting her cheek from his chest. It was fair if she'd joked first about a bet. "Hogwarts," was the answer she decided on.

Theo withdrew his arms, offering her a soft conspiring smile. "Then that's fifty galleons from Blaise I'll never collect on," he sighed heavily, shoving his hands into his pocket. "So, did something happen, or...?" He squirmed under her hard glare. "Just one of those things because he's Draco, and you're you, and in some fated way, it was bound to happen?"

She made an effort to make a disgruntled face. "Godric, nothing happened. The latter then, which is ridiculous logic."

"Well, I obviously don't believe that evasive fabrication for an instant." He folded his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes. "There was nothing out of the ordinary before N.E.W.T.'s, Draco kept leaving with Narcissa's appointments to St. Mungo's, and then N.E.W.T.'s, and then you strangely not riding on Hogwarts Express with us the last..."

Hermione shifted, hurriedly side-stepping to make a break for that perfect patch of grass...

"YOU weren't on the Hogwarts Express with us that last day," he accused, mirroring her movement, obviously ignoring her frustrated (read: desperate) groan. "You gave Blaise and I some troll about Floo'ing directly to the Leaky Cauldron to accept Scamander's job offer that morning, but—" he drew out that last word, jabbing a finger at her, lengthening his last point for emphasis. "You weren't at the party in the common room the night before. Draco conveniently disappeared early on in the party, and didn't come back to the rooms until well past midnight."

Huffing, Hermione swiped at his finger and skirted around him, well-over this conversation. "You will also remember I came back to the room well before midnight and went to bed immediately."

"Nothing happened, Theo. I had a book. I wanted to read alone. He found me, we talked and I read some from said book." She blinked several times before looking back to her friend. "End of story."

He looked as she felt, not believing her condensed explanation for a moment, but knew her well enough not to argue. Not over this. His expression turned as he seemed to ruminate over what to say next.

"I suppose it all looks very nasty right now," he started, stepping up and tapping her forehead. "But don't let it stay that way. Things aren't always as they seem." She opened her mouth to inquire, but he nudged her in the direction she been so desperate to flee moments before. "Go on home, love. I'll see you in a few weeks."

Hermione swallowed, casting a wistful glance back at the stupid, rose-swathed tent. Frowning, she squinted, skimming the entrance. "I think your companion for afters decided you weren't her best snog."

Theo shrugged, winking. "Between you and me, Tracey was still the best."
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Deepest alpha gratitude to Kyonomiko. Beta love forever to CourtingInsanity. All errors are mine.

I own nothing.

Saturday, 20 April, 2002

Hermione was running late by her standards, meaning she was still three minutes early; however, given that it was Percy who had extended the dinner invitation, he was likely already waiting outside the barrier of the Burrow's wards to walk through with her; it seemed the sort of chivalrous thing he would do.

In defence of her timing, Percy hadn't fumbled into her office and inquired about her dinner plans until roughly an hour earlier. He seemed to flush brightly when she accepted, only to leave with a look almost akin to disappointment, rubbing the back of his neck. But, there was no time to stew if something was amiss. She rushed to an organised end of her revisions for the day and dashed out of the office to the Apparition point. Landing in her bedroom, she scrambled to exchange a large faded jacket for a nicer blouse and redid her braid.

The forty minutes following were spent in search of an appropriate wine to offer her hostess for the evening. Too expensive and she'd be teased about becoming too posh. Too fruity and there'd be some offending comment about not able to handle 'real alcohol.' But then again, would it be the entire Weasley clan, or a simple dinner of the parents and Percy?

In the end, she selected a cabernet sauvignon, knowing at the very least that Molly and Arthur would enjoy it with a shepherd's pie at a later date. Wine purchased, she left the store, and held fast to the bottle and her wand. The world around her pressed and spun…

"Good evening, Hermione."

"Percy." She smiled, eyes shifting over the tall grassy fringe of the Burrow. "Sorry if I kept you waiting, I couldn't decide on a wine."

He shook his head. "Right on time, which is still early for this household. Terribly informal lot, you know."

"Suits me well enough after the day it's been," she answered, opting to ignore the sardonic undertone.

"I appreciate your invitation to dinner. I've been meaning to drop in and see your parents and everyone, just haven't made the time to yet…that sounds awful, doesn't it?"

"Not in the least." Percy's voice was unmistakably strained and his cheeks twitched as he worked to smile. "Mum was thrilled when I owl'd we were coming." He hesitated, and said, softer, "It's been several weeks since coming here myself."
Hermione cast him a sideways look as they walked side-by-side through tall gold and green grass, passed through the tingling magical barrier, up the trimmed grass surrounding the pathway leading to the front door—

Which blew open before Percy and Hermione even made it to the porch. Molly Weasley shot out the door, engulfing Hermione in one of her consuming, insistent, and unrelenting hugs.

Hermione shifted awkwardly, still holding the bottle of wine and her wand. "Good to see you too, Molly," she said, though it sounded muffled in her own ears.

And the Weasley matriarch may not have even heard, as she had already begun to bemoan over how thin and fragile Hermione was in her arms. Molly yanked Hermione back, cupped her face in a firm hold, and commented on her freckles and skin kissed cheeks—Hermione caught Percy's eye from the side...

...Whose face bore a forced and tight smile as he shook Arthur's hand.

"Well, I'm here now, and you can feed me to your heart's content," Hermione chortled, proffering the wine.

"Oh, thank you, dear—let's get inside. C'mon, c'mon—hello, Percy." Molly paused from her exaggerated ushering to place a strained peck on her son's cheek. "So happy to see you, too. What a lovely surprise for the evening."

Hermione accepted a side hug from Arthur before crossing the threshold into the home. She paused to breathe in deeply. The Burrow never changed. It would never mean to her what it meant to Harry, but it was the safe haven of many special memories. And it always smelled of comfort, warmth, and something rich and flavourful.

"Smells delicious. D'you need help with anything while we're waiting on everyone?"

The matriarch shook her head. "It's just the four of us tonight, but at any rate, you're company. Let's enjoy the sitting room while we let this wine breathe—it'll go perfect with our shepherd's pie." Molly levitated the bottle to the set kitchen table, uncorked it and poured into four glasses. "Now, you'll have to tell us all about everything in Australia while we wait."

Arthur chuckled, sinking into an armchair that had seen many better days, while Molly waltzed to take the seat beside him. Percy sat on the sofa, stiff and quiet. Hermione felt very much as walking on eggshells, slipping over and taking a cushion next to Percy on the sofa.

"Not very much excitement to report, unless you're just desperate to know all about ashwinders—"

"How are your parents?" Arthur cut in. "Anymore biting children to deal with?"

His warm humour spread, coaxing an easy smile across Hermione's face. "Not lately, thankfully. Monica and Wendell remain healthy, active and very happy."

"Excellent," Arthur said, blue eyes twinkling. "Very excellent, indeed."

Molly cleared her throat, loud and exaggerated, expression narrowing in displeasure. "But, you've been away so long. I just didn't expect such extended trips when you told us about working with Scamander—we've missed you, haven't we dear?"

"Yes, yes, very much."
Hermione bit back a laugh as she caught Arthur give his wife's arm a reassuring pat, mouthing something that looked very much like *Mollywobbles.* "But, it really hasn't been too long, Molly," she protested. "Barely more than half a year, the time went by so quickly. And you've hosted *two* weddings this year—"

"—*Another* complaint I have with you, Hermione Granger." Molly raised a lecturing finger, jabbing at the air. "You missed Ronald's wedding in January —when you told Ginny and me that you would do all within your power to make it back."

Hermione sighed, growing tired of justifying herself when neither the bride nor the groom were affronted. "It just couldn't be helped that time. I sent an apology to Ron along with their wedding present, and Ginny sent me some lovely photos of the day. Ron's written that they're already expecting."

"Twins!" Arthur beamed, taking the metaphorical bait. "Can you believe it? We're s—"

"—Do *not* interrupt, Arthur," Molly cut in, a look of hurt becoming more and more evident on her face. "Hermione, you know you mean as much as family, my dear—" Percy shifted on the sofa, as his mother continued "—and Ginny's off with away games so very often—"

"—She's usually back in her flat every night, sleeping soundly and safely."

"And, she tells me all the Weasley family news from Sunday dinners when we owl," Hermine added to Arthur's pacifying interjection.

To no avail; it seemed Molly was a brewing storm refusing to be appeased, angled directly at the couch. "Charlie still keeps mostly to Romania—"

"—But, that's nothing new, Mum," Percy injected, sounding uncertain if he should even speak at all.

"I just want to keep everyone close, knowing they're safe and out of mischief!" Molly's voice had risen to a shrill volume by this point. "And *together*—I can't understand why you young people can just stay together these days." She lunged for husband's hand, squeezing tight, ignoring or not noticing when he winced. "Arthur and I have been together since Hogwarts, and we've been more than happy, right, darling?"

"Quite so, dear." Arthur wriggled his fingers in her grip.

Hermione bit back a laugh; it was almost comedic aboard the *SS Ridiculous* in the Weasley living room, until Molly lead the conversation to unexpected and long since dealt with territory: "There was you and Ron splitting up first, without giving anything a real go," Molly bemoaned, "Then, there was Ginny and Harry—"

Irritation rolled over her in great waves. "But that was nearly *four* years ago, now," Hermione interjected, in a voice much sharper than she intended. "And you completely adore Blaise."

"Yes, but since they've no plans of a wedding, I've really no idea if this is permanent or if I should just detach myself altogether." Molly's flashing eyes landed on Percy, and given the way the wizard squirmed, she was obviously no longer talking about her daughter. "No warning. None! No explanation at all. Lovely Penelope suddenly vanishes from family gatherings, and you offered up nothing until a specific inquiry was made and it was rather vague at that! And now you've even stopped coming by nearly as often, Percy! It'll be weeks or a month between your visits."

The wizard gave a heavy sigh. "I've said work keeps me busy. Lots to do for Mr. Greengrass and his company, Mum." From the slump in his shoulders, he seemed quite exhausted and they hadn't even
"And that's another point!" Molly burst, waving her hand between Hermione and Percy. "I can never understand why you left the Ministry, Percy. You had such a promising career there. And, Hermione, you could have selected any department, especially after finishing your N.E.W.T.'s. I can't understand how it is that Ronald is the only child to follow in Arthur's respectable footsteps. I just—"

Hermione had heard enough. She rose from her seat with every ounce of poise she possessed, and in two large steps, she was in front of the middle-aged witch, leaning down. She silenced the Weasley matriarch with a gentle kiss to her soft, freckled cheek. "Oh, Molly." She sank to her knees, coaxing Molly's hands from Arthur's, and grasping tight. "You've so many talented children, and they're all in jobs and careers they love. There's already a darling granddaughter, who gets along marvellously with Teddy. You've had two weddings at your home just this year—so much to be thankful for." Hermione brushed her thumb along one of Molly's knuckles. "You can't imagine how grateful I am that you've thought to take special care of me and be so inclusive all these years, but I needed this time in Australia. I really did. Do you think you can forgive me for not writing often enough?"

"Oh my dear…” Large tears fell from the witch's eyes as she spluttered. "Oh, my, yes. Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm…I'm so terribly sorry." She pulled her hands back, furiously swiping at her red eyes.

"Think no more of it," Hermione stood, laying a gentle hand on the woman's shoulder. "Percy invited me to have a wonderful time with you all this evening, so perhaps we could sit at the table, tuck in, and you can tell me all about your ideas for the nursery at Ron and Elaina's house."

Molly released a watery chuckle as Arthur stood and offered his hand to back to Molly. He cast a silent 'thank you' over to Hermione, and interlaced his fingers through his wife's as they led the way to the kitchen table. Hermione and Percy followed somewhat awkwardly and uncertain of what to expect next in that emotional wake.

The duration of the dinner that followed was, simply put, a cocktail of confusion. Molly smiled far too wide she forged ahead with great alacrity, sharing anything she reckoned remotely newsworthy. Arthur would smile and nod, catch his wife's fingers for quick kisses and squeezes throughout the meal, and interject comments, all before trying very hard to steer the conversation to differences in Muggle artefacts in Britain and Australia, making special effort to inquire if Hermione had dared to go riding on a swerveboard...

Percy remained tense the whole of dinner. He never volunteered information, only answering when asked to expound upon a subject, keeping his answers brief and direct. Hermione caught him casting side glances at her a time or two, but he never maintained eye contact for long.

When they had all eaten the very last bite of pudding, and Hermione had thanked Molly for a wonderful meal, declaring she couldn't eat another bite, Percy wasted no time in offering to see Hermione home…

"No need to trouble yourself, Percy." Hermione shook her head, curls swishing about her face. She brushed several back behind her ear and smiled. "It's been a long week for you and it's only a simple Apparition trip."

"Oh, do let him, Hermione," Molly entreated. "He could take you for an ice cream or anything else—you're probably the prettiest face he's been around since Penelope."

Percy's fists clenched, eyes falling shut, and his mouth twitched—as if counting from 'one' to 'ten' in his head. Hermione acquiesced, if only to appease any unforeseen awkwardness she may have
caused. They said their goodbyes, made promises to come again soon, and walked quietly to the edge of the tall grasses.

"Well, shall I escort the lady home?" Percy proffered his elbow for side-along Apparition, disappointment coating every word.

"Actually, do you trust me?"

Percy canted his head. "Yes?"

Hermione smiled softly, taking a firm, but gentle hold of the crook of his arm…

And sent them spiralling through the magical funnel, landing them at an intersection along her walking route. She withdrew her hand, and kept the distance between them companionable.

"We're about a twenty-minute walk from my flat, depending on how fast or slow we take it."

A half-smile toyed with Percy's mouth. "Lead on, then."

Silence reigned for what seemed to be an enormous amount of time, making Hermione self-conscious and more tongue-tied with every step, every breath. What exactly to say?

The former-Gryffindor beat her to it. He exhaled loudly and rubbed the back of his neck. "This wasn't exactly what I had envisioned when I invited you to dinner."

"I see that now…" Hermione breathed out an equally long breath. "I'm sorry to have jumped to conclusions and assumed you meant a Weasley family dinner." She paused right on the sidewalk to look right at him. "You should've told me."

"You were all too eager to attend see my parents," he shrugged, offering a wry smile as his eyebrows gleamed golden in the lamplight. "Who was I to squelch such excitement?"

The witch caught herself from snorting and resumed their previous pace. "All the same, I'm sorry to have put you on the spot like that."

"It wasn't you. And you didn't mean for that to happen, either." He bumped her shoulder with his arm. "Not exactly what you expected either, I take it."

"It's been years since she was so clingy. When did all this start up again?"

Percy shrugged. "It seems I mishandled things with her after Penelope and I broke up. Mother felt very hurt that I didn't say anything about it immediately after the fact, and never gave her many details. And then, I think some of it has to do with Ron and Harry getting married and moving on in life this year. Weddings bring back other unpleasant memories, and change has been harder for her to cope with."

Hermione chewed the inside of her lip a moment, considering. "You were with Penelope for quite a while, giving her time to grow fond of her. I'm sure she still feels the sting of loss. And, the same for you."

"Well, of course it stings," he started, his voice low and serious, as when admitting secrets of the heart. "We were…we knew each other, we were companionable, I thought we'd just breached a certain point in the relationship. And then, things start falling apart."

Even in the dim lights, Hermione could see wisps of sadness cloud his eyes. His mouth twitched and
he heaved a deep breath before continuing, almost reluctantly.

"She was volunteering all sorts of hours outside of work, and all sorts of work that anyone else could have done. We were arguing over little things all the time, but what was I supposed to do—run home to Mummy like some first year?" His lips curled into a snarl. "And perhaps while Mum and I gabbing on over a pot of tea, everyone else who runs in and out of the house can give their opinion, too. Tell me how to live my life and make my witch happy." He scoffed and raked his hands through his hair. His shoulders began to droop. "Penelope was the final string of things to just be…wrong. And so, that was that," he finished solemnly. Shadows layered over his face as they walked from lamppost to lamppost.

A wave of sympathy rolled over Hermione, and she swallowed a forming lump. "It's a heavy burden, not quite belonging. And no one quite understands, unless they've experienced it as well."

He cast her a sideways smile, not offering to contribute anything else to the conversation, though. Ah well, this is where chatty friends like Theo come in handy—the art of deflection and distraction. She cleared her throat. "Did you know I think I only got my job with Rolf because he was trying to make Luna Lovegood jealous at the time?"

"What?" Percy released a chuckle, in spite of himself it seemed.

"True story." Hermione nodded. "It was coming to the end of the year at Hogwarts, and I had started panicking a bit about a job, career choice, where to live, and the all that comes with leaving school. Ministry job offers and department job openings just weren't feeling like the right direction for me."

She felt the weight of his eyes, and she slowed their pace to keep from bumping into anything. "Luna was in Hogsmeade one weekend before the end of the school year—she and her father were actually there to have lunch with the Rolf Scamander, and Luna invited me to join them. Rolf wasn't entirely pleased to see me walking into The Three Broomsticks with her, but somewhere in the middle of three-and-a-half-hour-long conversation about anything and everything to do with Magizoology, he must have decided I could be of some use to him."

She giggled, memories flooding back to her. "He actually kept me very close to his side that first year, paid extra attention to me and my work, I think he was hoping I'd talk to Luna about how wonderful he was—which I did. But Harry was assigned to their house while Mr. Lovegood had some foreign dignitary staying with them for something about Nargle infestation of an entire village—"

Percy actually snorted at that, with the witch sniggering herself. "The rest was history," Hermione continued. "Rolf never really had a chance in that, but he's been a good boss."

"Always seems a nice fellow when we run into each other," said Percy. "I suppose one story of happenstance deserves another," he started, picking up the pace again. "Mr. Shacklebolt reinstated my clearances to work for the Ministry after the War, and I applied for the Wizengamot. Lots of filing, reorganising, reading up on court rulings and summarizing them for various members. Did a little bit of fiddling around in the shop with George for a while that first year, as well."

The wizard paused, inclining his head as if reliving a memory. "About a year later, I bumped into Mr. Greengrass while he was stumbling around trying to get some assistance. I actually ended up being the one to assist him with all his needs, and within a week he offered me a very well-paying job, starting off as being more akin to a personal aid, with the odd legal counsel here and there. And now, well…"

"Now you're indispensable," Hermione filled in, smiling over at him.
"I wouldn't go that far," he attempted, but Hermione could tell the beam in his voice.

"All the travel you get to do," she continued. "All the times you represent Mr. Greengrass and his company—I think that's very worthwhile. He trusts you to speak for him, which says a great deal to me. If nothing else, you've got great experience and a good reference if you ever decide to go back to the Ministry. You could probably return as a department head if you wanted."

"Really?" The surprise in his question was unmistakable.

Hermione shrugged. "If you'd like; but why change any time soon though, right?"

"Quite."

Silence fell over them again, and while not uncomfortable, it was enough that Hermione hadn't the strength to fight it this time. Percy cleared his throat several times, even looked as if he wanted to say something a few times more than that, but he never did. It was actually a relief when Hermione pointed out her building.

She lay a foot on the second step, hoping to not appear too eager… "Thank you for the dinner invitation. I'm sorry again for my confusion and assumption."

He gave a soft smile with a hint of underlying eagerness. "Well, perhaps we can try again some other time."

Her heart sank, and she swallowed hard. "We'll see," she said, attempting light and breezy. She swallowed again and forced a wide smile. "G'night, Percy."

She waltzed up the remained of the steps with all the dignity and poise she could muster, not pausing to look back once. She sank back into her armchair, groaning when she made it back to the safety of her flat. What an unfortunate sticky wicket this turned out to be! And no—

"Hermione!" a frantic voice called from her fireplace.

"Theo!" The witch jumped from her seat, sprinting to the face appearing in the flames of her fireplace. "What is it? What's happened?"

There was a deep frown splayed across her friend's face, worry lines etching his face, even through the green flames. "I need you to let me through, and may as well put on the coffee or kettle or something."

"Wha—"

"Please!" The flames hissed and crackled, adding to the urgency in his request. "Warrington was just found behind Ollivander's. Unconscious. Badly beaten."

His face disappeared for a moment, as if he'd been yanked away. Hermione couldn't move. Couldn't breathe…

A flaming outline returned—the contours of Blaise, this time, however. "Forget changing your wards and get your Brightest-Witch-of-the-Age arse over here now. The lover was beaten and dumped behind Ollivander's and Draco has been taken in for questioning."

Hermione would have thought her heart had just stopped, if not for the fact that she somehow managed to sprint to her fireplace and then it thundered like it had never done before as the world was ablaze in green fire and smoke.
Sunday, 21 April, 2002

Malfy,

Theo is quite put out you blocked your Floo and adjusted your Apparition wards. I can't say I blame you for wanting to be alone right now, though. Blaise just came back with take-out, and he and I will be here for several more hours. There's plenty of food and drink. We'll be discussing theories, but the topic of conversation is yours to decide if you come.

We just want to help.

HG

P.S. You know Theo won't let up until he gets through to you. Fair warning.

Hermione chewed on her quill a moment more before folding the letter into three sections and padding over to Theo's snowy owl. She sat in pensive silence as Theo and Blaise tucked quietly into their dishes, pulling long and slow sips of amber-coloured fluid from crystal tumblers.

Theo's owl returned some five minutes or so later. There was no reply.

Hermione shuffled her food around in its container, not in the least bit interested in taking a single bite, regardless of how delectable and expensive it all smelled. Her stomach grumbled in protest; it lurched and twisted when she speared something fresh and bright and contemplated putting it in her mouth.

She sighed and lay down her fork, sipping at her now-cold tea. An owl flew through the window, but she immediately recognised it as Harry's. The disappointment in the room was thick as she announced the owner of the majestic bird and shooed him away. Another dinner invitation she'd make time to decline later. He'd forgive her.

Theo tried to Floo call Draco again with no response. He tried again to Floo directly to Draco's study and then Apparate. He was blocked from both. He took up his seat on the sofa grumbling. Hermione caught something along the lines of 'sodding prick martyr' before tuning him out.

Her eyes drifted to a bookshelf on the other side of the room, and she allowed Theo and Blaise's voices to remain muffled and distant. Her mind dulled and tunneled as she started counting books. She had just counted to one hundred and twenty-seven when a majestic silver eagle flew into her vision and hovered until she held out her arm.
"Granger," Draco's voice spoke from the spectral bird's beak as it perched on her arm. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm in no state of mind for Theo's endless prattle or Blaise's superior drawl. Please eat my share of whatever expensive food Blaise purchased. Don't let these two twats keep you too late, I'm not worth losing sleep over. I'll talk to you soon. Good evening."

His patronus faded away from its perch and Hermione allowed her arm a slow descent back to her side, blinking over to the wizards across the coffee table. She took a shallow breath and laced her fingers together over her lap.

"Well then," Theo muttered. "I'll give him another hour to brood before trying again."

Hermione swallowed hard, looking back at the food she still had no intention of eating.

Solidarity and all that, of course.

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**Tuesday, 30 March, 1999**

"'Bravely bold Sir Robin rode forth from Camelot, He was not afraid to die, Oh brave Sir Rob—'"

"You're doing it again, Granger."

"Hmm?" Hermione blinked thrice, reorienting herself. She had been lost in editing her Charms essay, that incidentally was not due for another two weeks. And if she was doing something again, was she being irritating?

"You're humming," Malfoy reiterated. He didn't sound irritated; there actually seemed to be an underlying dash of humour in his tone.

Nevertheless, aware he'd heard her, she was now self conscious and didn't answer right away. She took her time in brushing a curtain of curls behind an ear before looking left to her study companion. Well. There had been two other in their study group this free block before DADA, but Nott and Zabini were no longer occupying their seats across the table.

A funny warmth bloomed in her chest. Where had they gone? How long had they been gone? Malfoy hadn't minded at all just...remaining? Working here with her...alone? Sitting next to her? It was enough for her heart to perform an irrational summersault.

"...maybe you were singing and it was too low for me to—"

"What—oh. I'm sorry." Hermione shook her head, lowering her quill to her parchment. "Lost in my own thoughts, but you said I was humming?"

"Well, you could have been singing," he clarified. "It's always too soft to determine if I could recognise the lyrics, though odds are I probably wouldn't. Wizarding Britain is lacking in musical variety, and try as they might, Thomas and Finnigan still haven't managed to get me very far in my education."

There was so much to ruminate over in those brief sentences, not least of which was the word 'always', but Hermione decided neutral territory was best—music and her Gryffindor friend's amazingly enough.

"It'd be quite the accomplishment if you had. Especially if Seamus has been in charge of your
Muggle music education. He knows something from every genre: folk songs, old religious hymns, popular culture boy bands, punk, rap, rock, classic rock." She giggled at the surprised arch of his brows. "It's a lot to explore, and I don't know how you've managed to have any fun between classes, N.E.W.T preparations and all the Healer appointments."

Malfoy released a light chuckle, something very tired lifting in his eyes. "All the same. You must know a lot about music yourself to list off so many genres."

"Not at all." Hermione offered a wry smile. "Just enough to realise I know but a small fraction of what's out there. What I mostly know is classical or songs from Muggle films, like what I was singing just now."

He shifted, angling towards her as an invitation to elaborate.

She swallowed the flutter in her belly. "Mum would sing songs from films while she edited research papers at home. We would watch those films together over and over. I suppose it's a habit I picked up for myself. It's funny you noticed it though, Ron always just thought I was muttering to myself. Harry caught the words once and sang along with me." She paused, catching her bottom lip in her teeth as she shrugged a shoulder. "I guess that just shows the quality of my voice if it always sounded like muttering all those years."

"Or Weasley wasn't listening hard enough."

Hermione's breath caught, the weight of his counter sank in. And she would have given anything to study his features, his face. To see if there was any hint, any indicator that he had meant something special - something more - in that. But he'd already gone back to his easy, elegant, meticulous rewriting of lecture notes. She had come to discover it was one of the ways he learned best: reviewing and rewriting his notes once to solidify everything, which freed him to focus on the practical application. He also worked best when it was mostly silent.

As it curiously was now…

"Have they been gone a while?" she asked, waving to the empty chairs across the table, stacks of tomes apparently abandoned.

Malfoy offered an affirming hum and lifted his face back to her. "Theo dragged Blaise off. Seems he’d forgotten to mention that Weaslette needed assistance with something, though..." His expression narrowed and honed in on the empty seats. "It seems odd that Theo should have to drag Blaise away for that, though. Blaise is still in what he calls the early stages of wooing..." His voice dropped, as if he was thinking aloud to himself, forgetting or not minding that Hermione could hear him.

His knuckles whitened as he gripped his quill, maintaining a fixed gaze on the unoccupied spots, and Hermione decided she would never have a better opportunity...In the presence of his friends just before class, she would only have to deal with Nott's waggling and teasing brows. But alone here and now…

"I've got something for you actually." She reached into her bag before she could talk herself out of it, and set her offering centimetres from his parchment.

"What's this?" he asked, which was a rhetorical question, as he'd already taken up the gift, pulling at the napkin wrapping in graceful, elegant movements...Revealing a crisp, shiny green apple.

He blinked up at Hermione, head at a slight tilt. The witch answered first with a casual shrug, and
banished her eyes back to her essay in a futile attempt for the last of her revisions. "You came back too late for breakfast and I thought I'd save you one." That seemed pragmatic enough, without getting too lost in that radiant grey gaze.

"Thanks!" He sounded positively boyish (if such a word could be used to describe Draco Malfoy) and there were several loud-sounding bites as she read the same sentence five times without comprehending a single word. "Salazar, there are few pleasures in the world that can compare to a crisp green apple. Breakfast was hours ago when it was still dark outside with Mother, before her Healer appointment, and we've still got DADA before lunch."

"It was no trouble at all," she answered, still pretending to care more about essay revisions. Downplay and divert. "I'm glad the boys are still gone actually. I wanted to apologise for how the conversation earlier turned. With the talk of the future and dreams." She paused, having the peculiar need to fortify her nerves before lifting her head again.

Finding his grey gaze steady waiting for her. Furrowed and, perhaps, almost pained.

"Nothing to apologise for." He didn't sound insincere, but there was a hastiness to his words. As if he'd rather sweep the whole matter under the rug, never to be seen again.

"But there is." Hermione had never cared much for brooms. "The future's not as uncomplicated as I always believed it could and should be and I shouldn't have been so careless with my questions."

A beat of silence. And then, "Well," he started, lacing his fingers together over his lap. "It's a simple enough question for one friend to ask another." (She was soaring. She was sinking. Friend.) "My dream for the future for too long has just been survival. My own, my mother's. Father's too even," he added, a bit softer though. "I don't remember that boy who's one purpose in life was to be his father. To have his position at the Ministry and on the Hogwarts Board of Governors. Spend my days sneering at the rest of the world and smug with my obligatory perfect wife and child," he sniffed, lips curling into a sneer. "Have box season tickets to Falmouth Falcon games and never worry for anything because I have money enough for my great-grandchildren to never work a day in their life."

Sinking. Hermione was definitely sinking at this level of vulnerability. He'd begun opening up more since she returned from Australia after Christmas, and it was captivating. Like watching a bud loosen and bloom, craving the dawn of a new day. But this was a layer he'd yet to voice in person.

The raw delicacy of his words now was nothing short of exquisite.

"Everyone deserves to dream, though." She paused and swallowed, hesitant to shatter anything. "And you were given a second chance at dreaming when you were acquitted last year."

"I know. At least, I know that in theory," he said, flashing a wry smile that she understood all too well. "I'd like to do something to make Mother proud. Make myself proud even. But…" He paused, thumbs twitching and twiddling. "Once again, there's Mother to consider. She'll always come first, and I'm having a mess of a time reconciling dreaming and making concrete plans with Mother's worsening condition."

His admission was heavy. Like stones falling down a deep well. She permitted the weight of it to sink into her bones before opening her mouth again.

"I hope you find some way, Malfoy." She angled herself and her gaze back to the almost-forgotten essay. "I mean, Parkinson is already off and married to some wizarding prince no one has ever heard of on the continent. Nott has his potions and life of leisure planned. Zabini will be a groupie for the Harpies for as long as Ginny plays for them — "
He snorted and she could hear the rolling of his eyes. "He'll follow her to the stars and back if she lets him."

Hermione didn't bother stifling her giggle, sneaking just one more glance. "Well, there you have it. You can't be the only one not chasing your dreams." She rushed her eyes back to her essay, really meaning to finish the last revision this time.

He uttered a soft 'thank you' and they worked in companionable silence. Until… "Granger, would you have a look at this rune for me? It looks like it should be -"

"Get the bloody hell away from Hermione, Malfoy!"

"What the —?" Hermione's heart slammed angst her breastbone, blood roaring in her veins as she jumped from her seat. "Ronald Weasley! How d—?"

But she was silenced as the tall ginger grabbed her and pulled her to his chest for a tight embrace. It was awkward. It was awful. She couldn't summon enough oxygen with her nose plastered to his scratchy robes.

She pinched him under his ribs. Hard.

"Ow!" he yelped, freeing her at last, blue eyes flashing, rubbing his side. "Shite, 'Mione! What the hell was that for?"

"You were rude and I couldn't breathe." Hermione jabbed a finger into her friend's chest, not caring at all she was poking the embroidered Auror crest. "I've been clear in my letters that Malfoy and I are friends and study together." She bumped against her chair as she moved and angled to gesture at the sitting wizard behind her (who had taken up his wand and assumed a stiff posture of defence). "We were clearly sitting very cordial-like with one another. And if you had been listening when you crossed the silencing barrier, you would have heard him asking me about a rune translation —"

"Silencing barrier?" Ron's face turned an angry shade of grape and raspberry, and his tone demanded an explanation.

"Our runic debates can get very involved and Nott always puts up silencing barriers when we study to keep Madam Pince from kicking us out." Hermione's gaze narrowed, arms folding across her chest. "I believe this is the part where you apologise to Malfoy, Ron."

"But —"

"Now." Hermione lifted her chin as her look turned to ice.

Ron blinked in stunned silence, cheeks still working through their various shades of red and purple, until settling on a ridiculous chastised pink. "Sorry," he groused at last.

"Think nothing of it," Malfoy deadpanned. "Just so you remember that Granger's a big girl and needs no help in steering clear of the wrong sort, Weasley."

BOYS. Hermione mentally groaned but decided she could chastise her study companion later, and focused on their intruder. "Ronald," she purred, flashing a saccharine smile. "It really is lovely to see you, but are you here on official business?" she asked, motioning up and down the length of him in his formal Auror attire. "And are you alone or is Harry here with you?"

Ron nodded. "Harry's talking with Neville in the Common Room. I was coming to fetch you; we're a guest demonstration for the DADA class next period and —"
"Oh! That's where we're going!" Hermione clapped her hands in a burst of childish glee. It had been since January and that suddenly felt a long time ago. "I've just been revising an essay this free period, but I'm at a stopping point." The butterflies in her stomach gathered and protested at the idea of not walking to class with a certain Slytherin, but anything to separate him and Ron would probably be best. "Shall we meet up with Harry and Neville, then?"

Ron's beam was unmistakable. "Yeah, once more for old time's sake."

"Lovely!" Hermione rolled up her essay and collected her inkwell and quill, packing them with care in her bag. "D'you think they're coming back at all before class, Malfoy?" Her breath caught meeting cool grey eyes. Bugger Ron and Harry for ruining this opportunity.

"I doubt it." Malfoy shrugged simply, looking back at his work. "I'll let Madam Pince know we'll be back this evening."

She swallowed, disappointment clawing at her chest and throat. "Thank you," she managed. "I'll see you in class."

She tried to appear sincere as Ron smiled and launched into all the latest details of Auror training. It was highly probable that she was only imagining the weight of grey eyes boring into her back as she left the library. It was just outrageous speculation on her part to believe she'd caught genuine hurt in those irises as she gave him one last look before walking away with Ron.

Such foolishness had born this ridiculous crush. Because she'd finally admitted to herself last week that she fancied Draco Malfoy, hoping it would help her move along. Unfortunately, these...feelings...seemed to be very very real, and in no particular hurry to leave. Worse yet, they seemed to have strengthened in as little as seven days.

"... save him a seat."

Ron's incredulous mutterings shook her from her stewings. "Hmm? I'm sorry, Ron, I missed what you were saying."

The wizard walking beside her sighed. "I swear your hearing's better than Mum's, I was just grumbling to myself."

"Or maybe you're not as quiet as you think you are," Hermione smirked. "Now go on, something about saving someone a seat?"

Ron's eyes darted over her face, nervous and guilty. "Just saying I was surprised you didn't offer to save Malfoy a seat."

"Oh." Hermione gnawed on her bottom a beat. She'd thought about it, but… "Just saying I was surprised you didn't offer to save Malfoy a seat."

"Zabini." Ron snorted, stuffing his hands in the hidden side pockets of his robes. "Can't believe Ginny is giving him the time of day. I didn't believe George when he said he saw them leaving The Three Broomsticks together last Saturday."

"Believe it, Ron," Hermione said, the memory of catching the two of them in alone in a dark corridor on Prefect rounds last week quite fresh on her mind. She winced and then flushed as her mind flew to a very different image. One involving herself and the wizard with a pair of very fine grey eyes.

She cleared her throat. "Nothing's official that she's told me, but Zabini is persistent. And smooth." She caught the low growl in the back of Ron's throat and she couldn't help the subsequent goading
comment. "And I've heard that the way he transitions to Italian when snogging is positively kni-"

"Do NOT finish that sentence." Ron groaned, skin taking on a greenish hue. "It was bad enough when it was Dean or Harry."

"Oh, honestly, Ronald." Hermione rolled her eyes. "Tell me about the rest of your family, then."

"What's there to say?" He gave a casual shrug. "Dad's busy, Mum is Mum. Bill and Fleur keep to themselves in their own little married world. George thinks they're working on trying to procreate, which would be brilliant. Give Mum something to focus on besides all of us unmarried children."

Hermione snorted. Some things would never change, and Mrs. Weasley's overbearing instincts would be one of them.

"Let's see," Ron continued. "Haven't see Charlie since Christmas. He left first thing morning after Boxing Day. Think he may have a witch, but he's fine. Percy's alright, I suppose. He's been helping with George at the shop some, but it's hard for George sometimes with him there. Makes him think of Fred and —"


"Yeah. I dunno, 'Mione." His ginger brow furrowed. "I can't say I've ever really seen Percy as more of a prig Prefect or Head Boy. I know that's not fair of me," he added before Hermione could even utter the scolding on the tip of her tongue. "It was a long two years of him being a Ministry-loving twat, and I get it, you know? George wondering if only he'd been there with Fred. If only he'd been there, maybe...Maybe it could be different today."

"Ron," Hermione murmured, shaking her head and taking his elbow. "We've all our own regrets. The burdens of the path not taken. But it does no one good to dwell there. I know you're busy, but do try with Percy. He's your brother, after all. I'm sure he just wants to feel part of the family again."

"Yeah. Mum always said he does best when he's involved with family things. Feeling part of it all." He nudged her shoulder with his arm, grinning as they approached the Fat Lady. "Come on, ready to see Harry?"

And for the next several minutes, all the way until the start of class, she was determined to focus on something other than a set of beautiful grey eyes.

And the wizard they belonged to.
Chapter 14

Monday, 22 April, 2002

"I don't see how you say that, Hermione," Percy said, keeping his voice low, eyes darting around their surroundings, likely uneasy at the attention they'd drawn.

"Because the ludicrous conclusion you've drawn is based on the limited and scant circumstantial evidence reported in the Prophet—and it's the obvious conclusion they wanted everyone to come to."

Hermione's cheeks burned and she was well aware that her volume of speaking was well above acceptable standards for indoor establishments...but, Merlin, she was beyond caring at the moment. She'd just wanted a simple, quiet cup of coffee, but Percy shattered said desire when he appeared at the the Apparition point just as she was walking in the coffee shop, and she had to feign a pleased greeting. Her displeasure multiplied tenfold when followed her into the establishment that had been her morning salvation, and to complete the unpleasantness of moment, he had been eager to discuss Sunday's ridiculous article with her.

His pink-tinged cheeks seemed to suggest he wished he'd been less inclined to inquire at all. "Ah," he murmured, rubbing the back of his neck, cheeks flushing even brighter, "we seem to be causing an unnecessary disturbance; have you finished adding cinnamon to your coffee?" His eyes slid to the door. "Maybe we should finish this outside...or in a silenced room..."

Hermione ignored the implications that would have had Ron sniggering in his drink. "Outside," she hissed, replacing the lid over her to-go coffee cup. Grinding her teeth, she stalked to the front door, suddenly thankful she'd gone with winding her curls in a tight bun to avoid the angry flounce of a braid or pony tail.

"Alright," Percy started primly once the coffee shop door closed behind them. "I don't see the need for such debate when it's really very simple: Warrington was found Saturday evening. He was found behind Ollivander's, all beaten and bloody, so why shouldn't Malfoy have been taken in for questioning?"

"He didn't even know Warrington had been released—"

"So says Zabini and—"

"Yes." Hermione narrowed her eyes. "That is what Malfoy told Blaise, Theo, and the Aurors. In fact, the list of people who even knew that Warrington had been released from custody Saturday afternoon seems to be very small indeed, probably thanks to Mr. Greengrass—"
"Even if Malfoy's telling the truth," Percy started, voice normal, though his jaw clenched. "He could have happened upon him at random—"

"And when he was done extracting revenge for having an affair with his wife, he...what, Percy? He leaves the man outside the shop he works at like an idiot?" Hermione asked incredulously, starting off towards their shared office building, the need to move pulsing through her muscles.

"Well, your ridiculous theory has even less credence, if you think about it…"

Hermione stopped walking, glaring over her shoulder. "I didn't mean—"

"Warrington faked his own attack or beat himself up?" Percy's red brow quirked up to his hairline, whether in irony or frustration, she couldn't tell.

"He could—"

"What was it again?" Percy interrupted, holding a mocking hand to his ear. "A fake wand so as not to implicate his own in making some of the magical blows? A few joke shop candies to complete the bloody mess and make it look worse than it actually was? That's a half-witted, half-arsed explanation and you know it, Hermione."

"I'm sure—"

"No, no, let's follow that infallible line of logic; where are did all the candy wrappers go, then? Where's the fake wand? Where'd everything go to pull off that elaborate charade?" The witch shifted her stance, pulling her lips to a thin line, but the wizard continued.

"He was unconscious when found, the article said," Percy recounted. "Someone passed by and heard something behind the building, and there he lay. You're suggesting that Warrington somehow managed to pull off that incredible injured look and eliminate all evidence, including something necessary to knock him unconscious before he happened to be found? That's really the explanation you're going with?"

Hermione straightened to her fullest height and fixed the wizard with the stoniest of glares she could contrive… And turned on her heel, marching again in the direction of the office buildings.

"Wait!" Percy sounded panicked, but Hermione paid him no mind as he clamoured and pounded the sidewalk to resume his place at her side. "Hermione, stop. Please." He brushed his hand against the sleeve of her robes.

Hermione whirled and snatched his arm, pulling and shoving him off the sidewalk, to the side of the office building. "First of all, I never said that was my only theory or even main supposition!" She stepped up to him, pleased to find a hint of fear in his eyes as he almost sank into the side wall. "I was merely pointing out that it was one explanation that Warrington faked his injuries or somehow inflicted them on himself to deflect further suspicion."

She stepped back and cast a wandless levitating spell on her coffee, freeing her arms to fold across her chest. "Second, you will recall that stranger and more peculiar things have happened before. An unregistered Animagus lived with your family for more than a decade as the pet rat, and no one ever suspected that he was really Peter Pettigrew, and the true betrayer of Lily and James Potter…you do remember that, don't you?"

The wizard had the sense to nod as Hermione unfolded her arms and waved them about uselessly.
"Merlin Percy, I'm just trying to process through possibilities because it's an oversimplification to agree that because Warrington was found behind the wand shop Malfoy apprentices at that he's obviously the culprit."

"But it makes sense if—"

"Shut it, I'm still talking!" She levelled what she hoped was a deadly glare, letting up when the wizard's lips pressed to a thin line. "For the sake of argument, let's follow our illustrious Daily Prophet's line of reasoning, shall we? If Warrington is being framed for Astoria's murder—though, it seems the Prophet was singing a very different tune last week—why beat him up after he's released? Why not pull out more evidence to further incriminate him?"

She drew a breath, shuddering before following down this next train of thought. "And if what you are baselessly claiming is that Malfoy is the guilty party, why resort to beating him up? Why not injure him with magic? And why stop at injury? Why not finish the job and end the man's life then and there?" Her body shook, she loathed every word coming from her lips, loathing that Draco should even be associated with such terrible suppositions. "And even with all of that, where in Merlin's name is the bloody money? That's still missing, or did you forget about it in your haste to presume guilty until proven innocent?"

Percy inclined his head, as if to ask if he were allowed to speak…Hermione waved an acquiescing hand, ignoring the wizard's smug smirk.

"He would obviously been keeping it hidden for the time being. It's too risky using any of it now, I'll grant that Malfoy is not an idiot..."

If he meant that as an appeasing remark, it failed entirely; Hermione's jaw clenched as her face flushed with contained fury. "All Greengrass properties have been searched! Malfoy's wand was clean of injury spells, or have you dismissed those points as well?"

Percy's arms folded over his chest, gaze narrowed in one of his classic Head Boy condescending expressions. "Malfoy is an apprentice wand maker; he can take his pick of any one of the hundreds of wands in the shop, or better yet—use any of those four wands with the experimental cores! And don't forget that there are plenty of Black family properties in Britain he could have easily stashed the money."

Hermione's breath caught, her mouth snapping shut. She couldn't contrive a counter argument that he wouldn't simply refute again, and that was infuriating. Godric, she had just wanted a bloody cup of coffee with a sprinkle of cinnamon...

Percy sighed, a hard frown etched across his face. "Look, say I'm wrong. Say that by some miraculous chance Malfoy is being framed, you have to admit that you're relooking at several facts with an incredible bias. Your judgement is clouded, and for the love of Merlin, I can't understand why."

Hermione chewed her tongue as she snatched her coffee cup from the air, fingers curling and digging into the cup as she took a hasty sip—promptly scalding her tongue. Balls.

She coughed for several moments, dismissing Percy's attempts to come to her aid. "He's my friend, Percy," she managed at last. "I stand by my friends, even when the odds are stacked against them. Merlin knows there were plenty of odds stacked against Harry back in the day…Ron too..."

"At least they were deserving—"

"Pardon?" Hermione clipped.
"They started off as your friends—"

"Stop." Hermione lifted a finger to the wizard's surprised face. "Stop right there. You clearly
remember very little from the three years we overlapped in Hogwarts, and have been told even less
of the years that followed. Overlooking the first two months prior to the incident of the troll in the
girls bathroom my first year, you'll kindly remember there was nasty fight involving a broomstick
over Christmas our third year—your year as Head Boy. Ronald ruined my first ball the year after
that. He couldn't be bothered to write me a single letter any holiday in all our years at school. He
would beg me to help him with assignments, only to whinge and complain when I made him a
revision chart for tests and O.W.L.S. Then there was the veritable heartbreaking nightmare that was
Lavender Brown our sixth year."

Hermione lowered her hand, wrapping it around her cup as well, allowing the soothing warmth to
seep into her hands. "And you may not know this one, but Ron only learned to have a proper
conversation with me, conversations involving kindness and compliments, and inquiries into my
interests, because Fred and George gave him a book for his birthday. Knowing them, it was probably
meant it as a joke too." She gave a light shake of her head, loathing dragging the past from where it
lie peacefully in its place. "It's a long and complicated history with your brother, Percy. Harry too,
for that matter."

Percy could only blink widened and confused looking eyes. "Merlin…Why bother with either of
them at all?"

"Because," Hermione said, allowing a rueful smile to toy with the corners of her lips. "There is
forgiveness, Percy. And grace and love. They are my friends, and anyone would be able to tell you
I've had my moments with both Ron and Harry—I'm extremely demanding, firm, stubborn, and quite
manipulative if pushed. But, I'm loyal to a fault. I fight for those without a voice."

She breathed deep before continuing. "And along that same thread—Ronald can be selfless, clever,
brave, funny, and even resilient, when he puts his mind to it. He has a great capacity for tenderness
and love. He destroyed one of the horcruxes. He pulled it together enough after things fizzled
between us and joined your dad, Harry and myself to Australia to look for my parents."

She sighed, starting back at the sidewalk, already spent and it was only first thing in the morning.
"This is who I am, Percy," she said, stopping to look back at him once more. "I stand beside them
and with them in the midst of adversity. And I trust completely." She turned her back to him, seeking
salvation within the confining walls of her own Percy-free office.

"Hermione," he called out and she shuddered, groaning internally as she paused, but did not turn
around even as she heard him walking, stopping behind her, his breathing controlled and determined.
"Tell me what happens if more evidence comes out and all facts point to Malfoy—what will you do
then?"

The witch squeezed her eyes, forcing the image of Draco's billowing robes floating in the direction
of La Roseraie from her mind… "I'll cross that bridge if it comes," she answered evasively, walking
as fast as she could towards the building doors, begging the Founders that the impossible wizard
would not follow her again.

To say the duration of the morning was unproductive after that unexpected, unpleasant and
altogether disagreeable case of happenstance earlier would be a gross understatement. The
exasperating pattern followed thus:
Stare at blank parchment, try to remember any rudimentary fact about ashwinders, press quill to parchment, begin scratching elementary sentence—"Ashwinder eyes are red—really red." Pause to consider hounding question—Of all the minutes and hours, Percy appears just as I need a morning jolt of caffeine...And the bloody wizard didn't even need a cup for himself!

Blink once. Shake head.

Begin again...

"The red of ashwinder eyes very bright and red. Similar to that of maraschino cherries, and not to be confused with ruby, sangria, apple or scarlet."—Godric, WHY did I allow him more than the obligatory greeting? This was a doomed conversation from the beginning after dinner this past weekend...

Blink. Shake head.

New sentence...

"The red of the eyes is what can give them away in the presence of a burning fire, as their bodies are entirely grey, and they blend quite nicely with remaining smoke."—Smoky grey, cloudy grey, twin morning grey irises that bore into you with all the infinite weight of—

"UGH!"

Hermione threw her quill across the room, flinging herself back in her chair.

And what was most infuriating of everything, which was saying a great deal, was that Percy Weasley had been correct: Hermione had been grasping at straws with her hasty and ambiguous little stunt before she lashed out...

"Warrington could have done it to himself', indeed," she groused aloud, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Brilliant that, Hermione. Brava. Full marks." She threw her head back, stared blankly at the ceiling. Willing for some enchanted message to appear from thin air, or some lost thread of logic to come to light—she'd honestly take both at this point...

Hermione, Theo and Blaise all talked until the stars faded and pink tinged the sky Saturday night. And then again late into Sunday night. It had been an infuriating twenty-four hours. For one thing, Draco continued to block them out. On some level, Hermione understood the need for silence and space. But too much of either could only lead to dark places in the end.

And then there was the fact that three clever minds (if she said so herself) had been conversing and hypothesising all that time and could only agree on two vague conclusions: Warrington was attacked by the killer, whomever he or she may be, and the killer wanted Draco framed. That was about the only thing crystal clear—their friend had no proper alibi for that afternoon or evening, having spent all that time at his house, reading in the library or working in his study.

They'd tossed about possible suspects in their minds. Mr. Greengrass was a resounding 'no'—too messy to sully his own hands. The fact that he kept relatively neutral in all the war business some years back being cited for this conclusion.

Order of the Phoenix Member? Hermione had fiercely argued against that theory; she couldn't contrive anyone left alive who would hold such a grudge.

Former Death Eaters? Plausible, there remained some who had evaded capture to this day. In the end, Theo and Blaise dubbed this hypothesis as 'doubtful'. After all, why not simplify matters and
just go straight to Draco and kill him? Or kidnap and torture him if pain and torture is the main motivation.

Sunday morning at home had been bleary and miserable, most fitting that it should be one of those bleak rainy days that one loathes to be out it…

Hermione's morning paper was surprisingly scant and void of lengthy details, if only because there wasn't much to go on. The Prophet couldn't even determine how long he'd been laying there—the anonymous finder of the body had reported thinking about dinner when passing the shop and hearing something…

There had been no tips reported to the Auror office, no reported sightings of Warrington around Diagon Alley, Draco's home…or anywhere. In fact, apparently it was only Mr. Greengrass who knew of Warrington's release, and it was requested to be done quietly, without any fanfare or major announcements.

Probably to avoid unnecessary negative attention, Hermione had thought when she first read the article.

And it really was remarkable - in a matter of six days, Warrington had gone from being the distraught, guilt-ridden madman who killed his lover in a passionate rage to being highlighted as another victim. A victim who'd been kept from his beloved's funeral without any due course. A framed wizard, who deserved to just go about his business, and learn to live and love again while breathing free air.

As if 'protective custody' at the Ministry was comparable to Azkaban. It was laughable and vomitous—the lot of it.

Hermione did neither, though, and instead released a long, exaggerated exhale, shaking her thoughts back to the present. She sat up, summoned her quill, and hunched back down to write—only to be assaulted with more urgent and pressing issues at hand.

Draco in Paris, for instance.

Draco in Paris on Saturday, when two separate people (Astoria and Theo) believed him to have been in London.

Draco leaving her for the direction of the hotel.

The exact hotel his wife was murdered in.

A piercing chill shot through her, and her eyes darted on instinct to a small framed picture she kept of her parents on her desk. It was taken just before fourth year, when her hair was still impossibly bushy and she still had that slight overbite in her front teeth.

"What do I do?" she asked the picture rhetorically.

She had every right to be in Paris. It was a normal Saturday and she was asked to take a meeting by her boss. There had been nothing untoward in her conversations with two different people in two very different places. What good would it do to volunteer this information to the Aurors? In fact, they may already know themselves—it was very possible that Draco had informed them of some misinformation by this point in time…

There was also the lingering, if not sickening, question of Draco's cryptic retort: Astoria would be surprised to see him.
Hermione swallowed hard, staring at the photograph still. "He knew all along, Mum. Maybe he knew she was leaving him. Maybe he went to confront her. Or maybe to sign annulment papers together before she went off, which is a whole other point I'm quite conflicted over, to be honest. It feels so very wrong to be wanting answers over the fact that Draco was in the process of ending his marriage, and yet, I can't help it. I wish I could just ask someone something about that specific point, but now's really not the time."

Groaning, she rubbed her eyes and started tugging at her bun. "And then, there's the money. And then, what had Astoria meant when she said she thought that it would make things better? What would soften the blow? And why did she think it necessary to involve me in her moral dilemma?"

Hermione dropped her hands to the table, leaning toward the framed photograph. "Merlin, I miss you, Mum. He's innocent. I know without a doubt that he didn't kill Astoria, but it doesn't keep me from wishing I could talk to you. Theo's as dear as Harry, but he's not you." She choked on a watery laugh. "He talks too much to be you, anyways. You were a far better listener. Blaise has Ginny. Harry is a blissful newlywed and is probably irritated with me, all the dinner invitations I've declined now...But he'll understand when I eventually explain it all to him..." She shook her head, eyes brimming.

"I'm worried, Mum," she whispered. "More worried than I care to admit. I'm worried the Aurors will do surface level work and simply go with the easy and very circumstantial evidence. I'm worried if this goes to trial, the Wizengamot will prosecute without truly searching either, thinking they can finally send him away for good...I'm worried for Draco. Godric—" Hermione gave a hard yank to her bun, wincing, yet reveling in the pain it brought. "I'm so worried for Draco. He's so determined to carry his burdens alone, when he doesn't have to be. The war changed much about him, but not that infernal pride to shoulder his own burdens..."

Her lower lip began to tremble as she blinked several times at the framed photograph. "He wrote me a letter after I testified at his trial. I hate I never had the chance to tell you that. You would have been impressed with it. It caught me off-guard at the time, but it was a good letter. And then we didn't talk for the first two months of school...we simply coexisted in silent shared spaces.

"And then, Theo just...invaded. There's no other word to describe it. Theo invaded my life, bringing Blaise along to charm it, but Draco...he was the silent conqueror. He was present, listening, inquiring, remembering, laughing, teasing, and praising."

She gulped a shallow breath, swiping at tears, needing the respite and promised absolution in the aftermath of confession. "And I'm so sorry, Mum...You too, Dad. I'm so very sorry." She gulped again. "I tell people that I went to Australia for the job and to see the two of you more. Merlin, I even told Harry that's why I chose to be in Australia for such an extended amount of time. I told him it was so the both of you would have a chance to know me, Hermione Granger. But the truth is...I was running away from here. I couldn't...I needed to leave...I—"

"Hermione!"

"Theo!" Hermione jumped to her feet, swiping at her eyes, pulse skyrocketing even higher as her chair banged against the floor.

The wizard remained in the doorway, chest heaving, neck muscles twitching. "Hermione..." his voice cracked when he said her name this time.

Her blood froze in her veins. "How bad is it?"

Theo blinked, a gust of emotions assailing his features. "They arrested him."
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Alpha love to Kyonomiko. Beta hearts to CourtingInsanity. Y'all don't even know-this story would have been deleted many times over if not for these two. All remaining errors are my own.

I do not own anything in the wonderful world of Harry Potter.

She'd heard him wrong. She wasn't thinking clearly. Her brain had somehow assumed the worst, when what Theo had actually said was, 'They're questioning him' or 'They're talking to him.'

"What?" Hermione finally asked, choking on her own breath.

"Draco's been arrested." Theo remained in her doorway, eyes darkening as he repeated himself.

"But…how…why?"

Her confused inquiries seemed to snap his last tendril of composure. "Why?" he snapped, dark and dangerous. "Because Draco Lucius Malfoy is the Prince of Prigs." He crossed the threshold, taking slow, deliberate steps as he continued. "Because, he's a martyr to his pride." He was nearly at her desk now, speaking at a volume that had Hermione looking out her open door to see if Rolf heard.

"Because —!" he was yelling now - yelling and gesticulating "— he's a buggering, halfwit m—!"

Hermione slapped a hand against his mouth as he leered over her desk, fury rolling off of him in waves.

"Theo," she pleaded, shutting her office door with a flick of her wrist. "I realize you're able to brew potions from home and no one cares if you have proper business decorum, but Rolf's in his office with a client." She pulled her hand from his mouth, reaching up to comb back angry locks of hair falling over his brow.

Only one emotion could have been strong enough in Theo to warrant such a reaction: fear.

She could see it in his eyes as he snorted, brushed her hand away and adjusted so he was standing upright in front of her desk. "I still stand by what I said, Draco's being a stubborn prig. And I can't get through to him right now."

Hermione sighed as she started gathering and organizing things around her office, feeling even heavier than she had before.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm packing my things, obviously," she answered, her eyes rested once more on the picture on her desk. "We're going to need privacy, and my work office is hardly the place, not even with a silencing charm."

"Words I never thought I'd hear the Hermione Granger say to me," Theo murmured.
"What?" Hermione glanced up from her work bag and finding him leering at her, brows wriggling suggestively. "Twat." She swiped and at him, catching air as he'd already sidestepped back towards the door.

"Where to, Miss Granger?"

"Your place," Hermione dictated, waltzing passed him and opening her door. "My fridge is empty save for some take-out leftovers and sparkling water, and I'll need to use your owl at some point this evening I'm sure." She made a quick gesture for him to exit, and closed the office door behind him.

"Wait just a moment." She walked up and over, knocking on Rolf's door.

"Come in," Rolf's bright voice answered from within.

Hermione cracked open the door, peeking her head and a shoulder through, nodding to her boss and his seated company. "Hello, Rolf. And hello Mr. Rians, how are you, sir?"

The balding rotund wizard in bright red robs huffed and shuffled his mustache. "Bundimun infestation, Miss Granger. And the Ministry is not being as thorough as I would like."

"Of course, Mr. Rians," Hermione offered an empathetic smile, brows lifting in half-amusement as she focused on Rolf. "I'm stepping out for the rest of the day, Rolf, and I'll owl you this evening if I'll be coming in to the office or working from home for the rest of the week."

Rolf nodded, slow and pensive. "Not a problem at all, Hermione. Is everything alright? I thought I heard something loud coming from your office a moment ago?"

Hermione gave a weak shrug. "Nothing for you to concern yourself over." Evasive, vague and not untrue, and Godric bless him for accepting that answer with a kind smile and dismissing wave.

"My place you said?" Theo asked as they walked through the office building doors, setting a brisk pace to the Apparition point.

Hermione swallowed hard, everything within her wanting to sink into despair. It seemed impossible that just hours before she'd had the energy and heart for a verbal spar with Percy Weasley.

"Actually, I'm going to drop my things off at home first and change."

"Change?"

Hermione waved a hand down the length of her body. "I'd prefer to be in some jeans and trainers. I have a feeling the rest of the day will involve a great deal of pacing."

Theo grunted. "You have no idea."

"Is Blaise already here?" Hermione asked, sinking into a plush chair in Theo's study some ten minutes later.

Theo shook his head. "He won't be coming. Stuck in Ireland at the moment," he explained, advancing to the sofa, lowering himself with a flawless poise that Hermione couldn't help but envy, even now. "There was some charity tournament he donated a generous sum for," Theo continued, "And they were giving him an award—letting him be an honorary Harpy for the evening, something like that." Theo rolled his eyes, waving an irritated hand. "Too early for a drink?"

"Just water for now," she answered, mouth and throat feeling like sand as realisation of what was
about to transpire sank in. She rubbed the back of her neck, offering a grateful smile across the room as the wizard wordlessly conjured a glass and filled it with water. "Thanks," she said after a long drink, setting down a now half empty glass.

He sent an answering salute back to her, taking a slow pull of amber-coloured fluid from a crystal tumbler. An unpleasant silence settled over the room, taking shape and form, winding and wrapping itself against Hermione's chest until she could bare the weight of the unknown no longer.

"You said…" she ventured softly, stopping to clear her throat, and get a grip. She was not apologising for getting to business. "You said he was arrested for being stubborn?" she asked, proud of the clarity she managed in that horrendous question.

Theo blinked at her and looked down into his glass. "Actually, I said a lot more than that, but yes. The stupid prig has chosen silence and was arrested for it." He took another slow sip.

One…two…th—

"What in Merlin's name does that even mean?" she demanded, incredulous and unapologetic at the bite in her tone.

"Just that, Hermione." He took a quick sip this time and set the tumbler on the coffee table. "Draco is not talking to anyone. Not the Aurors. Not even me."

"But that's ludicrous! What do we even have talk about if—"

"I have the Auror's case report," Theo interrupted, the smug gleam in his eye contradicting the simplistic humility of his statement.

Hermione's eyes blew wide "You have the…How do you—?" Straying curls fell from her already loosening bun as she shook her head. "Nope, nope, nope. Don't tell me. I probably really don't want to know."

"Actually," Theo interjected with some degree of exaggeration. "This was all above board and by the books." He reached into the folds of his robes, waggling his eyebrows. "I demanded a copy of the report for the purpose of creating a solid defence for the 'accused', as they are now calling him, ammnnddd…" He withdrew his hand, revealing three individually folded sheets of parchment. He levitated all three parchments over to Hermione.

"Merlin!" She unfolded the first sheet, gazing at the length. "It took three of these to write a report of everything today?"

"Thankfully, no. That's three copies of one report just for you."

Hermione looked up from skimming the document to blink at him in question.

He gestured airily. "I requested Auror Bell make three copies specifically for the Hermione Granger, and then two for me, and two for Blaise."

She continued blinking at him, at a loss for words, and he seemed to feel the need to elaborate, "It's really nothing — any simpleton would think of such an elementary spell. But, knowing the swot you are about these things, and whom all this effort is for, I decided you'd need one copy just for reading, another to mark up and take an insane amount of notes on, and then another just as back-up. Blaise and I just have more back-ups as needed." He finished with a final casual shrug of his shoulders.

Her wordless blinking continued, a burst of fondness swelling within. "You marvellous…"
wonderful…” she croaked and stopped short, finding it imperative to clear her throat right away. "Thank you," she managed, dropping her gaze back to the parchment in her hands. Several silent and studious heartbeats passed. "Auror Bell is quite thorough it seems; have you read this in its entirety yet?"

"Yes, but you like reading out loud," he answered, sinking back into the couch, eyes glued to the ceiling. "Proceed at will, Miss Granger."

She couldn't find it in her to roll her eyes at the irritatingly predictive powers he possessed. "Godric help us," she murmured, tucking her feet under her as she began.

"At a quarter past nine this morning, Aurors received signed warrant to search the premises of Mr. Malfoy (hereafter referred to as 'Suspect') delivered and received by Auror Bell and partner Auror Robards. Aurors Bell and Robards arrived at house at half past. Found suspect not at home. Aurors began search the house. Aurors began with the library and studies — the main study and a secondary private study. Auror Bell discovered leather pouch of four wands within the private study and confiscated to be tested at the Ministry. Aurors then began to search Suspect's kitchen —"

Hermione stopped short, letting the parchment drop to her lap. "The kitchen?" she scoffed, gobsmacked. "What are they thinking they'll find there — a journal titled 'My Nefarious Scheme by, Draco Malfoy', complete with diagrams and flowcharts, buried deep in some random tin of flour?"

"And risk soiling his clothes?" Theo drawled.

Now she rolled her eyes, bringing the parchment back to up to resume reading. "Aurors then began to search Suspect's kitchen when alarm sounded from Auror Robards pocket. Alarm had previously been provided by Goblins at Gringotts, set to trigger in the event of any activity on the joint Malfoy/Greengrass account. Aurors immediately exited the premises, Disapparating then to Gringotts —"

"Keen on those specifics, isn't she?" Theo quipped.

"Shut it," she clipped. "Aurors found Suspect bent over a desk, studying a parchment. Auror Robards made introductions to protesting Goblins, explaining the Ministry was watching the suspect's account. Suspect did not acknowledge Aurors, instead continued to look down at parchment. Inquiries made and Goblin named Glumbrass stated a deposit had been enacted at a quarter past nine this morning, but could not be completed until the suspect arrived in person to approve and read letter delivered with the deposit.

"At this time, Suspect was asked to hand letter over to Aurors. Suspect glared and crumpled letter in his fist. Auror Robards probed for letter again. Suspect then destroyed letter with wandless Incendio —"

"Circe!" Hermione yelled, face falling hard into her hands, not caring that such a reaction would render the parchment wrinkled and crumbled...What in Merlin's name was Draco thinking? Or was he even thinking at all?

"Keep going, it just gets better." Theo's sardonic tone was hardly encouraging.

Hermione jerked herself upright, yanking at her hair tie, and letting her curls tumble all around her shoulders and face. Wincing at the pain in her scalp, she swiped and shoved at her long tendrils, brushing handfuls behind her ears before continuing.

"Suspect then destroyed letter with wandless Incendio and was then placed in full body bind.
Suspect questioned as to contents of letter. Suspect declined to answer or acknowledge question. Suspect refused to answer any questions posed by Aurors, occasionally refusing to make eye contact.

"Goblin Glumbrass provided information when questions posed to him. Glumbrass stated deposit had been received from wizarding bank in Paris, to be made in Malfoy/Greengrass joint account. Auror Bell inquired after amount of transaction. Glumbrass reported it was the exact amount previously withdrawn by Mrs. Malfoy née Greengrass (hereafter referred to as 'Deceased')."

Hermione paused, eyes darting over the previous sentences again in disbelief, heart sinking… 'Exact amount previously withdrawn' leaping and screaming from the parchment.

"She was giving it back, Theo," she murmured, heart beginning to race. "Astoria was giving him all the money…This is what she must have been blathering to me about in the bookshop…” The latter she uttered more to herself, perhaps to convince herself the late Mrs. Malfoy had some streak of decency.

The wizard snorted as if he disagreed with her private supposition and began mumbling under his breath. Hermione permitted herself the luxury of ignoring her friend's likely indecent comments and continued reading.

"Goblin stated that French bank had been holding money in temporary account per Deceased's instructions. Money was to be held until date of Monday, 22 April, 2002, and deposit only completed after Suspect had completed reading letter from Deceased."

Hermione grabbed her water glass, draining its contents quickly. Theo had added more amber-coloured fluid to his tumbler by the time Hermione turned back to the report.

"Aurors Bell and Robards inquired at length to expand on reason of withholding funds until this exact date; Glumbrass states it is against policy to make such inquiries. Warrant to make further inquiries will not be attainable at this time, as Deceased has not committed a crime. Suspect asked again and refused to answer —"

Theo snorted. "I bet a memory in a pensieve would probably just show Draco sitting there, pinning them with that Malfoy withering stare, and the female git makes it sound like he's an angry little boy yelling at his nanny."

Hermione sighed but couldn't disagree. "We're almost at the end of this, Theo. Let's just finish it all in one fell swoop…"

"Good luck," he muttered as Hermione cleared her throat.

"Aurors brought Suspect to Ministry at half past ten. Suspect kept in holding. Continues to decline answering questions regarding letter, money and the Deceased posed by Aurors Robards and Bell. Have begun inquiring about confiscated wands and Suspect declines to answer. Declines to even talk.

"Auror Bell dispatched at a quarter till eleven to bring in Mr. Ollivander as Suspect refuses to answer questions about aforementioned wands.

"Auror Bell returned five minutes later. Mr. Ollivander compliant with requests to study Suspect's confiscated wands. Mr. Ollivander remarks all made of firwood, which is wood of Suspect's current wand. Mr. Ollivander identified wand cores from left-to-right as an erumpet particle combination core, ashwinder ash core, dragon scale core and griffin feathercore. Mr. Ollivander stated he had been unaware Suspect had begun testing alternative wand cores."
Hermione paused, rereading. Something in that sentence sounded…odd—a puzzle piece that didn't quite fit in with previously obtained or heard information…

Her brow furrowed as she replayed scenes throughout the past couple of weeks…

"Hermione?"

"Hm?" The witch shook herself. "Sorry, lost in thought for a moment." Her eyes scanned the report for where she left off. "Ok, here we are." She cleared her throat, ready to be done with this vile document.

"Auror Bell escorted Mr. Ollivander back to his shop after observations complete. Auror Bell returned and wands tested for recently performed spells. Rudimentary spells found to been performed on erumpent wand and ashwinder wand. Successful Levicorpus cast with dragon scale wand. Appears unsuccessful attempts for another made, but incomplete…"

Hermione faltered, wishing more than anything she did not have to continue reading. She summoned all of her courage and continued, voice shaking. "Found successful casting of Levicorpus and Sectumsempra with griffin feather wand."

Her voice wavered and broke. There was more, but she couldn't see for the insistent tears pooling in her eyes, the last sentence she read echoing in her mind. 'Found successful casting of Levicorpus and Sectumsempra with griffin feather wand.'

A voice broke through her harrowing thoughts from across the room. "Suspect continues to decline to speak. Suspect arrested. Auror Robards to file case with Wizengamot for trial date." Theo was standing before her an instant later. "Draco finally said one thing after the case had been filed—he asked that I be summoned, but refused to say a single word when I got there."

Hermione's head spun. In fact, at this moment, she was quite certain she was feeling the earth spinning on its axis. "What are we going to do?" She stared at him with expectations she was positive he couldn't meet.

He raked a hand through his hair, a bitter laugh escaping his chest. "I wish I knew. I've done all I can for the moment, by means of putting together a smashing character reference list, of which you are the shining star—"

"What?!"

"I'm sorry, I know I should have asked, but since you'd only be volunteering anyways, you'll be one of our star witnesses to the reformed ways of Draco Malfoy—"

"Theo…" Hermione's mind finally caught up with his words and she slapped a hand over his mouth, heart thundering in her chest. "Theo, I can't!"

Confusion and anger met in his eyes as he shoved her hand away. "What do you mean you can't?" he demanded.

"Just that!" She jumped to her feet, wrapping her arms around her waist.

The wizard considered her for a silent moment, his mouth twisted. "If you're worried that—" He snapped his mouth shut, shook his head and took a step back. "Love, the late Mrs. Malfoy née Greentramp was discovered in a hotel room, where she was waiting for her long-faced lover of nearly a year. You, on the other hand, ran away. All the way to Australia." He braved a step closer to her, a crooked smile toying on his face. "I highly doubt anyone will question you along the lines of
"Silencio!" Hermione screamed, hot fury burning her veins as she folded her arms over her chest. "You daft prattling prick! This has nothing to do with that and everything to do with the fact that Draco was in Paris the day Astoria was murdered!"

Theodore Nott's brown eyes blew wide and he looked like she slapped him. Worse. Genuine fear invaded his features, conquering his eyes first.

Hermione's last façade of strength snapped and crumbled. She'd said it. Out loud. The nightmare had come to life: Draco had been arrested and she was going to be called upon to give testimony.

She crashed to the floor, gasping and sobbing into her hands. Minutes or hours later, a hand lay on her head, collecting curls and pressing soft against her skull, just like her father had done when she was a little girl. She swiped and swiped angrily at the repulsive tears, willing them to vanish, knowing it was futile.

Theo's hand withdrew. A few hiccups escaped as she opened her mouth, desperate to explain.

"I don't care about my reputation now," she stuttered through the tears, at last bringing herself to look up, half shrugging a shoulder. "He was married. Even when I knew it would be hard, I chose to remain his friend. I chose to accept professional interactions and come to game nights. I chose to accept tea invitations with Andromeda and Narcissa. I knew I would never have the chance to…to say anything in person. What does it matter now if the extent of my feelings comes out in a courtroom?" She sucked a shallow breath and mustered a rueful look to answer his sympathetic (pitying) expression.

"But," she continued, "what if this piece of information is just what they need to put him away for good?" She looked away and hugged her knees to her chest, eyes boring into her coffee table.

Her friend flicked her shoulder, and she gave a dismissive wave, releasing the silencing charm. He exhaled in a long puff, but she refused to look back up. "He's everything to me, Theo; how could I ever face him if it comes out?"

The wizard said nothing at first, the silence darkening as with pending storm clouds. "Are you sure it was him?" Theo tried. "Maybe it was someone with Polyjuice—"

Hermione swallowed, shaking her head. "He knew you were the one to write me about Narcissa," she supplied, her voice as heavy and despondent as her heart.

"Anyone could guess I wouldn't have told you."

Bless him for his persistence…The witch shook her head again. "Draco scheduled a consult with me for the next Monday. He specifically said he was testing different wand cores. We just learned that not even Ollivander knew that…" She looked back up at him, unable to help the inflection of hope in her voice. "Unless he gave you and Blaise the specifics?"

He answered in the negative, hope draining from his face. "I just knew he was testing wands; I would assume it's the same for Blaise."

Thick clouds of despair loomed overhead, poisonous and choking her with each breath. "What if it comes up?"

Theo heaved a sigh and sank to the floor with her. "It may not," he offered, but they both knew he was breathing the same poisonous despair as she.
22 April, 2002

Dear Miss Granger,

Under and by virtue of the authority of the Wizengamot, you are hereby directed to be present and in attendance for the trial of Draco Lucius Malfoy, Wednesday, 24 April, 2002, Courtroom Eight, Level Ten, Ministry of Magic.

Failure to comply will result in immediate disciplinary action, and you will be forced to provide testimony under the influence of Veritaserum.

Sincerely,

A. Briangate

Chief Court Scribe

23 April, 2002

H-

You're to drink this entire vial of Dreamless Sleep tonight.

-T

P.S. That's not a request.
Friday, 27 October, 2000

"Double, double toil and trouble," Hermione murmured to herself as her shoes clacked on the sidewalk. "Fire burn and caldron bubble. Fillet of a fenny snake, In the caldron boil and bake..."

She was giddy. She was elated; it hardly mattered that the leaves under her feet were sodden from a late afternoon rain shower instead of the dry crackling and crunching she preferred.

It was fall, and what an utterly poetic thing it was to be a witch in Britain in the fall. The brisk air tickled her magic and all that was within her, down to her magical core, thrummed and hummed to be alive, to be back in Britain, to be a witch, and to be walking down the sidewalk of Diagon Alley.

It was generally quiet in this tucked off corner of the alley this late in the afternoon, but thank Merlin for the smallest of pleasures like nodding and smiling at a few passing pedestrians, and returning the winks of enchanted carved pumpkins in shop windows.

And then, there it was, in all of its ancient and established glory. A painted wooden sign reading Ollivander's: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC.

The sign alone had Hermione smiling a secret smile as she stepped through the shop door. "Something wicked this way comes," she thought as the doorbell tinkled overhead.

"Miss Granger," the shop owner immediately greeted her. "This is indeed a surprise. I was not aware that you were in need of my services."

Hermione’s eyes darted about the shop, scanning the shelves. "Well, sir, I believe —"

"I've been seeking an audience with Scamander's Beastly Incorporation, sir," a new voice answered.

Hermione's heart missed a beat as Draco appeared from the shadows of a hallway, silken locks combed back, sleeves of a button-downshirt rolled up to the elbows, as at the end of a busy day. "I've come across some peculiarities regarding magical beasts in your notes that I thought you needn't be troubled with." He smirked in Hermione's direction. "Not when there are two extraordinary Magizoologists in wizarding London for such a purpose."

Hermione's cheeks flamed as butterflies and fairies fluttered in her stomach. Those glittering grey eyes that were just as stunning as she remembered would be the end of her.

"I see," Mr. Ollivander said, as though he didn't really. "Well," he continued, turning his attention back to the stocked shelves. "I'll leave you to it, m'boy. A good evening to you, Miss Granger."
And to you, sir," she answered, stepping up to follow Draco. The narrow hallway he led her down was as dim and damp as she'd always imagined…

Draco's office, however, well… She hadn't been sure of what to expect; however, in the end, she decided that a rectangular room resembling a fully packed trunk seemed appropriate and as she should have guessed all along.

"An office of your very own," she said, lingering at the threshold. "Quite nice."

"Thanks." He shoved his hands into the pockets of his smart black pants and inclined his head in question. "Won't you come in?"

She acquiesced, taking in the shelves and shelves of books, and a less than amply-stocked shelf of what appeared to be wooden cylinders and used carving tools. There was a work table set up to look out of the rooms only window with two chairs pulled up to it. The chair on the right seemed smaller, and it was apparent it had been pulled up for her.

"Very nice," she repeated, allowing a genuine smile to spread across her face.

He shrugged, and pulled out his hands, rubbing them together in slow movements. "Ollivander's is only about the same size, too, believe it or not. It's impressive all he's accomplished in such modest quarters."

Hermione gave an agreeing hum. "Have you made any wands yet?" she asked, tilting her head in the direction of the sparse supply shelf, and wholly unashamed at the excited squeak in her tone.

"Three," he answered, the boyish glint in his eyes undermining his otherwise insouciant expression.

"Malfoy! That's —" she cut herself off, chuckling and shaking her head. "Actually —" she tucked a few curls behind her ear. "To be honest, I've no standard to measure that against, so, while that sounds impressive to me…"

He snorted, and Hermione could only chuckle again, though this time to deflect from the rising flush in her cheeks.

"It could be absolute troll for all I know," she finished lightly, pulling off her coat and scarf.

"Well, Blaise was certainly unimpressed," he said, taking her things and walking over to the chair on the left of the work table. He lay her coat and scarf over the chair on the right and sat in the seat on the left, motioning expectantly at her to sit as well. "The prick actually sat there buffing his nails when I took them to Theo's one night, drawling in that superior tone of his that two out of the three failed to perform..."

The witch choked...then chortled, face aflame as she fixed her gaze on the floor while Draco gave an irritated huff.

"Shit," he swore. "We've been around Theo too long; apologies for the unintentional innuendo, Granger."

"S'alright." Hermione forced her lungs back into normal rhythm and brushed her curls back again while sitting down and taking extra care to appear prim and professional as she crossed her ankles. "But of the wands you made one worked, correct?"

"Yes." If he'd been embarrassed earlier, all traces had faded as mist in the light of Draco's obvious golden beam. "Ollivander seemed quite pleased. He said it was promising for only three months in,
but that, as it is, I lack in understanding some fundamentals of wand cores.” He trailed off, rubbing
his neck and gesturing up-and-down where she sat. "Hence, the Magizoologist consult."

"Oh?" Hermione's back straightened even more of its own accord, the hairs at the nape of her neck
standing on end. "How may I be of assistance then?"

Draco wagged his eyebrows, summoning his essentials (parchment, self-inking quill, green apple)
from the desk with a wandless Accio and smirked. "Dragon heartstrings. Impress me, Granger."

She cleared her throat to cover the thundering of her heart, and then started one of the most glorious
evenings she'd had in a good while. Draco took notes while she talked, at first working his way
through his green apple and only asking questions here-and-there. But when he'd finished and
vanished the bare core, the glimmer took on a mischievous sheen. The atmosphere shifted and the
consult became a meeting of minds and sparring of theories. It was infinitely more than it had ever
been at Hogwarts.

That vibrant spark of magic thrumming in Hermione cackled and crackled down to her core as they
debated, stood and drifted closer around the table, drawing pictures and diagrams. They pored over
Ollivander's notes and consulted three different tomes from Draco's shelves. Everything faded, losing
any meaning it may have had to begin with.

There was only Draco.

And that impossible dimple that appeared when he was truly excited about learning something new.
The way that he stroked his chin while magic churned and bubbled in his brilliant mind. That
determined gleam when he was wrong, because he was already plotting how to have the upper hand
five minutes into the future.

And that insufferable smirk when he said things just because…

"I don't understand how you can believe that!” she exclaimed, eyes wide, and an incredulous hand
on her hip. "The Aurora Borealis, also known as the Northern Lights or the polar lights, is the result
of collisions of gas particles—"

"That's what the Muggles have to call it, because they don't believe in fairies."

Hermione ground her teeth together, pressing her fingers deeper into her hip as that ridiculous smirk
of his broadened.

"It's fairy migration," he continued. "All this scientific nonsense you're spouting off is an elaborate
ruse to explain something really quite simple." He looked her up-and-down, eyes gleaming with a
wicked schoolboy determination. "And only goes to prove that you fancy the ego stoking you get
from using such large and ridiculous words no one else can understand without consulting a
dictionary."

Hermione's foot actually stamped. On the floor. Like child. A petulant child. "You are exasperating,”
she huffed, punctuating each and every syllable. She pivoted and angled herself towards the table,
unable to meet that arrogant expression any more. "How on earth did we end up talking about this?"

"Oh, there's an easy explanation for that, too,” he drawled, as if about to explain something
incredibly obvious or mundane. "You started to blather about the flaws in the Ministry of Magic
Classification Categories, and followed the wood elf path from dragons, to Porlocks, to Merpeople,
Cornish Pixies to where we currently are."

"The 'wood elf path'?" she asked, head snapping back to him, curls whipping around her face.
Draco arched a single perfect, pale eyebrow raised in question. "That Tolkein book you mentioned in your letter back in March, with the dwarves and wizard and hobbit. The dwarves are deceived by the wood elves and end up getting perilously lost…"

She pressed her lips into a thin line, heart welling and swelling as he trailed off, blinking in question, long lashes fluttering softly.

"You don't remember telling me about it, do you?" He seemed genuinely hurt now.

"No, it's not that!" Hermione exclaimed, shaking her head, eager to soothe. "It's just no one reads books I talk about, and—"

A shrill squawking sounded from behind her, and Hermione instinctively covered her head and ducked down without another thought to her previous astonishment.

Boisterous laughter rippled across the room, bounding off the walls as Draco silenced the squawking. Hermione glanced up to find the wizard leaning into the table, laughing, wand out, and lowering to his side.

"Sorry, Granger," he wheezed, still laughing as he straightened up, shaking himself. "Oooh, your face…sorry!"

Her cheeks burned, embarrassed and confused, as she slowly stood upright, letting her arms fall to her sides.

Draco at last collected himself enough to explain, eyes dancing. "It's just my alarm. I want to be sure I'm there for when the Healer drops by to make one of his check-ups on Mother."

"Oh." She rocked on her feet, gathering her bearings back to reality. "Oh! What time is it? I hadn't realized how dark it had become."

"Really? You hadn't noticed that the lights in the room became increasingly brighter as it became darker and darker outside?" He inclined his head to his office window, clearly amused.

Hermione bit the inside of her lip, offering a sheepish half smile, which seemed to please him, because he very suddenly started to beam.

"Ever the swot getting lost in her work," he murmured. "But don't panic, Granger, it's only seven o'clock."

"We've been at this for three hours?"

It was somehow possible for him to beam brighter; tendrils of his warmth reaching out to her... "Just like with N.E.W.T's."

Without any warning, Hermione's throat became as sand, and she struggled to return his genuine smile. She attempted the impossible and managed some awkward sound in an attempt to clear her throat. "Well, part of that was Theo's fault, always going off on idle prattle, but I'm sorry we had to keep rescheduling this consult, Malfoy."

Something serious crossed over his face. Something…unreadable. And intangible, but serious nonetheless. "This is the job you said you wanted; I can't begrudge you for living your dream." He looked away to the window, pensive and preoccupied. "It's nice finally being away from Hogwarts, you know? I'm grateful I could work there that year, with Madam Pince, but some of my plans fell short, and I…"
He snapped his mouth shut, looking back to her, almost pained. "It just wasn't the same after you lot went off. Our letters this past spring helped, but it really meant a lot that you managed the time to attend the wedding."

_Ah yes._ The cold and cruel sting of reality at last.

She cleared her throat again, louder this time and gave a thick swallow. "You only asked about it every other owl; couldn't find the heart to disappoint you in the end..." Because not everyone should have an existence as disappointing and unfair as hers seemed to be.

He considered her a moment, tilting his head. "Will you be here for Theo's Halloween party next week?"

She replied with a sad shake of her head. "Some meetings with the Australian Ministry for the next several days, and I thought I'd see about setting up a teeth cleaning appointment with a practicing dentist couple in Perth..." She added the last admission hesitantly, but it lit something beautiful inside her to see understanding fill his features. "Will you and Astoria be at the party?"

"Don't know." His voice had hardened. "I'll have to see how Mother's day has been, and then... well..." He sighed, shoving his hands into his pockets. "I'd considered it but...probably not."

Hermione swallowed again. "Well, it could be an opportunity to start some new Halloween traditions together."

"We'll see," he clipped, stalking past her, back to his desk.

Hermione padded up to the office door as he gathered and summoned items, settling them into a briefcase. She hated the wall that had started to form between them, and the evening very much could _not_ end like this. It just _couldn't_...

"Theo mentioned wanting to learn some Muggle games since I only have short work trips planned for the near future," she offered, with no small amount of hope or invitation in her voice.

"Oh?"

"Yes. They'll be Friday or Saturday nights starting in November. He said that wouldn't conflict with Healer days for you."

He snapped his briefcase shut, looking directly at her again. Looking for..._something_... "No," he answered. "No, it wouldn't. Sounds like it could be fun."

"It does." She smiled as he joined her by the open door and they walked out to the front of the store.

He unlocked the door, motioning for her to exit first, and followed, locking the door behind him.

"Thank you again for making the time this evening," he said, proffering his hand to her.

She took it, giving it a professional shake, swallowing hard. "Consult us anytime. _Scamander's Beastly Incorporation_ will always strive make the time for your questions."

He released a hard chuckle. "Thanks."

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**Wednesday, 24 April, 2002**

A quarter past eight o'clock in the morning found Hermione's heels clicking down an echoing
hallway, long black robes billowing. She found Courtroom Eight and took a seat on a bench just outside the door.

Various Wizengamot members swathed in plum coloured robes began trickling into the courtroom at half past eight, some giving her curious glances, while others passed without noticing. One wrinkled wizard condescended to ask her if she'd misread the time on her letter, or if she had forgotten how to cast a Tempas charm. Hermione rewarded his inquiry with an innocent smile, stating she'd hate to get lost or be late in case there were any last-minute alterations to the time or location of the proceedings.

The wizard spluttered and reddened and tripped over his robes as he backed through the courtroom door.

Theo and Blaise arrived at twenty minutes to nine.

"Yes, I took it—no, it didn't help," Hermione stated dully, answering the unspoken question in Theo's arched brow.

He blinked once and she shrugged a shoulder. "Dreamless sleep doesn't help if one cannot sleep."

"Fair enough," Theo replied, his lips forming a tight smile. He and Blaise each proffered a hand to her, lifting her from the bench and together, the trio entered the courtroom.

Dark stone, dim lit sconces, and no means of central heating—exactly as Courtroom Five had been almost four years ago, and as Harry had described Courtroom Ten.

Hermione pondered if this were a metaphor for the Ministry's views on truth and justice as positioned herself between the two wizards on a raised bench.

Mr. Greengrass and Daphne followed soon after—Mr. Greengrass stoic as he stalked to claim a front-row seat of the proceedings. Robes of black and green, he reminded Hermione of a coiled snake.

Lips pursed, Daphne hesitated at the door before crossing the threshold and paused at the trio, opening her mouth and snapping it shut before trying again. "I just want you to know," she whispered. "I don't think Draco did it. Neither does Oliver. And I really hate that it's come to this.

She hurried to slip into the seat next to her father before any of them had a chance to respond.

Andromeda and Harry entered the courtroom room and sat together on the bench behind Blaise, Hermione and Theo. Hermione looked back at her friend, finding strength and warmth in his emerald, bespectacled eyes, and he mercifully made no comment of her declined dinner invitations.

Mr. Ollivander entered cautiously, taking a seat next to Harry. Warrington slipped in after, taking a seat near the view back; no visible signs of injury, Hermione observed…

At nine o'clock exactly, the courtroom doors were thrown open, a blast of cold air charging in. Theo and Blaise stiffened in their seats and Hermione clamped down on her knees as Draco was led in.

Wrist bound in magical chains, grey eyes dull and void of emotion, and looking as though he hadn't eaten or slept in days. Aurors Bell and Robards flanked either side of him, marching Draco to a chair in the centre of courtroom and chaining him to the seat.

The Wizengamot member presiding over the trial introduced himself as Mr. Slopes, and promptly asked if the scribe was ready for dictation. The wrinkled wizard indicated to his enchanted quill and the nightmare began.
The crime and charges were repeated, in case anyone might have forgotten the reason for assemblage today.

Robards was called upon first to read the report of the French Aurors who found the deceased—apparently it wasn't necessary to have the actual Aurors present, a slip of parchment was sufficient. He read further reports of initial interviews of the family.

Bell stood next to give account of Warrington's initial custody, his subsequent release and attack on Saturday. After which she read word-for-word from the report that Theo had copied on Monday.

Hermione mouthed along, knowing the bloody document inside out by now.

Draco sat unflinching through it all.

After a brief recess which Blaise, Hermione and Theo remained seated for, not saying a single word, the proceedings continued with the presiding wizard directing a series of questions to Draco. All of which were met with stony silence.

"Will you give an account of the circumstances leading to your marriage with the deceased?"

"Will you give an account of the nature of your relationship with the deceased?"

"Will you give a full account of your whereabouts on Saturday the sixth of April?"

"Have you ever cast hexes, jinxes or curses with any of your experimental wands?"

"Were you keeping these wands a secret?"

"Can you explain how it is that one of them appears to be the instrument of murder?"

Here, at the question-turned-accusation, something happened to indicate Draco had, in fact, heard the wizard speaking — both of the Malfoy heir's hands balled into fists as he sat in silence.

Slopes asked (read: accused) again, "Were the wands designed in secret with the intent of the wilful and premeditated murder of the deceased?"

The chained wizard still did not answer, but, even in the dim light, Hermione could see Draco's knuckles visibly whiten and his jaw clench.

It was just after this that Hermione came to the conclusion breathing must not be all that essential to life after all, she couldn't recall taking a single breath for the duration of Draco's questioning.

She also decided that the two wizards she sat between deserved knighthood, as she'd absently taken one of each of their hands in the midst of Draco's interrogation, squeezing until their knuckles had gone white.

"Sorry," Hermione murmured, releasing their hands when Slopes briefly addressed the scribe.

Theo nudged his shoulder to hers, clenching and unclenching his fist to encourage blood back into his appendages. Blaise grunted, letting his hand dangle over the edge of the bench.

Mr. Greengrass was called upon next to discuss the details of the marriage contract between the deceased and the Malfoy heir.

"It was all standard and regular," he stated. "The contract was signed in my offices in London the very evening after they all arrived back from Hogwarts. The couple were engaged for a whole year
while Astoria finished her seventh year and Draco worked at Hogwarts. Her dowry was paid a week
before the wedding. Draco, Astoria, and Narcissa moved into one of the family homes after the
honeymoon."

Slopes turned to the courtroom scribe and back to Mr. Greengrass. "Was there anything different that
stood out to you at the time? Anything at all about the accused or the contract?"

Mr. Greengrass' dark brow furrowed. "Well, there was something," he hesitantly admitted. "We gave
a brief announcement in the *Prophet* their last week at Hogwarts, before the papers had all been
signed. When Draco came to the office that evening, he stated he would like to amend the contract to
include an annulment clause."

A light burned in Hermione's chest and her breath caught at the timing in Mr. Greengrass'
recolletion. *It couldn't be...*It was too much to hope for...

Mr. Greengrass' answer seemed equally intriguing to the presiding wizard. "Would you elaborate?"
he asked.

Hermione stiffened and swallowed, perfectly aware of Theo's brown eyes boring a hole into the side
of her head, and decidedly ignoring him.

Mr. Greengrass acquiesced, almost cautiously. "I don't recall the exact wording, but in summary: If
no heir is produced within the first five years, the marriage would be null and void; or, after at least
one year and with the full and willing agreement of both parties."

"Would the dowry have to be paid back?"

"Yes, but in instalments if need be." Mr. Greengrass' face had turned to ash, almost reflecting what
little light there was in the room. "I almost hoped Astoria would be pregnant soon after the wedding.
Thought some stability and a strong family name would mature her and she'd grow out of her wild
quirks..."

A tidal wave of nausea assaulted Hermione. She could hardly breathe. How small-minded this man
was to arrange a marriage for his daughter, barely more than a child herself, and to wish a child on
her to help her grow-up. And to put the weight of his hopes and dreams on Draco...

Plum-purple Slopes paused to ensure the court scribe was keeping up before continuing. "Who
would inherit the money in their joint vault in the event of Mrs. Malfoy née Greengrass' death?"

Hermione swallowed hard in the pregnant pause before Mr. Greengrass answered, almost under
duress. "Draco."

A hushed murmur moved through the Wizengamot members and Slopes had to speak over them. "Is
there anything else you'd care to add, Mr. Greengrass?"

"No, sir." Mr. Greengrass avoided eye contact with Draco as he returned to his seat.

Daphne was called upon next and then Warrington. Anyone in attendance looking for scandalous
details of a torrid affair would have been thoroughly disappointed. Daphne knew very little, or at
least she feigned a delicate constitution in her time of grief for questions to simply be moved along
from. And Warrington was nothing if not discreet.

He clung to his story of love and stupidity and a guilty conscience as a lifeline in a storm. And, no —
he hadn't an inkling if Draco knew about them or not.
"Nor would he have cared," Theo muttered, which earned an agreeing snort from Blaise and an elbow in the ribs from Hermione.

Warrington stepped down and the next name was called.

"Miss Hermione Jean Granger, Magizoologist of Scamander's Beastly Incorporation."
“It seems you've been here before, Miss Granger."

Hermione crossed her ankles, straightening in her witness seat, declining to take the bait that the beak-nose, plum swathed Slopes dangled before her. She sat and blinked up at the wizard, placid and calm. He would never know that her mouth felt as ash.

The wizard arched a brow. "Am I to take it, Miss Granger, that you will not be answering questions, as well?"

"No, sir," she answered, looking him right in eye. "But, you didn't ask me a question."

The wizard cleared his throat even as soft murmurs rippled through the seated Wizengamot. "Do you know why you were summoned to be a witness for the defence of the accused?"

_Scamander's Beastly Incorporation_ has received consult requests from Mr. Ollivander's wand shop, and I have been the Magizoologist to respond on several occasions."

"How many instances have you been the Magizoologist to fulfil this request, Miss Granger?"

"Five consult requests, sir."

"One after the other, or all in the span of a month? Two months?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes, uneasy about this line of questioning. "October 2000 was the first appointment. Next there was January 2001, followed by March 2001, July 2001, September 2001, and then April 2002."

She snapped her mouth shut and her heart slammed in her chest. Merlin and the Founders, but she couldn't swallow, couldn't _breathe_...

Slopes inclined his head to her, arching a condescending brow. "But, that's actually six occasions, Miss Granger."

"Yes, sir," she answered, feigning an air of composure. "I'd forgotten about last week, the day that
Warrington was brought in."

"Ah. Well, as long as you remember it now…We must be accurate and thorough with all our facts, Miss Granger," Slopes drawled, tapping his chin. "In this handful of instances, would you say you're an expert as to the alleged reformed character of the accused?"

Hermione ground her teeth, counting to five in her head to keep from lashing out something she'd only regret (but then, she was well practiced with *that* by now…). "My experience with Mr. Malfoy from our first year at Hogwarts all the way through our sixth year had hardly been civil, sir. However, in the times we have met professionally, Mr. Malfoy has never been anything other than courteous, kind, inquisitive, and respectful."

"Could you elaborate there, Miss Granger?"

"I think my explanation speaks for itself, sir," she answered stiffly, eyes narrowing, self-restraint already waning. "Where Mr. Malfoy once disdained the very air I breathed and insulted my blood, he has now come full circle to not simply accepting my professional council, but also becoming one of my friends."

Her answer seemed to almost amuse her interrogator. "Indeed," he drawled. "Would you expound upon this *friendship* with the accused?"

Hermione lifted her chin, refusing to allow her eyes to flutter to a chained, straight-back Draco.

"I have come to know Mr. Malfoy as an intelligent and compassionate friend. He is ambitious and loyal and will sacrifice anything for those he cares most about."

Vague, but all true, and much to Hermione's relief, Slopes did not delve further into her personal feelings, instead taking a new direction for the interrogation.

"In your capacity as *friend* to the accused, Miss Granger, had he ever spoken harshly or against his wife?"

"Not that I can recall, sir," Hermione answered honestly. "They seemed to be civil enough with each other."

"Oh? And, you would know this because of frequent contact with the accused, Miss Granger?"

Hermione pressed her hands into her lap to keep from crossing them indignantly and huffing. "I'm not sure what grand admission you're searching for, sir. Mr. Malfoy is my friend, but I travel quite frequently with my job. During the encounters we have had with each other, professional or with mutual friends, Mr. Malfoy has never said an ill word against his wife to me."

Slopes sat back in his seat, drumming the fingers of his right hand in mid-air, and the entire courtroom shifted and shuffled. The scribe seemed to ready himself for the witness, when Slopes leaned forward again, composed and serene.

"Miss Granger, you said you travel with your job?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you away recently?"

"Yes, sir." Hermione nodded, beginning to feel adrift in unchartered waters, uncertain why this was relevant. "I've been in Australia since last October, only returned earlier this month."
"I see," the wizard acknowledged. "You mentioned having a professional appointment with the accused this month?"

Hermione's heart inexplicably began to race. "Yes, sir."

Cold eyes narrowed again. "What date was that, Miss Granger?"

"Monday the fifteenth, sir."

"And had you seen him before that time, Miss Granger?"

Her hands clenched in her lap. "Very briefly the Monday before, sir. Monday morning the eighth." Her voice was soft and uncertain, blood thundered through her veins.

"Where did you see the accused that morning, Miss Granger?"

She blinked, unclenching her hands. "Nott Manor, sir."

"And, why was the accused there?"

An insane cackle sounded in her head as she fought to keep from giving an incredulous snort. "Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Nott have been friends since they were young children, sir. Why wouldn't one of his nearest friends invite him into his home in a time of need?"

The wizard's eyes hardened further still. "But, how exactly does that explain your presence, Miss Granger?"

Hermione ground her feet to the floor, fighting the urge to leap from her chair, blood now boiling and heart raging against its bony cage. "Monday morning, the eighth of April, I was scheduled to have a consult with Mr. Malfoy at the wand shop," she snapped, wishing her glare could burn a hole right through that absurd silver 'W' sewn into the wizard's robes. "Mr. Ollivander explained that Mr. Malfoy was not present and showed me his copy of *The Daily Prophet*, and I knew Mr. Nott would be a more trustworthy resource than whatever rubbish had been printed."

Her chest heaved and she clenched her hands into fists in the midst of her outburst.

Mr. Slopes canted his head, something dangerous blooming on his face. "Is this another forgotten consult at Ollivander's, Miss Granger?"

Icy, invisible fingers clamped on Hermione's throat. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, forcing the words out.

"You previously said that your consult this month was the day of the fifteenth, which was, incidentally, the day Mr. Warrington was brought in to the Ministry. But, now you say you had a consult scheduled for the Monday previous, on the eighth." He paused, eyes narrowing. "The Monday after the murder of Mrs. Malfoy née Greengrass—is that correct?"

Her face went cold. Colder than ice. "Yes, sir." Perhaps her voice hadn't shaken…

"Did the accused owl you to schedule this appointment?"

"No, sir." Her tongue had turned to ash and she tried very hard to set her jaw.

"Did Mr. Ollivander owl to arrange this appointment?"

"No, sir."
"Did Mr. Ollivander schedule this appointment for Mr. Malfoy with Scamander's Beastly Incorporation in person?"

Hermione had never wished so hard for something horrible to happen. Anything to keep from being dragged down this devastating line of questioning. "No, sir."

The wizard's eyes glittered under a cruel sheen. "Is that to say that the accused made the appointment in person?"

"Yes, sir." There was no mistaking the crack in her voice this time; It bounded off the walls of this stifling room, making its way to slam into her chest.

"Was the accused in Australia for this face-to-face scheduling?"

Hot fluid stung the corners of her eyes as her eyelids began an automatic rapid flutter. "No, sir."

"London, then? Or somewhere else in Britain?"

"No, sir." Nonononono. The word became a mantra, a shout. A plea to anyone or any deity listening.

"Then where, Miss Granger, did this interlude occur—we're all very intrigued by now," he asked, haughty and condescending.

She couldn't blink fast enough. The pooling tears slid down her cheeks. "Paris," she uttered the singular admission finally, wrenched from her clenched, protective fists.

"What's that, Miss Granger?" Slopes inclined his ear to her, even as all members of the Wizengamot leaned forward in perfect unison. "Speak up, girl. And all the specific details, if you please."

"Paris," she repeated, lip trembling. "I was in Paris Saturday night, the sixth of April. Mr. Scamander requested I take a meeting with the French Ministry on Sunday for him, and I spent the night before in Paris."

"And the accused was in Paris that day, the sixth of April, the day of his wife's murder?"

Hermione nodded, numb and defeated. "Yes, sir."

An eerie stillness fell over the courtroom as all meaning and purpose in life drained from the witch, traveling through the chair, collecting in a puddle that a child tramples upon in the rain. Splashing and kicking and stomping over until there's nothing left.

She was torn between finding Draco's eyes, showing him the depths of her contrite devastation in a shared broken look and wishing to never have him glance in her direction again. He could only loathe her again after this. Hate her and curse her. Curse her name from a dank and dark prison cell...

Slopes seemed determined to torture her still. "Where precisely in Paris did this interlude take place, Miss Granger?"

She squeezed her eyes even her eyes shed tears she apparently still had to shed. "At a coffee shop in wizarding Paris. Across the street from La Roseraie."

"Fascinating." Hermione could hear the wicked glint in his eyes even as her eyes remained closed. "Did the accused say what he was doing in Paris, Miss Granger?"

"No, sir," she whispered, opening her eyes and shaking her head.
"Did the accused mention his wife?"

"No," she exclaimed, wincing in the aftermath. *Too firm.*

"Really?" A single brow arched. "Not a single word in passing or small talk between friends, Miss Granger?"

"Only that..." Her head spun, mouth *so very* dry. "I asked him if he was there to surprise Astoria—I'd bumped into her in Muggle Paris earlier in a bookstore. We were running from the rain. She left before I did and our paths didn't cross again..."

"And how did the accused respond?" The plum-swathed prig leaned forward, as in great anticipation.

Hermione swallowed hard, hating the words on her tongue as she met those gleaming eyes. "He said that Astoria would be surprised to see him."

The entire Wizengamot erupted. Dozens were on their feet, calling for an immediate vote. Others jumped up to argue with their fellow members. The rest were facing the presiding wizard, pointing at Draco...Hermione thought she detected the word *Veritaserum* in there.

"*Silence!*" Mr. Slopes had risen, looking victorious. "We will proceed with the remainder of the witness list—thank you, Miss Granger. That will be all." He dismissed her with a disdainful wave and remained standing until Hermione stood to trudge back to her seat.

Her feet were as lead as she plodded for an indeterminable amount of time back to her seat between two of three wizards she'd just betrayed. Every muscle tense and rigid as she sat and wound her fingers together in her lap.

The wizards had mercy on her sanity and mirrored her stoic silence, offering no absolving words of comfort, no sedating arms of consolation. She would only have brushed it all away if they tried.

Back in her own seat, she focused all her attention on her torturer, allowing all else to fade into the background, and only catching highlights for the duration of the proceedings.

Andromeda's name was called next, and the affectionate hand to Hermione's shoulder the witch offered as she rose from behind only faintly registered in Hermione's mind. Slopes treated the pureblood matriarch's testimony as a cautious, almost patronizing, interview rather than an interrogation. Andromeda was poise and compliments, using phrases like 'loving son', 'affectionate cousin', 'sacrifices', and 'burdens a child shouldn't have to bear'. Hermione could only hope the Wizengamot was listening as well.

Mr. Ollivander's interview followed, and funny enough, there were no pressing inquiries of Hermione or consultations from *Scamander's Beastly Incorporation*. Slopes actually looked as if he considered this interview to be a thorough waste of time, the banal and trivial opinions of a senile wizard.

Harry sat in the witness chair last, although Hermione guessed Theo had only listed him more for the prestige and respect due him than anything—Harry's limited experience with Draco since the war revolved around Teddy and the occasional pick-up Quidditch game...

The court scribe read aloud two surprisingly exceptional reference letters written by Headmistress McGonagall and Madam Pince, neither of whom were able to physically leave the school grounds at this busy time of year. It touched something deep in Hermione's heart to know they'd made the effort, almost dispelling the numbing guilt.
Almost.

The Wizengamot conferred amongst themselves before Slopes declared, for reasons Hermione did not catch but soon deemed inconsequential, that they would reconvene tomorrow for a final vote.

Wizengamot members left the courtroom first, carrying on in conversations as they sauntered out, as if this were one of many trivial agenda items on a long list for the day.

Draco was led from the courtroom next, chained, stoic, and flanked by Aurors Robards and Bell. His jaw clenched as they passed his defence team, but his eyes did not wander or waver from their fixed state. Hermione's heart sank to the floor as his billowing robes crossed the threshold.

"Hermione." Harry's voice sounded as from a distance...something brushed against her curls...

Which woke her from her numb stupor.

One moment she was a lifeless statue, and the next she was shoving passed Blaise, filled with purpose. She caught herself from stumbling over her heels, and bolted out the courtroom door without looking back.

She searched left then right down, down, down the corridor…

With no sign of Draco or his bodyguards. They must have Apparated directly to where he was being kept. Maybe she could try to see if—

A hand brushed her elbow and she flinched, curls tumbling as she looked back.

"Hermione," Theo tried, his voice heavy and low.

"Get away from me," she snapped, hot tears flooding and stinging her eyes again. Merlin, how was it possible she still had tears left?

"Hermione, it's—"

"Don't!" She yanked a handful of curls behind her ear, willing the useless tears to recede. "It's done, Theo. It's over. He's not talking and…and I…They…"

Her lip trembled and she clapped her hands over her mouth. A headline in tomorrow's newspaper flashed in her mind, 'Malfoy Heir to Azkaban at Last'…

"Oh gods..." she whispered as nausea unlike any she'd ever known before crashed over her. She was weightless and there was sand in her mouth, and she needed…

Hard fingers dug into her shoulders, the pain yanking her from a sinkhole of despair. "You listen to me, Granger!" Theo hissed.

She blinked, flitting her gaze across his hardened features and then beyond him. Harry, Andromeda and Blaise lingered near the courtroom door, united in silent uncertainty.

Theo's fingers dug deeper, releasing after she winced and focused again on him. "You were provoked. Do you hear me?" he growled, eyes blazing. "You. Were. Provoked," he repeated, emphasizing each word. "The bloody purple sod had no reason to ask you about your work, your travels, anything, outside of what pertained to the case."

Hermione's mind whirred. "You're saying—"
"I'm saying he knew, Golden Girl!" Theo stepped closer, keeping his voice low. "I'm not saying what exactly he knew, but someone somehow alerted the old shit that Miss Hermione Granger knew something and just needed to be pushed."

The witch's heart stuttered even as Theo continued talking. "You were a just a bloody character reference. You heard what the interviews after you were like. None of the prodding and interrogating. You did your job flawlessly, and he had no choice but to rile you up to get you to spill what you knew."

Her eyes widened as his words rang in her ear. Something akin to a bell of hope.

"Can we ask Harry to investigate and call for a mistrial, or…?" She trailed off as Theo shook his head.

"Useless at this point, Hermione. Slopes could justify his line of questioning by saying your support seemed suspicious and he was doing his due diligence by making further inquiries."

"Okay." She nodded, fingers twitching at her sides. "Okay, so what can we do?"

The wizard heaved a deep, exaggerated sigh. "You need to go home—"

"But—"

"Shut it, dearie," he interrupted her protest, covering her mouth with his hand. "Someone knew enough of you, your whereabouts or schedule to tip the presiding wizard off. Which means you are going home," he said again, face hardening. "You're going to let Potter or Blaise go with you, preferably both, and you're going to search your flat for any sign or trace of anything out of place or nefarious. And tonight, you're going to take a sleeping draught, and another dreamless draught if you'd like."

Something in Theo's face softened as he continued. "If I do my job right, you're going to need a good night's sleep tonight."

She stood there, just breathing, for several long moments. Ruminating and gathering her sanity before finally nodding. "What will you be doing, Theo?"

He responded with a humourless half smile. "What I've always done," he answered vaguely, ushering her back to the trio at the door.

"You and Blaise will need to escort the lady home, Potter," Theo instructed as they joined the tight circle.

Harry's green eyes blinked in confusion at the lack of preamble. "I don't recall answering to you, Nott," he retorted.

Blaise snorted as Theo rolled his eyes.

"Consider it a well-meaning suggestion that you should take seriously, if that better suits your ego, then. I think we can all agree—" he paused to look everyone in the eye "—the vindictive old sod knew something, enough to pry when Hermione's interview should have ended. And if you value your friend at all, Potter—" he pointed from Harry to Hermione, finally jabbing that aristocratic finger in Harry's chest, driving his point home "—I suggest you use some of that Gryffindor sixth sense you're so famous for and sniff around the hovel she calls home for something amiss!"

With that, he snatched back his hand and stormed off, marching in the direction of the elevators.
Harry's mouth hung ajar before he actually shook himself before yelling a response. "And just what will you be doing?"

"I don't answer to you, Chosen One!" Theo called over his shoulder without pausing in stride, leaving stunned witches and wizards in his wake.

Blaise recovered first and proffered his arm to Andromeda, offering to escort her back-up to the Floo systems. Harry offered Hermione a weak smile, nudging them to follow.

"Theatrical and far too dramatic," Harry mumbled, "but he's not wrong, Hermione."

Unbearable weight pressed on the witch's chest as she drew a shallow breath. "Doesn't help anything without proof."

"I know," the wizard sighed and snatched Hermione's hand as they walked, applying generous pressure. A couple of times he opened his mouth, likely to scold her for cancelling and rescheduling dinner, but he'd snap it shut before a word could pass his lips—and for that, Hermione was grateful. The only thing that could be worse than this weighty silence would be a conversation full of promises that couldn't be kept, false hopes, and pitying reassurances.

When they reached the Floo systems, Andromeda pulled Hermione in, wrapping her arms tight around Hermione's shoulders, carding her fingers through the young witch's curls. "This is not the end, my dear," she whispered into her hair. "And Narcissa would have been honoured to hear you speak so highly of her son."

Hermione squeezed her eyes tight, choking on a sob in the witch's shoulder, unable to manage the voice for a simple 'thank you'. Andromeda's grip finally loosened and Hermione reluctantly stepped out of the witch's arms. She cupped Hermione's cheek with a hand, swiping at tears with the pad of her thumb. "You betrayed no one," she whispered, as if this were for Hermione's ears only.

A strangled watery laugh escaped from Hermione's throat as Andromeda pulled away and disappeared in a roar of green flames.

Harry was at her side in an instant, nudging her shoulder in that familiar way with his own. "Will your wards still let me through?" he asked.

She nodded in the affirmative, and he entered the fireplace next, making a point to state it was not because some git made a theatrical scene in the middle of a corridor that would put Hamlet to shame.

Blaise gestured for her to enter next, muttering about the predictability of Gryffindor bravery. Hermione rewarded his attempt at distraction with a half-hearted snort as she entered the fireplace, allowing the green flames to transport her home.

The trio diligently searched her flat, finding nothing that could be reported as off, suspicious or dubious. Harry had her join him on the front porch of the building to check for anything questionable outside.

Her brow puckered as she tried to focus, shoving aside the numbing and throbbing ache threatening to swallow her whole. Her gaze combed distant buildings and sidewalk before settling at last on the ominous painted dark grey brick home across the street.

It had been the colour of Draco's shirt today and she found it impossible to look away; losing herself instead to the image of tracing the contours of his lean build over said grey shirt. Shivering as her fingers skimmed up his arms, briefly massaged his shoulders before curling around his collar as she looked deep into his shining grey eyes and finally threading into—
Her fantasy came to an abrupt halt as she thought she saw something shimmer across the street, as when seeing something under the cloak of a disillusion charm. She blinked twice and shook her head, tilting her head as she studied the house again.

"Anything, Hermione?" Harry asked.

Was there?

She squinted a moment longer before looking away. "Nothing, Harry," she answered, following him back inside, even as she fought to convince herself that the brief shimmer in the shadows of the grey building had only been her imagination.

Chapter End Notes

thoughts? You should know ch18 is one of my favorites...I'm excited to share it with you all next...
Thursday, 6 September, 2001

"Dragons breathe fire, Granger!"

"Immaterial, Malfoy."

Draco shot upright from his position of hunched debating, looking as though he'd been slapped. "You're not serious."

Hermione tutted at his non-question. "Manifestations of magic in magical creatures is not a reliable standard to quantify or qualify their magic—or even compare it! A bowtruckle may not breathe fire, but as being drawn to magic it tends to inhabit trees with magic, thus making them excellent indicators for wood used in wands—"

"But trees with magical tendencies are not limited to bowtruckle colonies," he countered, a roguish glint in his eyes. "And anyway, that's saying whether creature is of use, which is not the same thing."

"It is," she hissed, "because you were talking about magical creatures with flamboyant magical manifestations, while I simply pointed out that there is simply too much a variety of magical beings out there with varying compositions, habits, and instincts to assess their magic against such reductionist standards!"

It was a rebuttal she was quite please with...until a lone, perfect, alabaster brow arched at her.

*Bugger...*

"So, what you've just said is that we may never know to the fullest measure exactly how 'magical'—" he punctuated the word with air quotes "—a magical creature is, because any standard we could possibly contrive, in the end, would still be inadequate and diminutive?"

It was necessary to pause and consider—there was just *something* in his tone. "Yes," she answered, begrudging and on the alert.

Draco blinked. "So you've just agreed with what you argued to begin with."

The metaphorical tables had suddenly turned. "Wait a—"
"Ah, ah." Draco wagged a finger. "If the magic cannot truly and accurately be quantified, there are infinite possibilities with wand cores. The results themselves could vary solely on the wood of the wand. Or, it could be that the magic is stored in different places, and which means that all one would need is a larger quantity of a part to produce the same results."

Hermione growled, folding her arms. "I suppose that could be correct."

Symphonic laughter broke free from the wizard's chest, heating the office to dangerous levels. It became imperative she stare down at her shoes and gnaw on the inside of her lip to keep herself from saying and doing a great many things...

"Don't look so despairing, witch." He nudge her shoe with his. "We've both just given credence to the eventual position I may have with testing wand cores one day. Ollivander isn't infallible and there are a great many combinations out there yet to have been tried."

Her mouth went dry and the simple act of swallowing became an insurmountable feat. She crossed one leg over the other and looked back up. "Why this debate then?"

The injustice of it all that he should bear such an endearing expression as he leaned back in. "Because I want you to admit at last that I am the delightful one, while Theo is a loquacious narcissist."

All the tension snapped and dissipated at that wholly unexpected explanation, and Godric help her, Hermione giggled. And couldn't stop. The pent-up frustration at last had an appropriate outlet and she cackled until tears streamed down her cheeks.

She could see flushed irritation in the narrowness of his eyes, the stiffness in his posture and how he'd angled himself away from her as she tried to regain control of herself. Oh, dear.

"Merlin, Draco," she gasped, swiping at her eyes and cheeks. "Don't take offense, of course you're the delightful one."

His ire melted leaving uncertainty, and something terrifying and wonderful in his darkening eyes, and she realized her rare slip.

"I didn't mean to laugh," she rushed, back-pedalling into a safe-place. "You just—"

"Draco, are you ready—oh!"

Startled by the interruption, Hermione scrambled up from her seat, wincing as her leg made contact with Draco's worktable, and offered a strained nod to Andromeda and Theo now standing in the office doorway.

"Hello, Hermione," the two newcomers chorused.

Draco snorted, rising with ease. "I see how it is. I'm ordered about, but the witch gets a proper greeting."

"Obviously," Theo answered with a roll of his eyes. "Didn't know you were coming with us too, Hermione."

"Coming? I'm not...that is, I'm here for a consult."

"My fault," Draco nudged her shoulder from behind. "Lost track of time with my Magizoologist consult, but yes, I'm ready now."
"Actually," Andromeda interjected, "If you're available I'd like it if you came with us, Hermione. I would be bringing you and Harry along at some point anyways."

"Erm..."

"Perfect." Draco flashed her an expectant look. "You don't have plans after this, do you?" It didn't seem to be a question as much as it was a statement.

Or perhaps request?

"No, but—"

"Excellent." Before she could determine how, Hermione was out the door and caught up in Andromeda's arms.

The middle-aged witch offered a warm smile, traces of sorrow marring her otherwise flawless complexion. "This is all turning out quite fortuitous," she said as they all exited the wand shop, Theo and Draco bearing twin serious expressions and inclining their heads as encouragement for the witch to explain. "I wasn't too keen to explain to Teddy we were looking at a gravesite."

"Oh!" Hermione struggled to pull herself free, this wasn't her place, even if... "This is really just for family; I shouldn't be intruding."

She was silenced by Andromeda's arm only tightening around her. "Please come," she pleaded softly. "The Medi-Witch, Miss Clearwater, was so gracious to stay a little longer and keep Teddy with her and my sister while we did this, and I was unable to locate Astoria for some feminine support—"

A snort sounded from the gentlemen, but Hermione couldn't determine which.

"And, as I said, I'd like for you to come as well," Andromeda continued, warm eyes taking on a sudden glossy sheen. "It's not just for...preparing..." she shuddered at the awful word. "But I want to set up tombstones for Ted, Sirius, Regulus, Nymphadora, and Remus—not move the already buried! Just...have the stones all near each other for one place to visit."

Andromeda's eyes were now brimming and she blinked furiously to keep them from spilling over. "I think the Black brothers should be reunited again, if only symbolically. And Harry should have a place to visit with his godfather, if he'd like..."

A lump rivalling the size of an ashwinder egg formed in Hermione's throat. What sort of heartless person would decline such an earnest invitation?

Her hands closed over the portkey next to Andromeda's, with Draco's perfect and warm fingers brushing against hers as the portkey activated.

A pity neither agonized screaming nor adoring puddling were appropriate outlets of frustration.

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**Saturday, 22 September, 2001**

"Bloody hell this is a bad idea," Hermione swore under her breath.

_Merlin's beard...This was a disaster waiting to happen..._

Andromeda invited her to join her for tea with Narcissa sometime this month. An actual _proper_ tea,
Hermione had agreed upon a date earlier this week, and now she was stumbling out of a fireplace, having the family house-elf sniff with disapproval (likely at her choice of comfortable sundress, cardigan and flats instead of the usual fancy attire of the young Mrs. Malfoy) and following said magical creature's condescending instructions to Narcissa's bedroom.

Hermione rounded a landing before coming to the final set of stairs to the second floor when an electric cackle filled the air that turned her blood to ice. Her hand froze on the smooth banister.

The laughter grew wilder, more frenzied.

Bile rose in her throat as cold fear sank into her marrow. A sickening loop of cries and pleas and 'we found it, we found it' echoed in her mind.

"Cissy!"

_Narcissa! _She was alone and defenceless!

Hermione flew up the last flight of stairs…raced to the second door on the right…burst through the door, wand drawn!

"Ah, Hermione! I see Mipsy gave you sufficient instructions, I wasn't too sure if…"

Andromeda Tonks trailed off as Hermione remained in the doorway. She could see with her own two eyes that it was Narcissa Malfoy sitting up a bed that looked very much like a hospital bed from St. Mungo's, draped with luxury designer-looking sheets.

"Hello," Hermione said, mentally wincing at the strain in her voice, willing her feet to cross the threshold. "Sorry. Dark hallway." She swallowed, stepping further into the room, closer to the sisters Black, plastering a smile across her face. "Mipsy said she be along soon…"

"Lovely, thank you, dear." Andromeda rose and hugged Hermione with such poise and grace that Hermione almost questioned if she knew what had transpired in Hermione's mind. The flicker of hurt in the woman's eyes as she pulled back and led Hermione to Narcissa's bedside was all the answer she needed.

"Good afternoon, Narcissa," Hermione greeted brightly, taking her hand and masking her shock at the witch's deterioration in a matter of a few months. Her pallor, sunken eyes, thinned cheeks, and icy fingers would have been indicative enough of the curse's advances in claiming the life of Narcissa Malfoy, but what was most telling was the woman's obvious hesitancy, if not embarrassment, to respond.

The witch's cheeks flushed as her mouth opened slowly. "Miss Granger," she whispered, though 'struggled' or 'managed' may be more appropriate. Her eyes flashed as the red in her cheeks deepened.

Hermione's heart sank and she pressed a kiss to the woman's fingers and cheeks before conjuring herself a chair across from Andromeda's, holding tight to the Narcissa's hand. To the one honest and pure thing linking her to this sense of aching belonging.

Andromeda ran her fingers over Hermione's curls before resuming her position beside her sister, as Hermione continued looking at the terminal witch, admiring her poise even in this debilitating state.

"You know, I've never been overly fond of nicknames," Hermione started, attempted for normalcy in conversation. "But, if it would be easier for you, I'd be honoured to allow you to be the first person
to simply call me 'My'. Or 'Her', or 'Knee' if it'd be easier."

The witch's face curled into a snarl that mirrored one Draco wore the first time he'd been introduced to fish 'n chips, and Hermione couldn't help the giggle that slipped from her lips. Andromeda chuckled along as well, running a loving hand over her sister's simple, but neat, braid.

"What about just 'Granger' then?" Andromeda countered. "It's what Draco calls her."

Narcissa rolled her eyes, tutting, even as the corners of her lips quirked upwards. "Granger," she conceded, faux duress not fully hiding the relief shining in her eyes.

Hermione beamed in return, releasing Narcissa's hand, looking between the sisters. "Perfect. And while Mipsy is still not here with the tea, you must share with me what was so funny that I found it necessary to race the last flight of stairs and burst in to join the two of you like an ill-bred plebeian."

"Oh!" Andromeda visibly brightening, sharing a look with her sister. "I don't think even Harry knows this story," she began, sinking back into her chair. "One summer when we were still very young, before Hogwarts, there was a week that we three sisters stayed at Grimmauld Place while Mother and Father went on a trip. Dear cousin Sirius ordered Kreacher to charm all the bathroom mirrors to reflect that we girls had grown a pig's snout. And the charm was specific to the three of us sisters."

"Ha! Really?"

"Oh yes." Andromeda nodded. "Aunt Wallaburga would have had a fit if she'd seen a pig's snout looking back at her in the mirror. Cissy here is the sly trickster who came up with our sweet revenge —I'd never heard Sirius scream so loud."

Hermione could have snorted; the list of commonalities Draco shared with his mother grew longer all the time. She cast a side look at Narcissa, quirking a brow. "And what devious plot did you concoct to merit such a reaction?"

"Hair," she answered, an honest-to-Merlin smirk spreading across her face.

"His hair?"

Andromeda, pureblood grandmother and oldest living matriarch of 'The Most Ancient and Noble House of Black', chortled into her hands, overcome with another fit of laughter (albeit more controlled than before).

"Hermione, you remember his vanity," (snicker). "Sirius always loved his hair. And we—" (laugh, hand to Narcissa's arm). "Cissy went directly to Father about something for his hair. And Father—" (giddy hand clapping now) "—Father slipped a potion in his pumpkin juice at dinner one night the next month when the boys stayed with us, and—" (clutching her sides, laughing) "—and it vanished his hair that night!" (Heaving breath). "Sirius thought he'd gone bald overnight! And Mother took us all to Diagon Alley for new robe fittings and everything that day!"

By this point, Hermione had joined in the laughter; Andromeda was doubled over in her chair, and Narcissa was silently chuckling, leaning back into her propped pillows. It was in this state of hysterics that Mipsy appeared with a loud ‘crack’, scowling and disapproving as she queried Andromeda where she would like the tea service set up.

"Right here will do, Mipsy," Andromeda answered, recovering first, seamlessly slipping into role of matron and hostess. "Hermione, if you would be so kind as to scoot your chair back while Mipsy sets up the tea."
An elegant carved wood tray table appeared over Narcissa's lap, and Andromeda immediately rose to re-fluff and reposition some of the propped pillows behind her sister. Narcissa uttered a hushed 'thank you', which Mipsy did not acknowledge, snapping her fingers instead, summoning a table and entire delicious spread of scones, clotted cream, pots of lemon curd and marmalade, a steaming pot of tea, and all the necessary accompanying chinaware. Mipsy disappeared with a 'crack', not even asking if they required anything else.

"Help yourself, Hermione," Andromeda said, already plating a scone with cream and lemon curd and setting it on Narcissa's tray. "Try with the cream and take small bites, Cissy. But let me pour your tea first."

Hermione plopped a scone in her plate, opened her napkin over her lap and waited for Andromeda to ready her sister's tea before reaching out to pour her own.

The teapot almost slipped from her fingers as a fit of coughing sounded from the bed and Narcissa's teacup clattered to the tray table. Andromeda had vanished the splatter and was already up and rubbing her sister's back, voice low and soothing.

"Should I send for Penelope?" Hermione offered, feeling useless and rather slow at the moment.

"No, we're alright, thank you."

Narcissa's coughing began to calm and she began to draw deeper and more controlled breaths, all the while offering Hermione an apologetic expression.

"Sorry," Narcissa croaked, pushing her plate away with two fingers.

Hermione smiled softly. "No matter. Andromeda had everything cleaned up before I had a chance to try to assist."

"The coughing fits started earlier this month and we've just had to take things slow...and use my anti-breaking charmed dishes." The attempt as humour was clear, but Andromeda's face told a very different story.

Hermione frowned, inclining her head pensively, inching forward in her chair. "Is that about the time talking became more difficult?"

"Yes," Andromeda replied.

Narcissa's angular face flushed red, nevertheless, she gave a stiff nod.

Hermione chewed her lip, pondering before standing and lifting the table out of the way with a flick of her wand. "Would you mind if we try a little experiment with your tea, Narcissa?"

"Experiment?" Andromeda voiced and Narcissa arched an uncertain brow.

The younger witch nodded, pouring a small amount of tea into Narcissa's cup. "One of my grandmothers developed a swallowing difficulty before I attended Hogwarts. When we visited her, her medical, or healing, staff would add a powder to her fluids to thicken them and make it easier for her to swallow...May I sit down?" Hermione asked, indicating to the edge of the bed.

Narcissa nodded and Hermione lowered herself gingerly, drawing up her wand. "And this summer, when I had to have three wisdom teeth pulled, I took the opportunity to play around with some spells to have a similar effect." She drew two small clockwise circles over the cup of tea, backtracking with one counter clockwise turn, whispering, "Cogulato."
Lowering her wand, she swirled the steaming cup in her hand, pleased to find the tea had thickened to a smooth nectar consistency. "Do you add milk or sugar to your tea, Narcissa?" she asked, lifting up and angling herself to the table.

"No, thank you," Narcissa answered, giving the teacup a dubious stare.

Hermione picked up the accompanying saucer and set the two on Narcissa tray, folding her hands in nervous expectation. "I know it looks glossy, but I couldn't do anything about that without having other negative effects on the beverage, and…"

She allowed her unnecessary chattering to cease as Narcissa picked up the cup, glanced up at her sister, who offered an encouraging nod, and brought the cup to her mouth, blowing lightly at the steam.

She took a cautious first sip.

Hermione and Andromeda blinked in watchful silence as Narcissa eyed and swirled the contents in her cup, blew again and took another sip. And then another.

Not a single cough between sips.

Andromeda's hands tightened around her sister's shoulders. Narcissa brought up her other hand, cradling the delicate cup, eyes taking on a glassy sheen as they met Hermione's.

"Perfect. Thank you." Narcissa's face broke out into a sudden beam as she looked beyond Hermione, calling out, "Draco!" before Hermione had a chance to give any sort of response.

"Good afternoon, ladies."

Dreaded and aching joy squeezed at Hermione's heart as she turned around.

"Hello, Nephew," Andromeda greeted brightly. "I'd have given instructions for four if I'd known you were coming home."

Draco shook his head, expression soft and warm and entirely focused on his mother. "I'm not here to intrude, I just wanted Mother to see I was home." He slipped between the table and Hermione to press a tender kiss to Narcissa's temple. "Enjoying your tea, Mother?"

"Yes." Narcissa lowered the teacup to the tray, cupping her son's face with her free hand. "Granger helped."

"I saw," he murmured, pecking his mother's cheek before straightening up, eyeing Andromeda and Hermione. "Did Mipsy provide everything you'll be requiring for your tea?"

Hermione's eyed the plate of scones and the untouched plate on Narcissa's tray, biting the inside of her lower lip. "Actually, Malfoy," she ventured as three sets of eyes turned to her, "I know it's unorthodox for tea-time, but I would love a pudding. Butterscotch, lemon or chocolate...I'm not too particular."

She knew she'd asked for the right thing as relief flooded into Narcissa's face. Andromeda ducked her head and began shaking it, as if berating herself.

Draco's eyes glittered as he bellowed, "Mipsy!"

"Yes, Mister Malfoy?" the house-elf drawled, as if offended he had even summoned her. "Does
Mister Malfoy require a setting?"

"No. Please bring three servings of that delicious lemon posset from yesterday. The ladies would enjoy some pudding with their tea."

"Pudding, Mister Malfoy?" The house-elf blinked at him in disgust.

"Yes, the lemon posset," he repeated, gaze narrowing.

"Will there be anything else?" Mipsy asked, fingers already poised to disappear from the room.

Andromeda eyed Hermione, who shook her head.

"That will be all." Draco dismissed the elf with a flippant wave, but the magical creature had already dismissed herself with a huff and a 'crack'.

Draco blew out a frustrated puff. "Sorry, looks like I'll have to see if Astoria can have another talk with her."

"Please do." Andromeda lay an affirming hand on her nephew's arm. "She's taken on a frightful attitude with the Medi-Witches lately, especially Miss Clearwater. Are you sure you won't join us?"

"I've some things to tend to in my study," Draco declined, making his way back to the door. "I'll escort Miss Granger out when she's ready to leave though." Blowing a final kiss to his mother, Draco waltzed out of the room.

"No Teddy to watch this time?" Draco nudged Hermione with his shoulder as they started down the stairs, a cheeky grin tugging at the corner of his lips.

"Not this time; he's staying the night with Harry. Andromeda mentioned wanting to give Penelope some time off and just have some time with her sister..." Her words struck her as she said them aloud...And her breath caught, unbidden tears filling her eyes.

Draco's jaw tightened immediately and he shoved his hands in his pocket. Hermione blinked several times, banishing the tears before they could fall. It seemed irreverent to try to fill the heavy silence with idle prattle, and she was prepared to bid the wizard a quick adieu before stepping through the Floo when Draco cleared his throat.

"Did you teach Aunt Andromeda that spell for the liquids?"

"I did." Hermione inclined her head at his open expression. "Would you like me to show you as well?"

"Please." The wizard conjured a glass, filling it with a nonverbal *Aguamenti*, holding it out to Hermione.

The witch stepped up, lifting her wand over the glass. "The incantation is *Cogulato,*" she said, "And you give it two clockwise turns and one counter clockwise as you say it."

He nodded and watched carefully as she demonstrated the spell for him, furrowing his brow as he studied the smooth nectar liquid, and looking back at her with an expression that shot right through her. It was beautiful and painful, and burning dangerously on the fringes of admiration.

"Why the counter clockwise turn?" he asked, voice low.
"Exhale. "Keeps the spell from changing the temperature of the beverage." Inhale.

"Brilliant." He levitated the glass to a nearby table and reached back into his pocket. "I…We," he amended, "missed your birthday party last Wednesday. Astoria ended up ill and it seemed best I stay in with Mother."

"It's for the best." Hermione chuckled, stepping towards the fireplace. "Merlin only knows what hex would have rebounded at you."

Draco snickered, withdrawing his hand from his pocket. "I told Theo throwing you a surprise party a week early in your own flat was a bad idea."

"Since when does he listen to anyone but himself?"

"Right?" Draco proffered his hand, face neutral. "Anyway, this is late, but happy birthday." He dropped something rectangular and brown in her hand, voicing an enlargement charm.

Hermione's grip adjusted as the rectangle grew to about the size of the briefcase her parents would take to work every morning. Her breath hitched and she sank to the floor, propping the case in her lap. Draco dropped to the floor as well, moving his hands to press the clasps open.

"I don't know what you already have, and you may have this exact case already, but Scamander recommended this for all the travelling you do."

Hermione's heart pounded behind her breastbone as she fingered over the section edges, cursing her insufferable tear ducts.

If Draco noticed her inner turmoil, he saved her the embarrassment of addressing it, and began explaining the sections. "So, this first one is a closet, and all you have to do is tap it with your wand for it to lift up and wave your outfits over and the charm will shrink and hang them. The wizard at the store said it would hold up to three weeks' worth of outfits, but couldn't tell me what closet they were basing it off of. When it lifts up, you'll be able to see your shrunken outfits, so all you have to do is pull out the desired article with your hand and you're all set. This smaller one next to it—" his hand moved right "—works the same and is just for shoes. Complete with shoe horn and magical shoe polishing kit. This section in the bottom corner—" he pointed to a smaller section under the closet "—is for toiletries, and he threw in two bottles of Sleakeasy just because."

Hermione chuckled as a choking lump formed in her throat.

"And this one—" Draco excitedly pointed to the last section, just as large as the closet "—is obviously a miniature study. You can store an entire shrunken bookshelf in there…" He lifted his eyes to her, eyes waggling. "Happy birthday," he whispered, closing the lid. "From the House of Malfoy and the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. And Teddy," he added with a smirk.

Hermione smoothed her hands over the case, pursing her lips. Words and admissions she dare not voice echoed in her mind, tearing at her tongue. She swallowed them all, giving a simple, yet sincere, "Thank you, thank you all,' instead, giving him a smile that hid every throbbing ache of her heart.

When she landed in her fireplace, she stumbled out, and scrambled for a handful of Floo powder, throwing it into the fireplace as she clutched the leather suitcase to her chest. "Theo!" she yelled,
gasp[ing on sobs threatening to burst free. 

"Hermione?"

She saw her friend rise from the seat he was lounging and kneel before his fireplace. She drew a shallow shaky breath, lower lip trembling. "I'm taking that assignment in Australia. I'm...I can't do this anymore, Theo...I'm..." She squeezed her eyes shut, blocking out the wizard's knowing look. "It'll be good. It'll be good for me. I'll get to see my parents more. Maybe go on a date or two."

Theo gave a sceptical chuckle and she wished she didn't feel so unconvinced as well. She blinked slowly, hot tears dripping down her cheeks, skimming her fingers over the edges of the suitcase, clinging to it as a lifeline. "I'm...I think this will be for the best."
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well...I hope you all like it...
Alpha gratitude to Kyonomiko. And so much Beta love to CourtingInsanity. All remaining errors are my own.

I own no part of the Harry Potter universe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thursday, 25 April, 2002

Hermione’s eyes snapped open, a very near and clamorous pounding against a hard surface shaking her from what she knew had been a nightmare (shimmering grey eyes boring into hers, a single tear at her betrayal freezing and turning the eyes into cold, slate grey with hate). She blinked owlishly into the dark, the after-waves of horror not yet dissipated when she heard a voice.

"Granger! Granger!"

"Blaise?" she croaked, snatching her wand, turning on a lamp, stumbling out of bed, sprinting her bedroom door and throwing it open.

Coming face-to-chest with a towering and glowering Blaise Zabini, fist poised to pound again as needed. "For the love of Salazar!" His scowl deepened. "Screw the birthday party incident already and let our persistent parroting berk bear his own messages!"

Hermione could only stand and blink, her thoughts a cocktail of confusion and shock. "What?"

"Wrong," the wizard snapped, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Bugger, it's too early for idiotic questions—" his hand dropped as his face smoothed into a placid expression. "The correct question is 'why'. Why is this magnanimous wizard—" he waved a hand down the length of his chiselled bare torso "—standing outside your door instead of curled up in bed with his witch?"

Hermione face pulled into a grimace as she groaned and leaned against the doorframe, eyes falling shut. "Should've taken that sleeping draught," she groused to herself.

Blaise paid her no mind, continuing with his irritated discourse. "The answer to said correct question, Granger, is because Theodore Nott is an insufferable sod, who has planted himself in my bedroom until I have successfully informed you that he's been with Draco all this time, and now Draco has decided to talk."

"What?!" she screeched, jerking herself upright, not believing her ears.

"Yep," he said, adding an extra emphasis on the 'p' as he spun on his heel and made for the fireplace, tossing over his shoulder, "Draco will be answering questions for his defence today and Salazar help us all."

"Wait!" She started off after him before realising her current attire and folded her arms around her
chest over her oversized t-shirt...

"Oh, and Granger?" He paused, sliding his eyes back to the witch. "I'm an idiot for it taking until I was pounding on your door to catch on. I only hope Theo doesn't know too many specifics, or I may be out fifty galleons."

Hermione said nothing, shaking her head and biting the inside of her cheek as the wizard sauntered off, muttering about 'bleeding Gryffindor hearts'. She heard the roar of her fireplace a moment later and sank to the floor, unfocused gaze blinking at her bed.

*Draco had decided to talk.*

"This Court would like to express its gratitude for your patience and understanding in adjusting your schedules accordingly as we have dealt with alterations to the proceedings today."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Slopes' patronizing preamble to the Wizengamot and returning attendees.

Theo leaned left, whispering into her hair, "Which is prig for 'the accused has decided to defend himself, and we've been scrambling like incompetent fools all morning.'"

Blaise snorted on the other side of Hermione, his frustration from earlier this morning obviously worked through in light of more pressing matters.

"Shhh," Hermione hissed as the wizard resumed his introduction.

"Is the scribe ready?" Mr. Slopes asked, and when the same wrinkled wizard from yesterday nodded and gestured to the poised enchanted quill, the presiding wizard honed his narrowed eyes on the chained accused sitting in the centre of the room.

"Mr. Malfoy, will you give an account of the circumstances leading to your marriage with the deceased?"

Draco's mouth twitched as he raised his chin. His eyes flashed to where she sat, not resting on her, or anyone for all she could tell; just a glance to draw strength from those who supported him. Theo shifted in his seat and Draco looked back to the presiding wizard, face as flint, a trademark glint in his eye.

"To be quite honest, Mr. Slopes, I find that question as vague and inconsequential today as I did yesterday, but in the spirit of cooperation, my circumstances appeared rather grim. My mother was ill and worsening every month, and I was completely broke and homeless with no hope for a future after completing my final year at Hogwarts."

There was a sharp intake of breath from behind, presumably Andromeda, as Harry uttered a profanity that sounded suspiciously like a praise.

"We wanted him to talk," Theo tutted.

Hermione shoved an elbow into his side as Blaise gave an acknowledging sort of grunt.

Slopes tossed a silencing glare about the Wizengamot members before returning his narrow gaze to Draco. "Would it then be presumptive to assume this was purely a financially motivated decision, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco lifted his chin. "I can assure this court that my marriage to Astoria was entirely and completely
"Why not rely on the late Mrs. Malfoy-Black's family money?"

"Half was taken by the Ministry as a result of her trial ruling after the war," Draco rebutted quickly. "And in light of her current circumstances, we had no way of knowing how long those funds would last."

"Your aunt's money then?" Slopes queried, as if he were asking for a freshly pressed robe in light of the original being wrinkled.

A genuine sneer spread across Draco’s chiselled face. "My aunt was innocent of crimes against the wizarding world and had already suffered so much loss, in addition to being left with the responsibility of raising her grandson. We could not burden her forever."

"Why marry for money after school? Why not find some job?"

The sneer flattened into a cold glare. "The Ministry departments I made inquiries to explained that there were no vacancies, and any apprenticeship I applied for refused to take me on or had fees I could not afford. I believed myself to be out of viable options."

Slope's face remained as stone, void of all sympathy or understanding. "How would you describe the nature of your relationship with the deceased?"

Draco shifted to sit straighter in his seat while turning to look at Mr. Greengrass. "Astoria was two years younger. She was well-read and beautiful, and in another life we could have found more in common. But she wanted all the fun and distraction this post-war world had to offer; she made it clear to me that I had no place in her design of happiness and pleasure."

Hermione's heart raced as Draco paused, sharing a private silence with Mr. Greengrass. The poor woman's father held Draco's gaze, smoothing his hands over his lap, poised and otherwise unreadable, until he gave an inclination of his head that was so slight it could've been mistaken for a twitch. Draco must have caught it, too, for he directed his attention back to Slopes and the Wizengamot.

"I'm sure it's conceivable why I would have added an annulment clause before signing, and why Astoria would have been so eager to agree. This was not ideal for either of us."

"Yet, that wasn't added until the very last moment," Slopes countered.

Draco didn't even flinch. "All correspondence and drafts had been discussed via owl up until that point and I was unaware of provisions that could be made until some face-to-face counsel once leaving Hogwarts."

"Counsel that could only come from your father?" Slopes inclined his head as Draco's jaw visibly tightened.

"Yes."

A dangerous smile quirked on Slopes' face. "Yes, we pulled Lucius Malfoy's visitation records from Azkaban and it appears the only date a visitor checked in was Thursday, the 17th of June, 1999, check-in time approximately one hour after the Hogwarts Express would have arrived back at Kings Cross Station."

"Was it really one hour?" Draco arched a brow in mock surprise. "Didn't realize the Ministry could
be so efficient. Remarkable."

Hermione blew out a long breath as Slopes' face darkened and he glowered down at Draco.

"Are you implying you needed specific counsel from a convicted Death Eater regarding a marriage contract?"

Draco flattened his palms over his legs, similar to his reaction when Slughorn would natter on about something inconsequential in the middle of lecture. "As a son I went to see my father, because I felt he would have insights neither my mother nor aunt would have." He balled his hands into fists, now pressing those into his legs. "And, for better or for worse, he's still my father."

Hermione felt Theo stiffen beside her and Blaise swore under his breath, reaching around Hermione, flicking Theo's shoulder. She focused her unwavering concentration on Draco, sitting chained in a chair as the two wizards on either side of her shared a brief, silent conversation. Blaise swore again, more filthily this time, bringing his arm back to his side, and Hermione couldn't help but share his sentiments.

Because it was in all the things Draco left *unsaid* that told of how complicated his relationship with his father was.

"Very well. Moving on," Slopes directed with a dismissive wave to the scribe. "Were you aware that your wife was having an affair at the time of her death?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

Draco gave a dark chuckle. "Almost since the beginning, Astoria was not near as surreptitious as she fancied herself."

Mr. Slopes curled a fist around his chin, appearing equal parts intrigued and confused. "Well then why not simply annul the marriage after your mother's passing, since this was all for her?"

Quite against her will, Hermione's ears perked, heartbeat quickening as Draco shifted in his seat, colour flooding his face. Theo slid his foot right, letting it rest next to Hermione's left in silent support.

"I needed more time," was the admission Draco settled on after apparent deliberation, his face tight. "An annulment meant several subsequent expenses I needed to be financially prepared for… I just needed a bit more time."

Slopes' face twisted into a patronising sneer. "Come now, surely, your friends and would-be ex-father-in-law would make allowances and sacrifices if necessary, Mr. Malfoy. You would not have been destitute."

"You sodding son of a—"

Theo's insult was lost to stagnant air and the clatter of chains as Hermione cast a hasty silencing charm over the wizard, yanking him back into his seat, and throwing an apologetic look to the front of the courtroom.

Slopes narrowed his eyes as if trying to match Theo's face with a name; Draco appeared an odd combination of tense over the presiding wizard's slight and startled, yet pleased at his friend's defence.
"Another outburst from you, young Mr. Nott and you'll be removed from this courtroom."

Hermione clamped down on Theo's arm as he glared back at the purple-swathed wizard. "Theo, please," she whispered in earnest, dropping his arm and turning back to the front of the room. Time stopped and everything tunnelled as she found Draco's eyes waiting for hers, questioning and probing. She held it, unblinking, folding her hands over her lap.

Whatever unspoken message passed between then, it appeared to satisfy. Draco shifted, angling back to his interrogator, cold and calculating. "Whatever you or this court may think of me, Mr. Slopes, I am not a charity case. It was a marriage of mutual convenience with a built-in expiration date that I'd begun preparing for. I'm proud of the profession I've been able to pursue and the opportunity to make new the Malfoy name. Why should I be bothered that my wife in name only was finding pleasure in the arms of another man? I certainly had no intention of seeing to her needs."

Theo leaned a solicitous shoulder into Hermione's as her emotions churned and swirled, unable to keep up with her thoughts.

Mr. Slopes leaned forward, hands clasped on his knees. "Then the next question that begs to be asked, Mr. Malfoy, is what were you doing in Paris the day of your wife's murder?"

The angles in Draco's face hardened. "Because it seems my mind had trouble bridging the disconnect between conceptually knowing my wife was having an affair and being brought face-to-face with the reality of her leaving me for good."

A cat-like grin slowly spread on the presiding wizard's face, and the entire Wizengamot leaned forward as one. "You will expound upon that, please, Mr. Malfoy."

Hermione bit down hard on her lip, rolling her eyes. This was worse than one of those ridiculous *EastEnders* episodes her mum would occasionally want to watch on a lazy summer afternoon.

The wizard in question lifted his chin, meeting the eye of his interrogator. "Astoria's house-elf had been making preparations and when questioned, was all too eager to enlighten me of her mistress' plans. That she wasn't coming back, and she was leaving without even saying goodbye. It struck me I'd have to owl annulment papers to her somewhere on the continent or someplace exotic."

He stiffened, and looked back to Mr. Greengrass. "I needed better closure than that. She was absent, but she'd never been unkind. She never complained about Mother or the near-constant medical staff in and out of her home. I needed to show my gratitude for that."

Every muscle, bone, and sinew within Hermione ached. And ached. And ached.

Draco's shoulders dropped in an unheard sigh, his face again on Slopes. "My mother had several emergency portkeys made up during the war. I used one to get to France and another to bring me back to where Malfoy Manor used to stand. I took Polyjuice Potion with me. My plan was to find a private area near *La Roseraie*, become an old man and wait in the lobby until Astoria came down with Warrington for dinner."

"Were you planning to confront the couple while in disguise?"

"No!" Draco shook his head with vigour. "I actually still hadn't worked out if I was going to go up and pay her a compliment in French and wish her happiness like an eccentric old fool, or just sit and observe the beginnings of her new happiness from an unnoticed distance."

Slopes tilted his head, considering and sinister. "Did you have your own wand with you?"

"Obviously," Draco answered in a drawl that would have made his godfather proud.
"And your experimental wands?"

"No," Draco clipped. "I left them in the pouch in my study Friday night and I didn't see them again until late Monday morning."

Hermione's heart began to race as Slopes waved at the scribe, as if to make sure he caught this next part.

"That seems to be quite the time gap for such a remarkable project, Mr. Malfoy," Slopes countered. "A project so secretive and important that you kept it from your master, and yet," a wicked gleam entered his eyes as they made brief contact with Hermione's, "you were so readily inclined to relay information of this undisclosed project to Miss Granger at your clandestine meeting in Paris."

Hermione's jaw dropped as arms from her left and right immediately wrapped around her shoulders and waist. Not in comfort, but to imprison. To keep her from doing something irreversibly detrimental.

She could only watch in cold fury as Draco struggled against his own bindings, trying to stand, only to be yanked back into the chair by invisible hands.

"Granger was an unexpected coincidence, nothing covert or salacious about it!" he yelled. He bloody yelled, straining still against his magical binds. "It'd been more than half a year since I'd seen her and over the course of an innocent, friendly, and brief conversation, I arranged a consultation with her."

Mr. Slopes chortled, disbelief apparent on his face. "What of the wands, then, Mr. Malfoy? You took them home with you, but left them untouched for almost three days."

"I visited with my aunt and cousin Saturday morning, already having the portkeys and Polyjuice Potion with me," Draco explained, settling in his seat. "I Floo'd home afterwards and immediately took the portkey to Paris. It was late when I arrived back home Saturday night. The French Aurors and Darion Greengrass arrived shortly after to take me to France to identify Astoria's body. I didn't think of them again until I discovered they were missing on Sunday when I was escorted back home."

"Missing?" Slopes scoffed.

Draco nodded. "They were nowhere to be found. I searched everywhere until Theodore Nott came by to see why I'd missed our lunch appointment. I forgot about them again as I recounted everything to him back at his home. When I came back home Monday, the wands were just where I had remembered they should be."

"You're saying you simply overlooked them," Slopes said dismissively, as if talking to a small child.

"That's not what I'm saying because the wands were in the wrong order," Draco spat, eyes blazing now, every bit his father's son. "The dragon scale core wand and the griffin feather core wand had been switched."

Slopes quirked a grey brow, looking as though we were holding back a laugh. "A mistake you easily could have made yourself, Mr. Malfoy." He ignored Draco's deadly glare, instead looking down to consult a parchment in front of him. "Did you know the Deceased had taken all the money from your shared account with her?"

"No. I only made withdrawals once a month, at the end of the month for what was necessary."
Slopes gave an acknowledging grunt before addressing the audience. "The court has acquired a copy of the letter penned by the Deceased, the letter Mr. Malfoy burned before Auror Bell and Auror Robards were able to obtain it. This copy was obtained by the bank in France as per their policy to make copies of all documents stored on their premises. The court scribe will now read the letter for our records."

Hermione sank into the arms still wound tightly around her as the wrinkled scribe rose from his seat, pointing his wand at his neck for an Amplifying charm and began to read:

Draco,

You've probably figured it out by now that I'm not coming back. At least, not for a very long time. Owl me annulment papers whenever you're ready. I know you're probably already in the works of taking on a second or third job, but I'm not waiting any longer. You can continue to hide behind calculating preparations and away from life and love, but I'm done. Cassius loves me and I'm through with pretending for Father's sake.

It was my original intent to take all of my inheritance money, a bit of cold justice to you and to Father. It seems Fate had other ideas and while I was ambling around Paris, burying my guilt with senseless shopping, I bumped into Hermione Granger. And because of this meeting of happenstance, I have decided to return all my inheritance as a gift to you. Cass didn't want me to bring anything with me anyways—we're going to make a fresh start of things, and he's almost as rich as Zabini.

I have given orders to the bank in Paris to not turn it over to you until you read this, and to not transfer the funds until now. If either of these have not been complied with, Garmont is the name of the associate who has been assisting me. Please pass that name along to Percy Weasley or my father.

Good luck,

Astoria

"Merlin," Hermione breathed, flabbergasted. She ignored the burning stares of Theo and Blaise on either side of her. What could she say at this point?

Slopes, however, was not suffering any after effects of that shockwave, and immediately pounced. "Why not say everything yesterday, or even speak to the Aurors initially?" he accused.

"Two reasons," Draco answered, meeting the sharp stare of his opponent, rebounding for a final defence. "I think one speaks for itself: that in the eyes of the people, I'm the failure Death Eater who got away. St. Mungo's refused care for my mother because of her name. I didn't kill Astoria, but no one was going to believe that. Where we are now—" Draco looked about the room and then back to Slopes "—was inevitable. No point in wasting words or breath."

"And the second reason?" Slopes queried before Draco could level his own disparaging (but no less true) accusations.

Draco sank into his chair, his hair falling over his brow. "It's silly, but my entire life since I was eleven has been on display."

Hermione felt Theo nod with his entire body next to her and a side glance at Blaise revealed the wizard to be rolling his eyes as Draco continued.

"It became much more so from fifth year onward. Even now, trivial moments like pick-up Quidditch
with Harry Potter and Co. make the front page, pictures, disparaging headlines and all. That letter was meant for my eyes alone, not to be shared with all of wizarding Britain."

Here Mr. Slopes stopped and inclined his head. "Then why the transparency today?"

Draco shifted to lock eyes with Theo from across the room, a sea of unspoken messages in their depths. Unspoken, yet Hermione knew they were understanding each other with perfect clarity; it was just their way.

"I was made aware of facts I was not previously privy to. And reminded that some things are worth fighting for," Draco said, blinking and focusing on the Wizengamot as he made his final appeal. "That some things are worth the effort."

Mr. Slopes considered him as the entire room held a deep breath, waiting to fall off the precipice of the unknown and into the waters of outcome. The presiding wizard then rose slowly in all his grandeur and fanfare. Hermione shifted, fitting her arms around the wizards who still sandwiched her. Theo drew a sharp breath while Blaise pressed in, the need for physical contact overwhelming his usual polished poise.

"This is now the sixth Malfoy family story of deflection and victimization the Wizengamot has heard in just over two decades," Mr. Slopes started, addressing the audience.

Hermione's blood ran cold. Draco visibly paled.

Slopes now focused his hard, cold speech to Draco. "Long has the Malfoy family had a manipulative hold on the Ministry, the Wizengamot, and public opinion. And here is their last and final heir clamouring for it all—not once, but twice, in less than five years. Draco Lucius Malfoy has admitted to a marriage of convenience and with his past inclinations, it would be no trouble at all to see him capable of making new and untraceable instruments of death. The Deceased had made him dependent on her resources and whether or not he knew of her decision to take the money with her is inconsequential. The Malfoy name has been synonymous with pride for centuries and she had taken the last of his, rendering him destitute again in her final act."

Hot tears scalded Hermione's cheeks. Her heart strained against the prison of her ribcage as wizard continued his hellish discourse.

"It is the personal opinion of this wizard that it may be for the better of wizarding society to see the last Malfoy locked away for good. However, it is not up to me alone. This court will adjourn here for the night, reconvening tomorrow morning at eight o'clock. I encourage my fellow members to consider the presentations, references, and submitted evidence with care and sobriety before coming to the courtroom tomorrow morning."

Chapter End Notes

If you're feeling especially kind, I'd love to know your thoughts... thank you for reading.
I appreciate you all!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

A/N: Eternal gratitude to you, my lovely readers, reviewers, favoites and followers.

So much love to alpha Kyonomiko and beta CourtingInsanity. All remaining errors are mine.
I own no part of the Harry Potter Franchise. This was for fun...

22 July, 1998

Miss Hermione Granger,

I just

Dear Granger,

I could never

Granger,

I’m writing to you instead of doing this in person because once again I’m a coward. I couldn’t handle the idea that you’d probably laugh in my face or walk away before I finished what I had to say. If you burn the letter before finishing it, or even opening it, I’ll never have to know.

I’m so sorry, Granger. You can’t imagine how sorry I am. And not because I was on the losing side, or that I was caught and had to be put on trial. But everything.

For how I treated you and believed myself superior to you for all those years. You shattered everything I was taught to believe every day in classes, and out of classes. I’d overhear you talk of Muggle things or your parents. You continually bested me in classes and even in character. In sixth year, when... there was the incident with some poison and Weasley was in the infirmary, and you were so worried for him. When you were glued to his side, even after how he had treated you all that year... You’ve honestly had every right to tell Potter and Weasley to hang over and over through the years, and you never did. You are endlessly kind, strong, brave, unwavering in your loyalties.

I’m so sorry for what happened at the Manor. I couldn’t save the three of you, I couldn’t risk him or my deranged aunt harming my mother. I saw your neck when she held the knife to you. I saw you at the final battle. Your blood bleeds as bright and as red as mine. And I could never say sorry enough to make up for everything.

I also needed to tell you thank you. To tell you how grateful I am that you came to my trial. That you spoke, almost fought, on my behalf, after everything.

I’m not expecting anything from you at Hogwarts this year. Don’t feel obligated to take on a new friend or project to fix. I’ll leave you alone because for all I know you’ve burned this letter before even reading it. I hope you haven’t. I hope someday I’m able to say things like this to your face—you deserve to hear it in person.
I hope you can forgive me. I hope you don’t hate me. I could never be more in your debt or think more highly of you. Maybe there could actually be a future with us as friends, or when I’ve at least done something to make up for... everything... I’d very much like to have the chance.

All the best, and see you in September,

Malfoy

"Letter from Kingsley?"

The chipper voice of Harry Potter interrupted Hermione's solemn moment of ruminating, having read the letter three times already, with long intervals of quiet meditation between.

"No," she answered, laying the parchment in the table and offering a wry smile to her friend. Harry waltzed into his kitchen at Grimmauld Place, a levitating basket of laundry trailing behind him. Hermione grinned to herself at Harry's abhorrence of completing chores without magic before expounding on her answer.

"Kingsley told me it could take up until next week to track Monica and Wendell down." She shifted, pushing the chair out from under the table and drew her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. "But even if it takes that long, we'll still have all the month of August to sort things out there, if necessary."

Harry lowered the basket to the table and began the process of folding with simple flicks of his wand, casting her a reassuring smile. "We'll stay as long as we have to, Hermione. As long as you need us."

She snorted. "At the expense of Auror training?" she asked pointedly.

The wizard simply shrugged, waving folded articles to form a neat pile on the table. Molly must have given him some helpful hints before moving out of the Burrow. "’Defeated the Dark Lord’ is already on my list of accomplishments, not to mention a whole lot of other unmentionables." He glanced up, a smug gleam in his bespectacled eyes. "I'm sure they can squeeze me into training and catch me up quick enough. Ron, too."

She shook her head at Harry's self-assuredness. She'd often wondered if this were more James or Lily coming through and come to the recent conclusion that it must be the best of one overshadowing the other. It seemed impossible to conclude otherwise in light of everything in the last seven years.

Harry continued with his magical laundry assembly line while Hermione's eyes traced back down to the letter. She drew a sharp inhale, stealing herself for the likely event of a charged reaction and took the plunge.

"Actually, Harry, the letter's from Malfoy."

"Is it? Fancy that." Emerald eyes flickered to her, but otherwise gave no outward indication anything was out of the ordinary, as if she'd made the banal announcement she'd be signing up for ten N.E.W.T. classes in the fall.

She raised her chin, eyes narrowing. "Malfoy, Harry. It's from Draco Malfoy."

"Mhm, I heard you." The wizard was suppressing a grin at her default lecturing tone. With a flourishing flick of his wand, the folded laundry piles began to assemble in the empty basket, which he then levitated to the landing, clearly amused that his silence had begun to irritate her.
Hermione huffed and dropped her legs, letting them make obvious contact with the floor before crossing one over the other. "You're a lot calmer than I expected you to be, almost like you were expecting this..." she started, hoping he would take the metaphorical baton...

She was not disappointed.

Harry dropped his wand and plopped into the nearest chair, giving her his full attention. "Andromeda's no-nonsense owl delivered mine yesterday," he explained. "I've been wondering if you and/or Ron would receive one also."

Hermione chewed the inside of her lip, mulling over his answer. "An apology?"

A light chortle that was too genuine to be a scoff. "Something to that affect..." He leaned over the table, squinting. "Your letter seems to have significantly more writing than mine, must be because your hair's prettier," he teased, waving airily over her loose, untamed curls.

"Wasn't planning on seeing anyone but you today," she mumbled, flushing and carding her hands through her curls, gathering them to hang over one shoulder. "But really, Harry," she resumed once her hair felt sufficiently dealt with, "this is unexpected to say the least."

"Why? We all spoke at his trial, which you know went damned further than it should've keeping him from Azkaban." He seemed to swallow a scoff before his emerald eyes softened. "The last two years haven't been a stroll around the Black Lake for him. Why shouldn't he come through just as changed as us?"

"I suppose that makes sense." Hermione admitted slowly, absently tracing her fingers over individual letters of words, making mental note of his practiced penmanship (impressive perfection, actually, especially when considering Ron's chicken scratch). "Sounds like he just wants a peaceful last year at Hogwarts, too. Make it alive and out of trouble all the way to end of the year examinations."

Harry inched his chair closer, not bothered that it scraped across the floor. "You're sure you don't want to take a job at the Ministry? You'd have the pleasure of eating lunch with Ron and me every single day still...Listen to Ron complain that the Ministry elves can't do it as well as Molly or Hogwarts, while stuffing his gob."

Hermione bit down on her lip, holding back a chuckle. "As compelling as that argument is Harry, I think Ron may want the space."

Her friend's raven brows quirked by means of a nonverbal response before he opened his mouth. "Given that Ron's still coming with the two of us and his dad to Australia, I'd say he must not be torn up enough to need that much space."

"Or maybe I just don't make that much of an impression," she countered wryly.

The wizard frowned, snatching her hand, threading his fingers through hers. "Don't even joke like that Hermione Jean Granger," he said, eyes dark and serious. "You are my family, and I'd already be dead a dozen times over if not for you. You said it yourself the two of you didn't fit," he reminded her, squeezing their fingers. "But someone will someday, and you'll just know it."

She swallowed hard, returning his affectionate squeeze before pulling her hand free. "Like you and Ginny?" she asked with a curious inclination of her jaw.

"Well," Harry started, carding a hand through his hair and adjusting his glasses. "We'll see. We'll see." He gave a nervous shrug. "I... it's been a whole year, and it's like getting to know each other again and wondering if the people we are now even fit together anymore, but I missed her for so
"Shhh," Hermione soothed, rising and moving behind him to wrap an arm around him, pressing her cheek into his hair. "It just takes time to figure things out Harry," she murmured pulling back, summoning Malfoy's letter as she backed slowly towards the staircase. "And that's what I'm doing with this last year of school. Giving myself time."

He nodded and she turned around, folding the letter in thirds as she started up the staircase for her bedroom.

"Hermione?" The wizard's serious timbre halted her mid-step, and she sidestepped back down two stairs.

"Yes?" Her brows furrowed on instinct at the concerned expression he wore. "Anything else the matter?"

"No, nothing like that..." He marched to the stairs, looking in her eyes. "It's just... You know you'll always have me, yeah? Forget about you and Ron or me and Ginny, just..." His voice turned thick and he shoved his hands into his pockets. "No matter what comes of Australia, I'm... I'll always be on your side. I'll always be there to help you."

A horrifying emotional sound escaped from her chest as she answered with a watery, "I know, Harry."

And she truly did.

**Thursday, 25 April, 2002**

"You can't all go in and see him at once, it's against Ministry policy." Auror Robards raised a commanding hand, as if it were going to make any difference to his argumentative audience.

"But—" Katie Bell attempted, and Hermione dug one elbow into Theo's side while pinching Blaise in the arm with her free hand.

"Shut it." Hermione glared up at the two glowering former-Slytherins, not intimated in the slightest. "We're probably lucky they're even letting him have visitors at all, so shut up and let the good Aurors speak," she finished with a winning smile back at the Robards and Katie.

The latter blinked in stunned silence at Hermione before turning her attention back on the gathering. "You may each see the Accused—" her face reddened with shame as Hermione levelled her with a look over that word. "I mean... Mr. Malfoy," Bell corrected. "You may each see Mr. Malfoy one at a time for ten minutes. And you will leave your wand with us before going in there."

Robards stepped up, thrusting his open hand out to Hermione. "You first," he said. He very clearly was not asking.

Hermione fought the sickening twinge in her gut as she handed over her wand and walked through the door that had been magically unlocked, holding her breath until it clicked shut behind her.

And she knew it had been relocked.

She had to blink a few moments, allowing her eyes to adjust to the even dimmer lights in the room—prison cell—within the Ministry. It was just large enough for a cot and two perpendicular walls meeting at a point, allowing privacy for what she assumed to be the room's facilities.
Draco was standing at the foot of his cot, studying her with an uncertain tilt of his head. Unbidden and, _Merlin_, so very unwanted, tears sprang to her eyes as she opened her mouth…

"Don't you dare apologise," he quipped before she could say anything.

"Wh—" she stammered as he shook his head, folding his arms across his chest.

"You're not allowed to apologise for anything," he repeated, softer this time but no less serious. He unfolded his arms, taking large and determined steps away from the cot until he was an arm's length away from her. His pale grey eyes never left hers, pinning her where she stood. "Salazar, witch," he breathed at last. "It's more than enough that you testified for me once already, but to hear all you said yesterday, to see your turmoil… don't even try to apologise to me, Granger." He lengthened her name, as if caressing each syllable.

Her legs felt weak, and it was ridiculous that _that_, of all things, is what her mind had focused on during his narrative. She opened her mouth, wishing her tongue didn't feel like lead. "But, I—"

"Hermione, please," he whispered, and she lost all trail of thought at the sound of her given name falling off his lips. "Just stop. Apologies are when you've wronged or wounded someone, and you did neither. You did neither," he repeated, placing marked emphasis on each syllable.

"I let Slopes get to me," she admitted. Simple and not untrue.

A smirk ghosted across his face. "Well, that was to be expected. It's just part of who you are. Loyal and defending at all costs."

_At all costs…_

"Malfoy—"

"Stop." His appeal was soft, but firm. His eyes flitted and darted all across her face, and he looked as though he were trying to smile. "Just… if this is to be our last conversation before I'm locked away —"

"You can't think like that!" she burst out, closing the distance between them, taking hold of his sleeves at his elbows. "Don't you dare think like that. _Please_."

"Why not?" He was wilting. Godric, she could see him crumbling from the inside out before her eyes. "You heard the man. My family history, and now… This is the second time I've been before the Wizengamot in less than four years. Maybe it's a sign." He sagged into her arms, breathing shakily.

"Malfoy…" she tried, but stopped short at the haunting look he gave her. She shifted her hands instead, guiding him gently down, kneeling next to him as he slumped to the floor. Her body gave a reflexive shiver as she sank onto her shins and feet, squeezing her knees together.

He started tracing idle circles over his left forearm. "What if I wasn't supposed to have a second chance?" he asked, so soft and mournful, his words tore into her heart. "Maybe I don't deserve it."

She covered his hand with hers, stilling his movements, drawing his focus to her. She twined her fingers through his, reveling in the feel of his precious-precious-precious skin, forcing herself to not look down and marvel at long last how perfect his hand felt in hers.

"Nobody does," she said, clear and firm. "Not Dumbledore, not Snape, not Harry, Ron, and certainly not me."
"Granger—" he protested.

"No." She pressed the fingertips of her free hand to his lips, observing but not acknowledging the widening of his eyes. "Your turn to listen to me now," she murmured, tracing the frame of his mouth and lips with a single digit. "This is hardly the time for an ethical debate, but you're not alone in past wrongs and faults. You're not."

She tightened her grip on his fingers with one hand, moving the other to rest under his strong jaw, taking no small amount of pleasure in the racing of his pulse under her touch. "I was the one who set Snape on fire our first year at Gryffindor's first Quidditch match, and I did it to protect Harry. I kept Rita Skeeter in a jar in her Animagus state for a period during our fourth year, and I still hold that bit of little known information over her as blackmail. I tricked Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest to be carried off by centaurs, and I'm still not sorry for that at all.

"I travelled with a bag under an illegal undetectable extension charm for the entire year we were on the run." She withdrew her hand, lowering it to lay it over his left, goose pimples shooting up her arm as he responded this time, lacing his fingers through hers. It was necessary to blink and clear her throat before continuing. "I still have that bag, and I have no intention of lifting the charm, even with the incredible suitcase you gave me. It's a security thing even now. You'll also remember I broke into Gringotts and let's not forget I obliviated my own parents." She could have cried that he responded with a squeeze to both her hands and pulled her so that she had to inch closer to sit upright. She looked right into his face, braving unfathomable depths in his eyes. "Their free will, Malfoy. All those memories they said they cherished so with me… I took that from. I erased myself from their lives, moved them and forever altered their reality."

"You had good intentions—"

"Godric, you are so stubborn." She shook her head. "This isn't a contest of who's been worse, or who had the better intentions and anyways, I know you. Everything you've done, even the acts of self-preservation, they were all for your mother's protection and care. Or your father's approval." She permitted the slight uptick of the corners of her lips here. "And even the occasional act was done for your two dunderheads Theo and Blaise… mostly Theo, and we both know that."

He gave a clipped, rueful snort, igniting a spark in her chest. She looked down at their twined hands, biting down on the inside of her lip. "You were acquitted before. They can't hold the past against you now, not when you're innocent. And you are innocent. We just need more time."

A pained and utterly forced smile answered her. "Unfortunately my fierce lioness," he murmured, "that's the precise commodity we're a bit short on."

They said nothing as the weight of his words sank in. And then, all at once, in one swift movement, Draco dropped her hands only to bind his arms around her, his shallow breath over her skin snapping every last frayed fragment of resolve in her. She flung her arms up and around his neck, permitting him to cuddle her to his chest, lifting her to fit across his lap.

Hot tears stung the corners of her eyes. She loathed that it was only here and now that she could know what it was like to be wrapped in his embrace, tucked into his warmth, nuzzling his neck. As if she'd belonged there all along.

"Granger."

The vibrating rumble of his voice had a pleasing effect; nevertheless, she pulled herself away, breaking contact with his skin, gazing up into his face…
His broken, remorseful face. "I meant what I said, though." He paused to swallow, and she decided to ignore the pounding of her heart. "I married Astoria for the money. I used her every bit as much she did me."

She pursed her lips, swallowing and skimming her fingers across the nape of his neck. "You don't have to explain. We don't have to talk about this now."

"But, we do." He wrapped his hands around her wrists, resting their hands in her lap. "I married Astoria for the money. I couldn't conceive any other possible financial solution to pay apprenticeship fees to a master and maintain security for Mother's curse. Astoria wanted the freedom from her father, from restraints and rules." He moved to cup her cheek with a hand running his thumb over her cheekbone. "It was a sham from the beginning. We left for the honeymoon together, but I had a portkey back to Mother and spent the week with her. And then I took a portkey back to Astoria for appearances of coming home together… I broke our marriage vows every single day."

"Draco, pl—"

"Put her above all else?" He brought his other hand to her shoulder, applying gentle pressure. "That never happened. Mother always came first, then the wands. Then Aunt Andromeda and Teddy and Theo and… Well, everyone and everything took precedence to Astoria." The fingers on her shoulder lifted to thread through her curls. "Honour my wife? See above answer. Cherish her?" He almost snorted as his hand dove deeper into her curls, eyes darting over her face. "She was beautiful, but I never once told her," he stated simply. Like an ordinary truth he wasn't at all ashamed to admit. "Polyjuicing myself to wish her well in Paris would have been the most endearing to her I'd ever been."

Her breath caught, heart racing and pounding as his eyes rested on her lips.

"Love her..." He scoffed, releasing her cheek to brush a single curl behind her ear. "There was never a chance for that, Hermione. Not after eighth year. Not after our last night at Hogwarts."

It was impossible. All of this was some insane out-of-body experience.

"Why—" Her voice cracked and she snapped her mouth shut, floating her hands to his arms. "Why didn't you say anything about the annulment clause before all of this?" she managed, eyes pleading. "Six months of silence before seeing you at Theo's Christmas party that year. Nothing but the two occasions we saw each other afterwards. Nothing still in the letters between December and your wedding... I would have understood. I—Merlin, it's been so long, and I would have understood."

He swallowed, genuine pain and confusion surfacing from grey depths. "You never said anything after I sent your book back. I thought… I thought it was just… that you didn't—" He gave a limp shrug. "You never brought it up, which I took as your answer."

Everything froze in the wake of his words. "It came without a letter Rolf said." Her eyes narrowed in profound confusion. "Rolf put the book in my office to sit until my first official day. He said there had been no letter or note."

"Not on the outside… but did you ever open it?"

Heartbeat quickening, Hermione gave a thick swallow. "I thought you were saying… there wasn't a note, Draco. I thought that was you saying a clean goodbye. I haven't been able to bring myself to even open it."

He released a breathy chuckle, dipping his head, brushing his nose to hers. "My poor witch. All this
time…” he breathed against her lips.

She closed her eyes, meeting him to close the gap—

"Time's up!"

Hermione jerked and would have fallen tumbled backwards had Draco’s grip not tightened around her back, as if on instinct.

"Yes, um… just a moment, please."

"Right now, Miss Granger," Robards barked, glaring hard and severe as Hermione reached up for one last caressing feel of his skin against hers.

Draco released her from his warm embrace, allowing her to lean into his hands as she began the awkward process of standing in a dress without flashing him (because she'd be hanged if this horrible place held the memory of the first time Draco Malfoy caught a glimpse of her knickers…).

He stood in one fluid, aristocratic motion. "You should open that book," he murmured, not looking up as he brushed his slacks. "John Donne sets the poignant mood."

"Draco…”

Robards throat cleared roughly and she knew his patience was waning. With a whispered 'I will,' and no small amount of effort, Hermione stalked out of the room, allowing Robards to see the wrinkle in her brow as she passed him.

Katie's face was set grim and tight when Hermione stepped out, allowing Blaise to enter the room. "Your wand, Miss Granger," Robards clipped, holding the cherished piece of wood out to her.

Snatching it from the Auror, Hermione gave rushed hugs and goodbyes to Theo and Andromeda before walking as fast as she ever had to the Ministry Floo systems, snatching and crumbling a flying Ministry memo as it shot towards her head.

She charged out of her fireplace as soon as she landed, not caring about the soot now mucking up her carpet. She barrelled back to her room like her life’s breath depended on it, tearing through the bottom of a trunk, scouring for a book she hadn't cracked open since her last night at Hogwarts.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ahem...Thank you wonderful readers. I'm floored, and so thankful. I love this chapter...I hope you all do, too.
Love and gratitude to alpha queen Kyonomiko, eternal internet cookies to beta CourtingInsanity. All remaining errors are mine.
I own no part of the Harry Potter Universe.

Thursday, 17 June, 1999

"You're missing the party, Granger."

"That's the point of hiding away with a book in an empty classroom, Malfoy," Hermione retorted, declining to lift her eyes from the well-worn pages of her book.

She heard a snort, the click of a shutting door and light footfalls across the stone floor… only one set of feet from the sound of it. He'd come alone; no Theo or Zabini in tow. Interesting... She granted herself a narrow look up, eyeing the Slytherin closely as he sauntered towards her with aristocratic ease and propped himself against the wall. The dim magical lighting in the room cast soft shadows across his face, having a twisting (yet not unpleasant) effect on her stomach.

"Come on then," he urged, sliding his hands into his pockets and tilting his head back to the door. "You can't possibly hope to increase your N.E.W.T. scores any more so by reading alone in a charmed nook by the window, which is the only reason I'd surmise you're here and not joining in all the frivolity."

She made a face at his wink, snapping her face back to the book in hopes he wouldn't catch the rising colour in her cheeks.

"It's quite the party." He was using that rare sing-song voice, elongating the words 'quite' and 'party', and she imagined the corners of his lips bending in one of those infrequent, but entirely genuine, smiles. "The seventh years have been invited too, so Thomas has been trying to start a game involving a mat of coloured circles and appendage placement commands—"

"Twister," Hermione supplied, maintaining sure focus on the book (without reading a single word).

"Right," he said, rapidly continuing. "Finnigan's charmed a Muggle music box that you sing along with..."

"Karaoke machine," she said at the expectant pause in his sentence.

"Correct! A bit of a test to see how many songs I've learned this year." He poked one of her curled legs, which earned him a pacifying glance, if only to convey it wasn't him, it was her... But then she couldn't look away, and further couldn't help the slight tilt in her head as she decided he looked...giddy. If such a word could be used to describe a Malfoy... "The book will keep," he held out his hand, palm up, grinning, "but how many opportunities do you think you'll have to find Weaslette and Blaise gyrating their way through a duet about a spicy life? Salazar only knows what
else this night could hold..." He trailed off, grinning so that his perfect teeth winked at her, the thrill of anticipation hanging delicately in the air.

Hermione loosed a quiet laugh, lowering and straightening her legs in her charmed nook by the window, resting the thin book in her lap. "Tempting as all that sounds," she acquiesced faintly, "I think, though, for the sake of the party and the attendees, I should probably keep my wistful state of being right where it is." She folded her hands over her book, trying (and not at all sure if she was succeeding) to not be obvious in her admiration of the view—shiny silken hair slightly mussed as with the end of a long day of testing, top two buttons of his white shirt undone, long-sleeves rolled up to show a hint of his perfect forearms, black slacks sitting low on his hips.

The smirk he was now sporting suggested that she had definitely failed in her attempt of covert appreciation. Stupid sodding fancying feelings. She cleared her throat and dropped her eyes back to her book, hoping the shadows hid the pink heat to her cheeks. To his credit, Malfoy let the moment pass, allowing contemplative silence to fill the space between them as moments ticked by, one by one.

"Why aren't you at the party?" she asked, unnerved at the tentative hope budding inside her chest.

He shrugged a shoulder. "It's a normal study night; felt weird not being in the same room as you," he answered, nonchalant and vague, shifting his stance and conjuring a chair with an easy flourish. "But I would ask why you are here in the classroom we practiced defence spells in and not simply reading in your room?"

She risked a look up to find him staring openly at her, unabashed; she blinked. "Figured Ginny would drag me out if I kept close enough." She blinked twice more as he continued to look on with palpable expectancy. "And, maybe I just wanted one more moment with the memories, processing everything, you know?" She couldn't keep still and brushed her hand over the curls already tucked neatly behind her ear. "My last year at Hogwarts has been vastly different than young Hermione would have expected, but in a good way. With Harry and Ron gone, I...I'm not sure I can convey how very lonely I was before you three invaded."

Malfoy's smirk broadened into something genuine and he leaned forward as if to convey he would listen as long as she spoke.

The effect was immediate, as an outside force loosed her tongue and unlocked the floodgates of her heart and she found herself shrugging a shoulder and saying, "And, if I'm being honest, this long-awaited end feels... anticlimactic. I expected it all to be and feel... different."

Malfoy gave a single, understanding nod and he started scratching the sleeve over his left forearm. "Same," he at last admitted. "And maybe a bit—" his face scrunched in that perfect way when he was searching for the perfect word "—unsettling..." He exhaled long and slow, meeting her eyes again.

Hermione considered him. "I would imagine so," she murmured. "Your mother's been weighing heavily on your mind, then N.E.W.T.’s, all those job and apprenticeship interviewed and..." The headline of today's society column flashed across her mind and she forcefully shook her head, curls springing free and swishing around her face. "Well, it's just been a lot for you."

He grunted in acknowledgement, resting his hands on his legs.

Sensing he wasn't leaving anytime soon, Hermione swung her legs down, letting them dangle against the cool stone wall, careful to keep her book from falling. "Will your mother be there to meet you at the train station tomorrow?"
"No." He shook his head, lacing his fingers together. "She overdid it this week playing with Teddy and probably won't be able to make it out of bed tomorrow." He a half smile toyed with the corner of his lips as his brows lifted at her. "But, I'm sure your parents will be happy to see you. You stayed over the Easter holidays to study, and you weren't gone for that long over Christmas, just a couple of days, as I recall."

She gave a slow, noncommittal nod, allowing silence to fill their shared atmosphere. Her fingers tapped over the pages of her book and she sucked a sharp breath, squeezing her eyes with this overdue confession. "They won't be coming because they live in Australia and they don't know they have a daughter." She opened her eyes to find him sitting upright and very nearly on the edge of his seat, blinking in thoughtful silence.

Exhale. "It was to protect them before the war. Harry and the entire Weasley family knows. And so does Professor McGonagall. And Minister Shacklebolt, but it—" She huffed to cover a sob threatening to spring from her chest. "It's frankly enough coming to terms with it all without telling people that I erased myself from my parent's memories at the end of sixth year and planted the impulse for them to move to Australia." (sniff, brush away curls) "I keep hoping that one day I'll wake up from this nightmare and find I have a family again. My family..."

The tears fell from nowhere now, and Godric hang it all! Not now. Not with him...

Weight and warmth encircled her waist and shoulders an instant later, long fingers combing delicately through her unruly curls. Tranquilizing phrases like 'you did the right thing,' and 'so brave, Granger,' and 'I'm so sorry,' gently made their way to her ears, seeping into her cognition, working exquisite, drying magic on her tear ducts. His movements through her hair slowed, he stopped all speech and very soon she found herself in the luxury of being held by Draco Malfoy. It nearly was enough to make her giggle with glee. Nearly.

Harry would be yanking his hair out if he knew...

Not that there was anything to know. It was just a fancy. That's all it had been. A passing fancy that had only been growing all term, that she could get over. Eventually. She'd moved on from Ron, after all.

She shifted, pulling back slowly, offering him a look of gratitude. A sheen of fluid coated his eyes, and she was adrift. Lost to the sea of those iridescent greys with flakes of sapphire and the idea leaped into her mind she could happily and willingly drown in those twin pools. Just as long as they looked only into hers. Forever.

Oh... dear...

"Thanks," she whispered, grateful for the book in her lap to occupy her fingers.

"You're welcome." He slid his hands back into his pocket, lingering in this closer proximity. "If you don't mind my asking—" he hesitated, snapping his mouth shut, almost reluctant to reopen it. He sighed. "Where did you go for Christmas?"

"Australia." She swallowed. Heat flooded her face before she took the final plunge. "I sat on their roof under a Disillusionment and silencing charm with some modified Extendable Ears from George. I just sat there and listened while they played the same Christmas albums we would all listen to together. I sat and listened as they exchanged presents." A strangled sort of laugh escaped her throat and her face fell into her hands, elbows pressing into the resting book. "Godric!" she gasped, lifting her head, swiping at her eyes. "I sound like some deranged predator stalking unsuspecting prey, but I just couldn't keep away, you know? I just needed to see them and remind myself it was enough that
he countered, soft, but with a flash in his eyes. "There's always a chasm, a disconnect, between concept and reality, and it could be years before it's bridged, if ever at all." He shuddered, and she recognised understanding in his eyes. He understood more than she realized. "But Salazar, that sounds like torture."

She gave a dark chuckled, unable to disagree.

"Don't do that again," he pleaded. She tilted her head mutely as he rubbed the back of his neck, shaking his head. "You've said they're teeth healers, so stage something dreadful to happen with your teeth to have a reason to see them, or schedule some appointment to see them sometime, or something else—anything else." He pinned her with a look. "But doing that every year—especially if you're alone—you'll only drive yourself mad in the end. Just… don't. Please."

"Okay." She found herself nodding, whether for her sake or his she didn't know; maybe some curious combination?

"You could have stayed at Hogwarts with us those few days," he mused, toeing the stone floor with his shoe. "Granted, it involved copious amounts of alcohol while you were gone…" There was a cheeky bend to his smile as he shrugged a shoulder.

She arched a brow, attempting a humorous look of her own. "In other words, I'd have been coerced into some game of Theo's that would only end with me performing some humiliating act he would lord over me until his dying breath?"

"Nonsense." Malfoy rolled his eyes, dismissing her argument with a breezy wave. "The irritating sod would find a way to remain as a ghost and taunt you to the end of your days."

She sniggered. "That sounds about right, but only if he found a reason to haunt you as well."

He snorted, hand slipping back to his pocket. His pale brows furrowed as his face suddenly fell before slipping into a frown. "When did he become Theo?" he asked, inclining his head. "I didn't realise… that is… I didn't know you two had become so…" He trailed off, looking away, cheeks reddening.

Merlin, she would have laughed, but that would likely be even more distressing to him. Or hurtful. She decided on huffing as a show of irritation instead. "Rather silly, really," she started, as if recounting the tale of placating a child. "It was one of those weekends in April when you were at St. Mungo's. We were studying in the library and without any warning at all, he summoned my quill from my hand, demanding I start using his first name, or he'd start using dreadful nicknames when addressing me."

The corners of his mouth quirked. "Expound on the word 'dreadful'."

"Believe me, it was all rubbish," she said, flippant and unamused, tapping a finger against her book. "There was 'Hermès', 'Herms', and 'Hermionninny' as a metaphorical nod to Victor. Then he veered off into the frightening world of 'Mio', 'Miya', 'Mignonette' before ending curiously enough on 'Athena'…" She trailed off, shrugging, hoping she'd adequately conveyed the insignificance of this.

He scoffed and the air between them settled when he surprised her. "Athena," he murmured, low and genuine. "You could have taken him up on that one." He cleared his throat, looking embarrassed and down at the floor again. "You have to admit the similarities are there. The wisdom, knitting-crafting, and fierce protective instincts."
She silently cursed her flaming cheeks, but refused to play shy when his eyes searched for hers. "Defeats the purpose of a shorter name," she countered, meeting his gaze.

"Three syllables instead of four." He sniffed, holding up the appropriate number of fingers on each hand in example. "Shorter is shorter, *Athena*," he said, every syllable rolling off his tongue in a pleasing way that snatched the breath from her lungs.

"'Granger' is shortest." It meant to sound like a retort. She had meant it to sound *so much* Wittier than the wanton *lovestruck* plea she heard instead, which seemed to have a delicious darkening effect on his eyes.

He swallowed, side-stepping to lean against the wall on her left this time. "Have you decided on a job yet?"

"Yeah," she breathed, gripping the book in her lap tightly. "I'm going to accept Rolf Scamander's offer."

"Really?" He snorted, rolling his eyes, dismissing her frown. "I'm not belittling the job, Granger, it sounded perfect for you. But that business name, though."

She joined in his light chuckle, shaking her head. "I suppose I could always talk to him about changing it one day." She squirmed in her seat, giving a nervous swing of her legs, reluctant to reciprocate along this line of inquiry. "What—?" She stopped, swallowing an uncomfortable lump in her throat. "What about you? Aside from… getting married…" She forced a tight smile, deciding to ignore the cold ache sinking into her bones, binding itself to the marrow. "Congratulations, by the way."

"It's not for another year," he clipped, expression hardening. "And it… well… Until then, I've decided to stay here for an interim year working for Madam Pince. I'll be going through the archives and stored books that aren't out in the library, cataloguing them, and maybe suggesting swapping out some."

An acknowledging nod. "Will you get to live here?"

"Yes. Rent free, and I'll make enough to save some also." A look of genuine relief washed over him. "I can even pay for my own necessities and not feel guilty all the time for borrowing from Aunt Andromeda."

Hermione chewed her lip. "Not to mention, you'll get to see your fiancé every day."

"That too," he agreed, though his face told a different story...

A story she really should *not* focus on. "Do you have anything lined up for after…?" She trailed off, unable to bring herself to mention it… again. "For after your interim position here?"

"I do, actually." He was almost beaming now. "Mr. Ollivander agreed to take me on as an apprentice summer of next year."

"He did?" She clapped her hands, nearly dropping the book as her legs swung with absolute glee. "Oh Malfoy, that's wonderful; it's the one you most wanted, correct?"

"Yes," he agreed. "I think the potion master in Wales would have been good, but that fell through. There was one wand master in France who accepted my application, but he said it would be best if I lived there, as there would be long hours. That wouldn't work with Mother."
"Right. Did he ask you any peculiar interviewing questions? I don't recall you discussing it…"

"Well, not exactly." He shifted, scooting closer to her. "All he asked me to do was explain why I thought my mother's wand didn't work for me at the last of it—don't ask me how he knew that, I've no idea—" he interjected as her eyes widened "—because we both had Unicorn hair cores. I told him from what I could find, it seems that Unicorn hair is loyal to undivided masters, and I was the epitome of conflicted at that point. Also, Mother was alive and well, and Unicorn hair is very loyal to its first master."

"Wow." Without thinking or considering, Hermione inched herself close to him. "And, that was correct?"

He shrugged. "Mr. Ollivander never actually said. He nodded and asked me to explain why I thought my new wand was of firwood."

"And you said…?" Hermione grinned, urging him to continue, losing herself to everything in this moment.

"Swot." But she caught the proud glint in his eyes before he ducked his head. "Well, there is a duality to Hawthorn wood, it likes conflict. By that point I had made a resolution within myself, and written and sent out all of my apology owls. Firwood chooses masters who are resilient, strong-willed, intelligent—" she rolled her eyes at the wiggling of his eyebrows "—and very often-times intimidating."

Hermione's breath inexplicably caught at the teasing in his gaze and it was some moments before she managed to ground out, "Sounds right to me." She glanced back down to the book in her lap.

"So," he drawled, a few of his fingers appearing in her line of vision, tracing the corner of an open page, which had a dizzying effect on her pulse. "What is it you snuck off to read?"

"Poems," she managed, floating her gaze up to him, breath catching now that he was even closer. She swallowed uselessly (does it really help when the mouth is already dry?). "It's a book of poems my parents gave me for my birthday our first year. There's one in particular they had memorised and they'd say lines to each other before one would leave for a trip or convention."

There was a softening to his features, even as a spark lit in his eyes. "Do you have it memorised, too?"

"It was our thing, on the way to the Hogwarts Express," Hermione supplied, nodding.

"Is it the one you were reading when I came in?"

"No, I was—"

"Show me." He stepped in front of her, slipping both of his hands under the book, titling it up.

Her eyes narrowed into suspicious slits.

"Please?" He blinked innocently.

She huffed, but acquiesced, flipping several pages to the right. "$\text{There.}" She pointed to the title.

He turned his head, reading sideways. "$\text{A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning?}\$"

"Yes—hey!" She yelped, jumping from her seat as he snatched up the book, raising it over his head,
and stepping backwards.

"Ah, ah, you have to earn it back now," he instructed, eyes alight.

She folded her arms. "This is ridiculous."

"No, this is academic," he corrected, lowering his arm and giving the poem a studious once over, lifting his eyes up over the pages. "And nothing cheers you like academia or showing off, so…" He gestured airily, arching a pale brow in expectation. "Impress me, Granger."

Hermione stood, biting down on her bottom lip as she deliberated. This was silly, after all. All she had to do would be to summon her book and be on her way.

On the other hand, he did venture from the common room looking for her. "Fine." She sighed with exaggeration, dropping her arms to her side. "'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning'. By, John Donne."

He nodded approvingly, and with a deep inhale, she started to recite:

"'As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
The breath goes now, and some say, No:
So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.'"

Closing her eyes and losing herself to the words, she could hear her mother's rich voice, beautiful, natural, never failing to soothe. She breathed deep again.

"'Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.
Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.'"

Her father's lulling baritone voice flooded her mind next, sturdy and proud. Oh, this poem hurt. Down to the marrow. Every sinew in her body ached with the weight of poignancy and loss…
Her eyes blinked and fluttered, and she found herself momentarily confused by finding *not* her father’s wise and cheeky brown eyes, but a pair of *grey* eyes trained on her. *Vibrant* greys and blues, gazing *into* her, as if he'd never truly seen her before…

And at a much closer proximity than she remembered before.

Draco cleared his throat and she remembered she was still reciting. She met his look and threaded her fingers together before continuing, her voice softening as she quoted:

"But we by a love so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.
Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat."

He was drifting towards her, or was it she to him? Did it even matter? He hadn't checked the book for accuracy the last two stanzas, and it was now pressed loosely to his chest as his eyes poured into hers. *Into her.* She shivered, continuing barely above a whisper.

"If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.
And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.'

He was standing over her now, and she had tilted her face up to maintain the hazy magical spell of his eyes. Warm puffs of mingling air tickled her brow when his head started a cautious descent.

"One last stanza, Draco," she murmured. He nodded mutely, gaze dancing over her face, undecided between her eyes and lips…

She drew a shallow breath, continuing. "Such wilt thou be to me, who must—" she faltered, heart stuttering, releasing her fingers, hesitantly floating her hands up… *Up…*

"Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.”

Her mouth snapped shut as her fingers skimmed over his wrists. He shuddered, dipping and tilting his head as she lifted herself to meet him halfway.

"Granger…"

Her eyes closed of their own accord, bewitched with exquisite anticipation…

"Ow!" She yelped and jerked backward in surprise, eyes wide.

Draco’s swearing echoed in the empty room as he bent over, scooping up her book. "Salazar," he muttered, cheeks red, raking a hand through his hair. "Clumsy of me…"

"It's fine," she answered, chest heaving in realisation. Oh gods. "It's fine, Malfoy. Thanks for coming to check on me."

And with that, she ran, sprinted, for her freedom, forcing the door open and dashing across the threshold without a second glance over her shoulder. She didn't hear him follow, and so she kept running. Running and running until she neared the eighth-year common room entrance.

She gasped the password and allowed devastating sorrow to overcome her as she noted he hadn't appeared behind her. He wasn't pulling her back to himself and whispering sincere nothings as he kissed her breathless… None of those things happened as she slipped through and around the partiers, managing a weak smile and wave to Theo.

She tossed and turned the entire night, telling herself over and over in the cool grey light of dawn that he'd only been caught up in the moment of reflective poignancy. It became a mantra as she sat down to her very last Hogwarts breakfast, hesitantly asking Theo where everyone else was.

Theo snorted. "I would assume Blaise is still hours away from surfacing from his room, or the prefect's bathroom, or wherever he and his witch slipped off to last night. Draco growled at me before marching off to the owlery earlier, muttering about Greengrass, the Ministry and Azkaban."

His words snuffed out her last remnant of hope. Draco hadn't run after her last night. He wasn't looking for her this morning. He wasn't writing his fiancé’s father… Perhaps even his father… Maybe to access some family engagement ring…

Last night had been a tangled combination of friendship and pity.

Blaise and Ginny joined them soon after, but Draco never darkened the Great Hall doors. As they began talking about gathering trunks, she found herself bursting out that she'd be Floo’ing out of Hogwarts through McGonagall’s office, and rising swiftly to go make said last minute arrangements.

Telling herself this was stupid and cowardly. It had all been of her imagination, there was no reason to run.

Yet run she did.

Thursday, 25 April, 2002

Hermione's returned poetry book now lay flat on her bed, open to where there should have been a
poem she'd long ago learned by heart.

She found instead that poem had been torn out and a detailed letter from Draco resting in its place, safely kept in place by a sticking charm.

The letter was dated the morning they were all to depart from Hogwarts and from the look of his penmanship, he must have felt pressed for time.

The words themselves explained everything. The extent that he knew of his mother's illness; his need to provide for her. That marrying Astoria was hardly ideal, but at least his mother wouldn't lack for a thing…

His scrawling turned larger, almost excited, as he explained he would be visiting with his father as soon as they pulled into King's Cross. That he had to sign the contract today, but he was certain there would be a loophole…

And he desired that loophole more than his apprenticeship because his only regret from the night before was dropping the book before he could kiss her.

It ended on with a note of hope, that he would hold her poem ransom and if she'd like to have it back, he has it memorised now too… Perhaps she would like to test his memory over a cup of tea sometime...

Silent tears slid down her cheeks as she read and reread the letter and a patchwork of grey and blue morning broke through the night.
Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm truly overwhelmed and humbled by you all. And grateful. So very grateful. Thank you all. As always, love to my alpha and beta queens Kyonomiko and CourtingInsanity. All remaining errors are my own. I own no part of the Harry Potter franchise.

Friday, 26 April, 2002

Hermione faltered slightly as she stepped through the Ministry Floo system; heels may not have been the wisest choice, but damn it she felt the need to look as empowered as she felt.

Three years. Three bloody years. All that time wasted. Burying that book away because she'd been hurt by the lack of an outside accompanying letter or note.

No more.

She shook her curls, snatching several behind her ear as she checked her to-go bag of hot beverages and sweet buns for Harry and Ron. It wasn't bribery per se… But it never hurt to begin important conversation with a touch of something delicious, especially when said conversation revolved around one former Slytherin neither were still overly fond of, despite the fact that they could co-exist.

And the fact that it was only now a quarter till seven in the morning and she would be barring the door to their shared office unless they listened to her and agreed to try something.

She clipped along the atrium floor, gaze fixed on the lifts, mildly pleased that at this early morning hour there were veritably no flying paper memos to dodge. She couldn't help the thrill of hope coursing through her, giving new life to her movements.

They were the 'Golden Trio', after all. Harry had somehow managed to come through six years of death traps at Hogwarts alive, and then defeated a murderous blood purist. Keeping an innocent man from Azkaban shouldn't be asking too much of him or this limited, outdated system of justice. Harry still had enough clout and pull. She just needed to—

"Hermione Granger?"

The witch in question cursed under her breath, her shoulders stiffening as she stopped in her tracks. She could hear rapid footsteps from behind and decided this could only be someone wanting to make an appointment, which she absolutely would not remember, because nothing to do with Magical Beasts registered on her mental list of important things at this moment.

(And yes, there was a list. Item One: Draco. The End.)

"Oh, hello." Hermione blinked, surprised as Penelope Clearwater stopped in front of her. "I…wasn't aware you worked at the Ministry now." It was a testing sort of comment, but words failed her for any other civilised.
"I don't." Penelope answered, adjusting rolls of parchments in her arms and looking wholly unfamiliar in formal dark robes as opposed to the lime-green ones she usually wore. 'I'm only here today for a presentation. There are a few charity ideas I've come to present to pertinent Ministry department heads and board members. Several Medi-Witches and myself would like funding to start for private full-time care or palliative support as needed in the terminally ill. I've done a good bit of research on equivalents in the Muggle world and I think it's time we caught up and offered something similar."

"Brilliant." Hermione reached out on instinct, giving the witch's arm an affirming squeeze. "That's fantastic; you will let me know if I can be of any help to your cause, won't you?"

"Of course, that's kind of you to offer." Penelope eyed Hermione with the trace of something deep, studying and observing like the true Ravenclaw she was. "I've been following along with the papers, and I just wanted you to know I don't think Draco did it." Her words were simple and soft, as if sharing a comforting secret. "He was wholly devoted to his mother, his aunt and little cousin, while being indifferent to Astoria. He only spoke to her when absolutely necessary."

Hermione found her stance softening even more; she could almost hug the witch with relief and so many other emotions she really didn't have time to dwell on at the moment. "Thank you." She offered a tight, but genuine, smile. "I can't tell you what it means to hear you say that." A sudden thought blinked in her mind, and her brows pulled together. "How is it we didn't even think to have you on the witness list, or any of the other Medi-Witches who'd helped and volunteered with Narcissa? Or any Healers for that matter?"

"I'd wondered if I'd be summoned," Penelope said. "But, in truth, I don't think I could have said anything different or added more to the testimony provided." She waved a silencing hand at Hermione's already open mouth, poised for a rebuttal. "I can't speak to what anyone else saw at home, but the way my shifts were it would only be evenings or early mornings for a few moments at a time when I saw him. As soon as he learned some simple spells that helped Narcissa, I would give them privacy and make myself busy with restocking or reminding that insufferable house-elf to leave our Healing supplies alone when she cleans..."

Hermione loosed a scoff at mention of Astoria's house-elf, shaking her head and saying, "Sounds as though you could have contributed something to Malfoy's benefit, though."

Penelope's responding smile was tight and grim. "I'm sure you've all done your best. I hope the ruling reflects that, regardless of the Prophet's spin on it." The witch's eyes darted to the lifts. "Are you on your way to the courtroom now?"

"Harry's office actually." Hermione looked to the lifts as well. "I know there has to be something that is being overlooked. Somewhere. I wanted to talk with him and Ron. Pick their investigative brains a bit. Maybe put together a plea for a trial extension."

"Let's be on our way then." Penelope jerked her head as she set a brisk pace, a relieved Hermione clipping at her side. Relief melted into a cold internal scowl as they found themselves waiting.

"It's good that you're able to still be cordial with Ron after everything." Penelope's voice shocked Hermione from her mental flow charts and lists and she made a confused face in response. "You're able to have conversation with Ron about this." Penelope shrugged, tapping her foot as they waited. "I saw Percy in the bookstore last month. He didn't see me, he was all hunched over a book against a shelf, talking to himself about wands and experiments, and I backed the hell away before he could notice me."

"Oh?" Hermione's foot began tapping in rhythm with Penelope's and she hoped the witch would see
the clipped response for the rhetorical question it was.

Penelope hummed. "I was even hesitant to be the one making the presentation here at the Ministry for fear of bumping into Ron or Arthur. Or, Merlin, even him while coming or going for Darion…"

"Of course," Hermione placated. _Where was the damn lift? "You shouldn't feel bad, Ron and I were only something for a few weeks really, and that was so long ago. You and Percy were together for years."

Penelope offered an acknowledging nod. "That's true… And I suppose Ron would be less likely to sneer at your reason for being here… At least less likely than Percy should he overhear the specifics of my presentation."

A long string of expletives coiled and spun around Hermione's brain. The lift that opened was on the other end and there was no mistaking the inviting inflection in Penelope's answer. "You think Percy would disapprove your cause?"

"Without question." The witch scoffed, matching Hermione stride for stride to make the lift. "He was a little put-out when I originally volunteered to take on one of the Medi-Witch positions caring for Mrs. Malfoy on top of my St. Mungo's schedule. And then," she continued as they strode stepped into the (unfortunately) empty lift, "when I adjusted my shift schedule at St. Mungo's to only work twice a week there and then devoted the rest of my time to Mrs. Malfoy…!" Words gave way to a low growl as the lift doors closed, and Hermione was trapped. Completely and utterly trapped.

"Percy said the caregiving work was a step back in my career." A slight tremor entered Penelope's voice; it tugged on Hermione's heart, softening her attitude. The glossy sheen in the witch's eyes weakened Hermione's resolve to dash away the second the lift doors opened. "I couldn't make him understand; the hospital had no right to refuse Narcissa's care. We're supposed to heal, no matter the affiliation of the injured, but Percy just saw my work with her as menial house-elf tasks. He'd still come and wait for me in the Malfoy study to go home when he was in town and available, but his ire was always palpable—oh, this is our floor…"

The magical contraption mercifully dinged, and the doors opened, but Hermione was ensnared still, tethered by an invisible, compassionate string. There was simply no other explanation for the words flowing from her mouth before she had a chance to think: "I have time to walk you to your meeting room if you'd like," she blurted, internally seething at her sodding intuition that Penelope may just need to get this off her chest… _Bleeding Gryffindor heart indeed…_

On the other hand… Some self part of her heart perked up; perhaps she could this conversation to her advantage. Perhaps there could be something to share with Percy the next time he inserted himself in Hermione's day…

"Oh, this is all silly girl talk in comparison," Penelope offered said as her eyes brightened. Hermione found herself wondering if the witch had many people she talked to, especially being so willing to open to an otherwise acquaintance on the way to a presentation. "Do you see him around the office building?" Penelope asked, shifting, blinking twice. "Percy would mention seeing you from time to time when they moved into your office building and I was wondering how he was, since I'm obviously too much of a coward to ask him in person."

"I don't know if I could say precisely," Hermione replied honestly, ignoring the disappointing sag in Penelope's stature. "He's friendly and polite when we run into each other. He seems to be keeping very busy with work, but I was at the Burrow for dinner one night with him and Molly made it sound as though they hadn't seen much of him lately. He was solemn and stiff throughout. And he seemed to be ready to defend himself against Molly's woes of his job and…" Hermione stopped
herself, flushing and twisting her lips. "Well, it seems she's had a hard time adjusting to the recent life changes, including your breakup with Percy. I think she misses you."

"I miss her too," Penelope said, slowly turning on her toe, motioning for Hermione to follow. "It's not that I would object to seeing her again, or any of the Weasley family for that matter. I don't happen upon them in daily life though and... well, you know Molly." She cast a sharp look in Hermione's direction. "She's such a mother bear even with her cubs all grown and living their own lives. And I couldn't lie if she started asking direct questions... about Percy or anything."

Hermione's ears perked against her will as Penelope sighed in obvious turmoil.

"I hardly want to tell her the truth either. I was an only child, so I never struggled to stand out from siblings. I would envy Percy for a having a home full of family to go home to, but then..." She shook her head. "Percy somehow always felt he had to defend himself and his choices. Or he'd feel lost in the sea of children. He was the third to attend Hogwarts, so his grades were always compared to his two older brothers. And then his social life—he was never as personable or popular as Bill or Charlie. And then when he felt overlooked with the twins at school, I'm sure you understand why."

Hermione allowed herself a chuckle as Penelope shrugged and sighed.

"Ron and Ginny were just too young and looked up the twins and had so much more in common with them." The empathy in Penelope's voice and words was a thick blanket, warming the hallway with love and grief. "I simultaneously loved and loathed spending time with everyone. Some days it did wonders for Percy. But other times it made him angry to be a lost middle child."

"Molly seemed to especially disapprove his career change from the Ministry," Hermione supplied...and mentally slapped herself for not stopping the words. She needed to get to Harry's office!

"Still?" Penelope rolled her eyes. "She needs to move on. Percy could easily be running Greengrass's company. He was overseeing so many things by the time we broke up. He has so many Wizengamot connections from his experience and he has a thorough knowledge of the law. He's his own person and I couldn't make him see that. He would wither and fume over every perceived slight or harmless tease." Her stride slowed as the corridor narrowed and Ministry workers milled around them, walking in and out of rooms. "I loved him, I really did. But I couldn't help him—he wouldn't let me, and then he attacked my professional decisions. We couldn't move forward on such unstable ground."

They stopped at last at a closed door of deep red wood. It must be standard for everything in this building to look harsh and condescending. It seemed wrong to up and leave the conversation on such an unpleasant note.

"Well, maybe the next time you see him, you'll be able to have a conversation, and it won't be as unpleasant as you fear." Hermione winced at herself, but really? What else could she say? "Maybe he'll notice you next time in the—where did you say? The bookstore?"

"Yes" Penelope loosed a breathy chuckle. "Hunched over a book muttering about wands and wand cores and what if none of them worked. It was all so very Percy, and—Hermione?"

The curly-haired witch had whirled around and begun advancing back up the corridor. "Sorry!" she tossed over her shoulder, certain her hair had slapped the witch in her face. "I've got to meet Harry!"

Move, move, move! It was imperative that she MOVE! She marched the length of the corridor, around one, then two, then a third corner.
Counting one, two, three, fourth door on the left.

And knocked.

"Come in."

On a normal day, Hermione would have found Harry's groggy and sleepy directive endearing, even would have teased him about a late night, begged him to not inform her of the details and ruffled his hair as she handed him over his drink.

This was not one of those mornings.

"Harry, we need to—where's Ron?"

Her friend blinked blearily back at her before waving at a chair near his desk. "You're a full half an hour later than I expected." Hermione gave a thick swallow, torn between a nervous giggle and a sarcastic retort, but Harry didn't give her the chance for either, continuing, "Luna explained everything to me last night, and I'm a rubbish Auror and friend for not catching the signs sooner."

Hermione lifted a shoulder weakly. "Or I could have just been brave and told you years ago."

"Years?" Merlin, Harry's eyes could bug and bulge… They settled into narrow slits, his hand dropping to his lap as Hermione nodded. He shook his head and said, "You know you're expected to make an appearance at dinner eventually, yes? I will need answers to my many many questions."

"Doesn't seem like there will be an opportunity for that if you don't help me," she clipped, bringing the beverage and buns bag to rest on the edge of his desk. "Late or not, I have sweet buns for you and Ron, one large cappuccino for you, and one of those ghastly sweet turtle mocha things for Ron, and where is he?" she asked again, leaning to search out the still open door.

The door shut, and Hermione turned to find Harry giving the bag a suspicious once-over. "He's worked out a bit of shift alteration while the Missus is expecting. Morning sickness seems to be especially hard on her, and he wants to be around in case she needs anything. He stays later to make up those hours as Molly usually drops in after lunch."

"More buns for you then." Hermione cast a stasis charm over the beverage and floated it to Ron's desk. "I know you've already gone above and beyond for me in this case, but I would very much like for you to try and see about delaying the verdict."

Harry stopped mid-bite into his sweet bun and frowned. "I don't think I've got that sort of auth—"

"People listen to you still," Hermione insisted, already prepared for his denial to be related more on his influence. "And this isn't about whether you're officially on this case or not, Robards would have to listen to you. Or maybe if we talk to the Wizengamot as they're filing in, get their support before Slopes arrives."

"What exactly are we getting their support for?"

"A mistrial," she answered. "Or, merely a delay of voting by even a week. Please."

His face pulled with scepticism as he let the bun sit back in the pile, brushing crumbs and stickiness from his hands over the stack. "It's not that I don't agree with you that this is all circumstantial and I do think he's been brilliantly set up, but we need something more than what's already—"

"The experimental wands!"
Raven brows furrowed as the wizard folded his hands over his lap, leaning back in this chair. "I'm listening."

"Right." Hermione sucked a sharp breath, loathing every word about to leave her mouth. "According to the Auror report, not even Ollivander knew Draco was experimenting with wand cores."

"You did," he pointed out. "Malfoy consulted you, remember?"

"Only because he happened to see me in Paris on Saturday," she insisted. "I probably wouldn't have known until later otherwise. Theo didn't know and we can assume Blaise didn't know. But yet..."

Her eyes fell shut and she forced the next sentence from her body. "Percy knew about them."

"What." It wasn't a question. It was a command to repeat and elaborate.

Hermione opened a single eye. "Percy and I were talking on the street the morning before Draco's arrest, and he said something about Draco's experimental wands."

Silence. Impossible blaring silence. Then Harry sighed.

"There could be—"

"I know, I know!" Hermione rushed. "I know there could be any number of explanations for that, but we don't know because he hasn't been questioned. And I didn't remember he'd said something about them until talking to Penelope just now."

"Are you suggesting that—?"

"It could be nothing, Harry. I know that." Hermione fingers found each other and twisted over her lap. "Merlin, I know I'm not an Auror, but I know circumstantial evidence when I see it. And we need time. My feelings aside, Draco is innocent and he can't go to Azkaban. A more thorough investigation could buy us more time. The Medi-Witches and Healers caring for Narcissa weren't even interviewed. This was thrown together too fast, and we need time to find to find the real killer."

Harry blew out a long puff of air, tapping his chin.

A shallow exhale. "I'm not saying you, or, Merlin, not Ron, be in charge of further questioning," she expanded. "But, is this enough? Draco is innocent—he is—and I... Merlin, I—" Her lip trembled as a merciless lump attacked her throat, tear ducts filling against her will.

"You can't sit idly by and let another member of the Black family be blamed for a crime he didn't commit," Harry supplied with a knowing look on his face, rising from his seat. "At least, that's what we're going to remind the Wizengamot of when we get there." He made his way to the door, ushering the witch to exit first. "Nothing that group of uppity old crones hates more than being reminded of their past errors in judgements—oof!"

Hermione threw her arms around the Auror's neck the moment he closed the office door behind him, squeezing every ounce of gratitude in her body into her embrace.

"We really need to get a move on, love," Harry tapped her shoulder.

"Right." She withdrew, pressing a kiss to her friend's cheek. "Thank you."

Emerald eyes twinkled back at her in response and together, they set off for the dank level of courtrooms.
"The corridor seems too quiet," Hermione observed as they walked in the direction of the courtroom from the lifts, their footfalls echoing through the hallway. "Shouldn't there be members milling about right now? It's already—"

"It's not even a quarter past," Harry interjected, taking her hand for a reassuring squeeze. "This is good, it means we can get there before—"

He stopped talking as they came up to the closed doors of Courtroom Eight, hearing the muffled sound of someone speaking from within. Someone speaking as in an address.

Hermione heart thundered against her breastbone as Harry opened the doors…

The full Wizengamot was already present and seated. Slopes was standing. Draco was standing, Robards and Katie on either side of him some distance away.

They had resumed his trial early.

"...having reminded the court thus," Slopes bellowed, sweeping his face over the courtroom before focusing on Draco. "We, the Wizengamot, do find Draco Lucius Malfoy guilty of the wilful and premeditated murder of Astoria Malfoy née Greengrass."

Everything tunnelled and grew dim. All breath fled Hermione's lungs.

Slopes raised his chin. "He is hereby sentenced to life in Azkaban."

Gutted. Hallow. Azkaban clanging in her mind and heart. Then...

"NO!"

If all eyes of the courtroom turned to her as she yanked her hand from Harry's and barrelled down the aisle, Hermione was unaware. There was only Draco in this moment, and she raced to him, lunging and wrapping her arms around him so that he staggered from the chains around his ankles and wrists.

It vaguely registered in her mind that the courtroom was now engulfed in a chaotic buzz, but none of that mattered. All that mattered was threading her fingers through Draco's fine platinum hair, fist ing his robes around his back as he sagged into her embrace, nuzzling his cheek into her curls.

"Hermione," he started, falling silent as Hermione pulled away momentarily, bringing her hand from his back to cup his cheek.

"Don't give up, this isn't the end; I'm getting you out," she murmured, boring her gaze into his sad grey eyes, willing him to believe her. "Trust me."

Katie cleared her throat from behind, whispering loudly something about stepping back now, contempt of court, but Hermione wasn't listening. Not when he would be taken from her at any moment. She darted her eyes all across his face, tracing the edges of his jaw and cheekbones with her fingertips.

Someone tugged her robes from behind; a brusque male voice huffed something about a Stupefy.

Draco was yanked from her hold.

"Draco!" Her hands reacted on instinct to catch him, but he stumbled to the ground nonetheless. He
must have slept and eaten far too little this week. She ignored the gruff command to stay on her feet and lunged to the fallen wizard, not worried at all who she may or may not be flashing at this point.

Twin grey irises were full and vulnerable as they met hers. "Did you find your book?" he asked, his voice hoarse and carrying a note of sorrow.

Tears pooled in her eyes as she nodded and swallowed hard, that insufferable lump forming in her throat again. Taking him by the hands, she helped him to his feet, feeling the world shatter around her as Robards pulled him backwards and Katie kept her glued in place by a sticking charm on her legs.

"Wait!" Draco yelled, straining to look backwards.

"Draco!" She balled her hands into fists, squeezing tight as Robards and Katie now pulled a struggling Draco up the aisle…

"Wait!" Draco snatched himself from the female Auror's hand, angling himself back around as Robards continued to tug "Hermione, 'As virtuous men pass mildly away, and whisper to—’"

He was cut off with a silencing charm, magical binding now wrapped entirely around his body as Robards dragged him from the courtroom, with Bell slamming the door behind them.

Hot tears stung her cheeks as they slid from her eyes. She stared unseeing at the courtroom door, not certain where Harry had disappeared to, or why he hadn’t barred the door, keeping them from escaping with Draco…

Something was in her hand.

Sniffing and blinking rapidly, Hermione looked down, bringing her hand to her face.

Muggle paper. Worn Muggle paper from the looks of it. Folded down into a small rectangle.

Carefully, so very carefully, as if it were an antique manuscript, Hermione delicately unfolded the sheets, finding two separate pages in her hands. And the title 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' staring back at her from the top of the first page.

Sucking a fortifying breath, Hermione turned around, glaring up at the still standing triumphant presiding wizard. "This isn't over."

Chapter End Notes

*running away* see y'all in chapter 23...
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

A/N: Apologies this chapter is shorter than my usual. It just felt best by itself. I continue to be humbled by you lovely readers. Thank you so much for reading my words.

As always, love to alpha Kyonomiko and beta love to CourtingInsanity. All remaining errors are mine.

I own no part of the Harry Potter franchise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, 26 April, 2002

(Later that night...)

"What did you say to him?" Hermione mumbled from behind a transfigured throw pillow on Theo's sofa, cracking an eye open to see the wizard in question halt from trying to tip-toe out of his study.

Theo sighed, shoulders sagging as he padded back to the sofa and sat on the coffee table in front of Hermione. "Is this something you really need to know now?"

Hermione drew a sharp breath, shifting so she lay on her back, pulling the quilt Theo had just placed over her up to her shoulders. "I'm not sure," she answered, deciding honesty would be best. She blinked at the high ceiling in the dim yellow light, considering the wizard's question thoroughly.

The day had been an unmitigated series of unfortunate (insert: bloody awful) events after Draco's sentence.

Her threatening oath to Slopes may have come too soon because immediately following, when she focused back on the door Draco had just been dragged through, everything tunnelled and she reeled. She'd failed. They'd failed. And he was gone. Carted off to Azkaban.

At one point, she recalled the sensation of the sticking spell releasing from her legs and then comforting warmth and expensive cologne embracing her and leading her from the courtroom.

Harry's voice, loud with righteous indignation at the sudden time change of the trial and not following updated protocol for proper notification of all interested parties, was her guiding beacon to the realm of reality. He was the brother of her youth and he would never cease to prove himself as her faithful friend... Even when she'd been less otherwise to him.

If that wasn't enough to clear the horror-struck cobwebs from her mind, Ron's arrival to the office as Hermione, Theo and Blaise crowded around Harry's desk to fill out the necessary paperwork for reopening a now technically closed case in triplicate certainly filled the bill. His response was, as she would have expected of someone who had been informed his brother would be questioned as part of a murder trial. She'd made certain to hug Ron fiercely before leaving the office with Theo and Blaise, voicing aloud pacifying assurance that there was little-to-no proof of anything; that it was only for...
clarification. Ron had grunted and told her this changed nothing, she was still in the running to be
godmother for the twins.

'Newly processed prisoners' were not allowed to receive visitors until after their first full week, which
meant they couldn't try to see Draco that day. As a result of her 'disturbance to the proceedings' and
'obvious contempt of court', it had already been decreed that one Hermione Jean Granger would not
be granted visiting privileges for the first six months of the 'prisoner's sentence'. That had been a hard
blow to Hermione's moral, even as she repeated to herself he wouldn't even be in there that long.

Theo and Blaise went home with her for a security sweep (Theo's insistence, even though they'd
forgotten all about it the night before). Hermione couldn't help but fixate on the grey across the street
again, thinking of Draco.

Fretting if he would be able to sleep at all. Worrying when this would all be behind them and he
could finally be released.

Wondering how to even begin to prove his innocence.

And yet…

Draco's innocence meant that someone else was guilty. And that someone else might just be
someone she would have called a friend, in the broad sense of the word.

Her eyes caught on a shimmer in the evening shadows again, and, to her utter dismay, she gasped in
surprise this time, which didn't go unnoticed by Theo. He immediately Apparated across the street,
and while finding nothing and not seeing the shimmer for himself, he insisted Hermione sleep at Nott
Manor for the weekend.

And now, here she lay on one of his opulent study sofas debating if, of all the things she could and
should be more concerned with, what she desperately needed to know most was whatever detail of
Draco's feelings she could get her friend to admit knowing...

She sighed, exhausted to the marrow. "I think so… I think it would help." Admitting that felt like
weakness; a testament to the pathetic and dire state she'd come to.

But three years.


"Well," Theo began, interrupting Hermione's internal torture. "First there was the Tracey Davis thing
to catch him up on—don't look at me like that. Draco's been a moody, conflicted sod since you came
back, and it's not all Astoria related. You may not be willing to admit more to yourself, but you know
it hasn't been all of those conflicting emotions that go along with fear of being framed for the murder
of a wife you cared little for."

Hermione sucked in a sharp breath, looking back to the ceiling and folding her hands primly over the
quilt on her chest. She recalled the foreign coldness in Draco's office whenever Theo had come up,
and couldn't disagree. "I'm listening," she breathed.

"Well, to address what is Astoria related: you know him." The wizard rolled his eyes. "I'd be the last
to say I'll miss the witch, but for Draco there was the whole guilt for not really feeling upset over it.
Astoria probably could have fought the marriage long and hard enough in the first place and Darion
would have caved. She also could have not agreed to the annulment clause, but she immediately
accepted. For all that, for what it meant for Narcissa, he was grateful, and felt he should be more
upset over her death."
Hermione gnawed on the inside of her cheek, nodding into her pillow. He offered a wry smile.

"And for some reason," he continued, "the fact that I'm a male and you're a female is reason enough to assume I've been biding all this time to get into your knickers—"

Hermione scoffed. And grimaced.

"I know." Theo sounded equally disgusted. "But he always was a bit of a spoiled and possessive bugger who never learned to share, even when something wasn't his to begin with." The lines in Hermione's face fell flat, her breath catching as Theo gave a light kick to the sofa. "And he was so very conflicted because you weren't his, and yet—"

He cut himself off, sighing... Kicked the sofa once more and rubbed his hands together. This was 'serious Theo' now, all tendrils of humour filtering from him, dissipating into the air. Hermione decided it was only fair she sit upright against the sofa, wrapping the quilt around herself, brushing stray curls out of her eyes.

"Shit, Hermione." Theo took a hand through his hair, looking more conflicted than she'd ever seen him. "There's background information you should have for perspective, but it wouldn't be fair to him if I told you everything."

Hermione bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep from prompting or pleading while he was obviously in the midst of a great internal struggle, lips moving in silent debate.

"Sod it," he muttered finally, looking back at her. "I'll tell you what I think you need to get by on, but you'll be hearing the rest from Draco. In person. Because he's not staying in that miserable hell-hole for long."

Hermione nodded, sucking in a long breath as Theo leaned forward, propping his arms over his legs.

"So, for Draco's part," he started, "all I really had was speculation up until Wednesday when I was allowed to speak with him—which was a bureaucratic nightmare in and of itself, by the way." He made a quick face at her, receiving an eye roll in response. "I can admit to you that it was very strong speculation, but conjecture nonetheless. I started suspecting something on Draco's part in January of our eighth year at Hogwarts. It was relatively soon after Christmas holidays, actually.

"Blaise and I discussed it one morning a month later while Draco was at a Healer appointment. We were in agreement about the feelings, but disagreed on the timing. My money was on something at Hogwarts while he thought you two needed to be away from school to see where it all could go. And to be fair to you—" he flashed her the ghost of a smirk "—I was hoping a little bit of Draco's Malfoy possessiveness would kick in after you and I were on a first-name basis, thus allowing me to win the bet back then."

"Prick." Hermione snorted, shaking her head lightly.

"Slytherin," he amended, "but that's nothing new. Draco didn't say anything about the marriage contract with Astoria until the day before it was announced, and even then, he said nothing to us about the severity of Narcissa's illness at the time. Blaise and I knew money was tight in the aftermath of the war without any Malfoy funds, but Draco kept things vague and nonspecific whenever we'd prod him. Honest-to-Merlin Hermione, I thought the marriage was something that had been arranged before the war and he couldn't get out of. It was just something we never talked about. If I'd known it was about the money to begin with..." He paused, shaking his head.

"You couldn't have known if he didn't tell you," Hermione offered softly.
He made a face back at her. "But I knew something was up. I should have tried harder. You had us all dreaming of life after Hogwarts on study breaks, and I should have known it would be more complicated for him. I mean, we talked. I knew things were a strain on him with his mother and… Salazar! This somehow feels like I'm a little to blame. He's my brother. I should have known how much he wanted to remake the Malfoy name."

He trailed off and swallowed hard, gazing unfocused into the dim light behind Hermione. She waited until he tilted his head in silent inquiry.

She blinked once and nodded. "Go on."

"Well, looking back, it was rather idiotic of me to not put anything together at the time." Theo shot her a pointed look that made Hermione shift in her seat. "First, you suddenly announce you're not joining us on the Hogwarts Express. Then Draco was brooding and a snappy shite the whole train ride to King's Cross. He offered no further explanation when he told us he was going to try and see Lucius just before disembarking the train." Theo lingered on the patriarch's name, drawing it out for emphasis. "And then for the next six months until the Christmas party at my house, he'd turn all silent, brooding and mournful whenever you came up in conversation."

"He seemed quiet at the party, too," Hermione added, pulling her hair over a shoulder. "A little short and withdrawn, but he loosened up by the end of the night."

"Yes," Theo affirmed. "I didn't ask, so I can't say for sure, but I'm of the opinion now that it's because you're just you, and by that point he just missed you. His friendship attempts with Astoria had come to nothing and he had a lot happening with Narcissa at that point. He was lonely, he missed his friends and he missed you. I'll stand by that till my dying day."

Hermione tightened the quilt around her, glancing down to smooth it over her lap as heat bloomed in her cheeks.

"Next," Theo continued, either ignoring or unaware of her momentary pleasure. "There was this sudden and mysterious cheer and glow about him starting at the New Year. Blaise and I saw more of him between January and June, and that underlying cheer was ever present and I think it carried him through to the wedding… Is there anything you'd like to add?"

"We started exchanging owls off-and-on in that time period," Hermione supplied at Theo's anticipating pause. "We kept the topics light. Everything was about books or our jobs; nothing to cancel a wedding over… Or so I kept telling myself."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far, my clueless little Gryffindor." Theo sniffed. "But you know how determined our pasty martyr can be. Especially when involving his mother."

Her cheeks burned again and she swallowed thickly, gesturing that he should continue.

"Well, I don't really know what else I should tell you… As I said, everything on Draco's part was all my own speculation up until Wednesday." Theo took his time sitting upright, stretching his back. "He finally told Blaise and I all about Narcissa and the annulment clause a little before the wedding. It wasn't surprising, but I didn't have any reason to assume you were part the reason behind that."

"You admitted the depth of your feelings to me at the wedding, but you were very guarded and keen on downplaying it that I never felt I could tease you about it. To be honest, I was shocked you took the long assignment in Australia. You travelled enough it seemed to help you when hints of chemistry started surfacing at game nights, but I guess I underestimated just how heavy the weight of love can be."
Hermione didn't answer. It seemed there would be more details she could volunteer here, but it felt important that Draco hear it from her first… So instead, she sat, fiddling with the ends her hair, contemplating if Theo had also come to the end of what he felt appropriate to divulge.

"Did you know he started making preparations for the annulment?" she asked, folding her hands crisply.

"I did." Theo hummed. "Though again, to my discredit, I didn't ask what exactly 'preparing' entailed. I never thought about the financial implications that could follow along with that. Blaise and I knew enough about Warrington by then, and Draco had finally started healing after losing Narcissa. I just took the annulment as more him moving on from one phase of life into another, not as making financial preparations for another payment."

"Fair enough," Hermione placated, at which Theo grunted.

"I saw the flowers in his office, you know." A dark blond brow quirked in her direction, making Hermione sigh and unfold her hands, as in silent surrender.

"I didn't feel like I could take your letter as an open invitation," she explained. "I wasn't family. We had said goodbye before I left. He never said anything about owling me. We actually never owl'd after he married, except for when scheduling consults. And besides, he had you. He had Andromeda and Blaise. Merlin, he even had Astoria, for whatever that was worth." Her lips quirked into a rueful smile. "But somehow, even when I said I needed the space, any sense of resolve, self-preservation or propriety crumbled at the need of Narcissa's death. I couldn't have him think he didn't have me in some form as well. Even if the sentiment was through covert flower messages."

"Well there you have it then," Theo said quietly. "Wednesday night after the trial, I may have clued him in to the fact you went home alone and miserable after his wedding—" Hermione felt quite torn between conflicting urges to smack the wizard upside the head or bury herself in a giant hole she could immediately make in the study floor "—I reminded Draco of events preceding your leaving for Australia for an unprecedented length of time," Theo continued, ignorant of his friend's internal debate. "You should know he refused to divulge that information to me, so thank you for already making me privy to said circumstances—and then I reminded him of the flowers he received the day of Narcissa's funeral."

He drew an exaggerated breath that Hermione nearly giggled at...damn him. He'd guessed her inner debate after all… "I reiterated that there is a Tracey Davis in my life, at least, I'm very much hoping there still is, and I'd been waiting for the right time to tell him. I ended by stating once and for all that in the whole of my friendship with you, you've been the sister I never had but secretly think it would have been perfection to grow up with."

It was such a declarative statement over Hermione's already fragile emotional state that the subsequent wave of fresh tears shouldn't have come as a surprise. And yet, they did. Hermione gasped and blinked and swiped before Theo felt compelled to extend any more comfort…

But in one fluid movement, he was standing and leaning, then pressing a kiss to Hermione's brow. "I know, love, I know," he murmured, ruffling her tangle of curls, sharing an affectionate smile. "Try to sleep. Tea and toast in the morning and we'll start plotting.

"Plotting?"

"Oh yes," he hummed. "We're not abandoning Draco in this time of need. And in the aftermath of such an emotional display, you two will need some form of communication. So, we're going to theorize and discuss ways which you can get letters and other such gifts to him when I take full
advantage of visiting hours. Time permitting, we'll discuss means of clearing Draco's name."

Hermione released a strangled puff of air as Theo left the study, dimming the light even more as he walked. Her head found its way back to the charmed pillow and she burrowed under the warm quilt, falling in and out of exhausting dreams until fresh sunlight streamed through the open study windows the next morning.

"April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers."

Chapter End Notes

Excerpt from The Wasteland by, T.S. Eliot. Thank you all for reading. Would love to hear your thoughts
The comments, follows and favorites still amaze and overwhelm me. Thank you all. As always, thank you to Kyonomiko her being Supreme Alpha. And to CourtingInsanity for being my perfect beta. All remaining errors are mine.

I own no part of the Harry Potter franchise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I think we dream so we don't have to be apart for so long. If we're in each other's dreams, we can be together all the time." - A. A. Milne

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Friday, 31 May, 2002

Granger,

Would you look at that? Three notes in one visit—what a lucky, lucky witch you are.

Actually, this third one is really just to irritate Theo. The sod was whinging that I'm not talking to him enough when he visits me. Not that he has much new to say today, and I'm in no frame of mind to hear how he nearly set his home potions lab on fire because he forgot about stirring the cauldron counter clockwise after five minutes of simmering because Tracey came to surprise him for lunch in his lab…

(Hermione grimaced. Tracey had laughed it off over their take-out dinner last night while Theo sulked, eyeing his witch with lust-filled eyes. Hermione hoped to never hear all that he'd been plotting for his revenge in his silent brooding.)

At the risk of bringing up an uncomfortable topic, should I be worried he doesn't have much news to give me? And you for that matter… You've talked about your frustrations with coming to the end of your book, but no mention of what Scamander would like you to do next. Or if…

Merlin, I hate that I'm even wishing for another five months in here, but if it's the only way I'll get to see you… These letters just aren't the same, Granger. Neither is dreaming. I'll take what I can get, but I'd love to be able to see you.

Guard coming to collect Theo, signing off now.

DM

Hermione swallowed thickly as she came to the end the last letter he penned this visit.

One month. Draco had been in Azkaban for one long month already. He was right: dreams and letters could never fill the void he'd created.

The case had gone cold and dry and Robards was threatening to put Harry back to his usual case
load with no time to dedicate to extra research. It was incredibly frustrating.

The questioning of Percy had been as expected. The wizard had direct access to their house; of course he had had a logical explanation for knowing about the experimental wands. He stated that he’d seen Draco working on them one evening when coming over to deliver some financial statements to Astoria. Harry couldn’t corroborate with Draco—no questioning of new prisoners until an infuriating amount of time had passed.

She absolutely knew Slopes was behind that decree. Just as he was in the vexing decree that denied her from visiting. Hermione appealed for visiting rights weekly and was denied every time.

Thank Merlin for Theo and the remaining prejudice of some establishments against Muggle items.

Theo travelled to Azkaban twice a week, the maximum number of visits Draco was allowed. Each time he carried with him a Muggle wallet that Hermione had cast an undetectable extension charm over. All magical items had to be left at the front desk, but the Muggle wallet had been so easily dismissed the first time that Hermione justified her deceit within the system quiet easily. Within the wallet, Hermione stashed daily letters she would write to Draco between Theo’s visits, a Muggle legal pad, pencil, green apples, deli sandwiches, Muggle chocolates of all flavours… really anything she could think of for him to consume in Theo’s allotted visiting half-hour. As long as it wouldn’t waft out into the hallways and attract the attention of the guards.

Their letters were formal in the beginning, hesitant about how much to reveal to each other on paper. Hermione had broken first, telling him the courtroom hadn’t counted, he would still be required to prove his recitation skills over a cuppa when they had him released.

After that, it had been Draco unleashed on paper. Everything she loved about him: his wit, snark, dry humour, childhood stories, Hogwarts memories… Even discussing the case at times, tossing ideas back and forth at each other. Hermione held back somewhat, if only to keep some unspoken things left to tell him in person. Pencil and paper just weren't the same, Austenian fun as it was, but thank Godric for this she supposed…

Hermione read through the letter again, a half smile tugging at a corner of her lips. Thank all the Founders and Merlin for Tracey Davis, while she was at it.

It shouldn’t have surprised her to be properly introduced to Theo’s new girlfriend the first Saturday morning after Draco’s sentencing. The witch was clad in what she could only assume was one of Theo’s bathrobes, flushing, but eager to become friends and assist by any possible means. Apparently the gorgeous blonde hadn’t been too keen on Theo putting their relationship on hold for the couple of weeks in April, and decided for the wizard she was in his life, and was going to help. Hermione had informed her the most helpful thing she could do at the moment was to pass the marmalade before her boyfriend ate it all, and proceeded to inform said boyfriend that he’d be the biggest idiot alive if he mucked this relationship up.

Tracey had been a common fixture in their meetings and discussions over owls and Floo calls with Harry ever since, fitting in seamlessly and bringing out a whole new side of adoration, seriousness, and softness Hermione had never seen in Theo before. New love was a beautiful sight to behold and Hermione hated every shot of envy that sank into her chest as she fell asleep alone each night. Thinking of Draco and his latest letter. Wishing he were present physically and not just in written word.

Most conflicting and disappointing of the last month was that there was no action to theorize or speak of. At all.
There had been nothing to lead to other suspects. Not Warrington. Not a random robber nor a disgruntled employee of Mr. Greengrass. Nothing at all to continue to question Percy...

It was irritating that Harry hadn't been allowed to place a tracer on the money in Draco and Astoria's joint account, order of Slopes, who claimed it was for Mr. Greengrass's privacy. Mr. Greengrass appealed to have that recalled for the sake of the case, but Slopes had been firm. The wands had been given to Mr. Ollivander as a ruse for the wizard to 'study', but there had been no signs of strange activity around the store, no indication that the elderly wizard was being watched, and no attempts at a break-in thus far.

All-in-all, there were items that should have been pleasing. She should be delighted that Percy Weasley was the exemplary employee Mr. Greengrass boasted him to be, and the model citizen everyone knew him to be. It should have been a relief that a relative of dear friends, a new friend himself, perhaps wasn't guilty after all. If not for his sake, for the sake of his family, who she'd always thought of with great love and affection.

And yet...

There remained the ever-present question of who killed Astoria? Draco would not remain in Azkaban forever. He couldn't. He wouldn’t.

Hermione blinked herself back to the present, feeling the urge to visit the loo. After a quick trip in which she also felt the need to tidy her braid, which had borne the wrath of her writing frustrations for the day. Padding back to her living room, she collected all her discarded wads of parchment from today's attempt at work and tossed them in the kitchen bin. She summoned her mug of now cold tea from the living room and with a flick of her wrist, boiled water instantly for a fresh cuppa Earl Grey.

There was also the small issue of Rolf being so pleased with her meagre collection of ashwinders that he'd been talking about Hermione starting another book, which would require travel. Initially she had turned him down, but he'd begun asking about her future plans again. And inquiring if she would be travelling with him and Hagrid to the dragon conference in a few weeks.

She heaved a deep sigh, keen self-awareness sinking into her bones. Into her soul.

For better or for worse, she'd come to realise there was a not-so-very-small fraction of herself that was not only used to being on the go, but almost enjoyed it. That had become so accustomed to fading as an anonymous face in the world of strangers and creatures, she wasn't certain she could function properly as a constant member of a social group. She lacked confidence in her ability to cope long-term as the only single person in their twenties within her family unit. Chewing on her tongue, Hermione stepped back to the sofa in her living room, blowing over her steaming cup.

Her fireplace chimed. "Hermione?"

"Harry!" the witch answered, setting the cup on her coffee table as calmly and gently as possible before lunging for her fireplace, where Harry's face sat in the flames. "Hello, I'm here. What is it?"

"Is it alright if I come through? I've got… well… it's really not much, but I thought you'd like to hear it."

Hermione stepped back to make room. "Come on over," she said, feigning a calm expression, fully expecting that her oldest friend would see right through it. Her fireplace roared to life in a sea of dark soot and green flames as Harry stepped through, brushing off his Auror robes, eyes bright but serious behind his glasses.
"Anyone else here?" he asked, looking about the room.

"Just me," she answered, eyeing him and then her Floo powder pot. "Do I need to summon the group—it wouldn't take but a few extra minutes..."

Harry shook his head. "There's no need. To be honest, I don't know why I'm telling you this right now. You'll only be cross with it and then, by default, cross with me and Merlin, it's hard to live when you're cross with m—"

"Just tell me," she cut-in. "I need... gods I need something. Anything you can say right now would be better than the nothing of the last weeks. Please."

"Right." He nodded, waving at her sofa. "Mind if we sit?"

"Of course not." Hermione immediately vanished Draco's letters and her work before taking a sideways seat, tucking a foot under her while the dangling foot tapped rapidly against the floor.

Harry eyed her foot but said nothing and so she left it to its anticipatory jitter as he ran a hand through his unruly raven locks. "So, a few things. The first is that I was allowed to visit Malfoy this evening, and—" Hermione's breath caught and it was a struggle to keep her thoughts from tunnelling. Or spiralling. "—he said it's very possible that Percy could have seen or heard him working on his experimental wands one evening. He'd always been in and out of the house for various Darion or Astoria related reasons, and Malfoy never paid him much attention. Which means, he couldn't for certain say one way or another if Percy could have known about his wands."

"Alright." An irritating find, to be honest, but what else could she say?

Harry's emerald eyes narrowed under furrowed dark brows. "This next part was unexpected information, and again don't get your hopes up."

She nodded, now tapping an impatient finger over her folded leg.

"Okay." He blew out a quick puff of air. "Mr. Greengrass just left my office moments ago. He came because he had some information he thought I'd find useful. The first had to do with company portkeys. It seems he orders portkeys in advance for himself and Percy—"

"Yes," Hermione affirmed, sharp and crisp.

"And he normally just waits for Percy to turn in his portkey inventory sheet for his needs, but Mr. Greengrass thought he would be helpful and check Percy's inventory for him while he's away for the day."

Hermione's heart rate quickened, and she couldn't stop drumming her fingers against her leg. Irrational reactions, of course; she needed to get a bloody sodding grip...

"Apparently, there are two of Percy's portkeys that are unaccounted for..."

She couldn't breathe and everything stilled as the wizard on her sofa released a sigh. She couldn't breathe. She needed to breathe. She needed to breathe....

"The destination of one portkey was Paris—" a shallow gasp from Hermione that Harry acknowledged with a slight tilt in his chin "—and the second portkey was back to England. Right back to Percy's office, to be precise."

"Oh my Merlin." Hermione choked as the Auror wagged a finger at her.
"Remember to not get your hopes up! There could be many explanations for that. We cannot go jumping to conclusions just yet."

She ground her teeth, loathing Harry’s logic. "Was there anything else you care to share that I shouldn't get worked up over?" she snapped, impatient for him to leave so that she may scream and rage and yell at such an infuriating nothing.

"There was…” Harry gave a shallow exhale, running a hand through his hair. "Mr. Greengrass also thought I should know that he had left Astoria’s inheritance money alone, announcing that it was not to be disturbed to his staff. He had been wondering what to do with it, and decided this week to make a sizeable donation to one of Astoria’s favourite art galleries in wizarding Paris. But when he went in to withdraw the funds himself, he was informed there were insufficient funds in that account for the withdrawal."

Hermione’s breath hitched…

"It seems that Percy's documentation of the accounts funds show everything in order while the actual amount in the account is barely a quarter what it originally was."

"Circe!" She leapt from her seat. "How on earth can you say this is frustrating news? Why, that's…This…"

"This is nothing, Hermione," Harry admonished, taking her wrists in his hands. "This is the exact circumstantial shite that put Malfoy in Azkaban to begin with."

Hermione shook her head, opening her mouth to protest...

"You know I'm right," he said, tightening his hold on her arms, a useless attempt at comforting. "We need something concrete and irrefutable, not more of this hogwash that can be overturned in a few court hearings."

Hermione scoffed. "And just how are we supposed to do that, Harry? This is magical murder!" She shook her head, hot angry tears welling in her eyes. "Godric, there weren't any witnesses for corroborating evidence to mull over, and it's not like Muggle investigations where you look for fingerprints or DNA or…"

She stiffened under his touch, an idea burning—searing—into her mind…

It just might work...

"Harry." She gulped a deep breath, clasping the wizard's elbows in her hands, looking him directly in the eye. "I've just had an idea, and it unfortunately involves The Daily Prophet."

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Monday, 3 June, 2002

"Once more, Hermione. Please."

The witch playing host to one very confused Theodore Nott rolled her eyes and folded her arms. "You are not this thick; you just want revenge for all the times I made you repeat everything before the trial."

"I resent that." His answer would have been believable had he not been lying on his back on her
sofa, head resting in his hands atop a throw pillow.

"Don't you have somewhere to be? Specifically someone waiting on you?"

"Not for another ten minutes. Start explaining, Gryffindor Golden Girl."

Hermione swore under her breath, imagining all the various ways she would painfully remove this wizard from her flat if he was not gone in eleven minutes… "Right, so Draco's wands have been kept at Ollivander's. Mr. Ollivander stated he would like to study them and since Draco was officially charged, the Ministry had no reason to keep them. Are you with me thus far?"

Theo rolled his head up, blinking once. "Proceed." His head dropped back into his hands, the indolent sod.

"We put a notice in the newspaper this morning, stating that on Wednesday the wands would be going back to the Auror's office for Muggle fingerprint and DNA tests—"

"And those are Muggle identification tests, correct?" Theo rose to a seating position in a movement so graceful and flawless it should be illegal (except Draco moved with the same ease and poise, and she couldn't very well find fault when he moved so…).

"Yes." Hermione curled her toes into her foot over her plush carpet, releasing them slowly. "The only leads we've had are purely circumstantial and the wands can give us something concrete."

"By using them as bait?"

"That's right." Hermione gave a thick, dry swallow. "If the killer doesn't take the bait, then we can still use the wants to lift fingerprints and obtain DNA samples. The Auror department has connections with a Muggle lab in London and Mr. Greengrass has already declared he will have everyone in his office submit samples, including himself, for comparison. Harry and his team have tonight and tomorrow night to see if the killer takes the bait…"

Theo stood and began stalk over to the fireplace. "And you trust Potter to perform his job competently and efficiently?"

"Yes."

"Will there be any point in a trial if someone is caught?"

"Of course, Theo." Hermione gave a quick flick of her wand, adjusting her wards to allow for the wizard's departure. "I mean, the suspect always has the right to decline a trial, but this is supposed to be a system of justice, no matter how frequently it tries to be otherwise."

The wizard snorted and grabbed a handful of Floo powder before giving her a serious look over his shoulder. "You're absolutely certain you don't want me to wait with you? I can come back after dinner tonight or plan to be here all day tomorrow if nothing comes of tonight…"

"Go." Hermione shooed a hand at him even though she smiled, warmed at the offer. "We both know I'd only irritate you with my incessant finger tapping, endless pots of tea, and ban of alcohol to keep my mind sharp."

He lingered a moment more, only disappearing in a cloud of green and grey when Hermione threatened him with a stinging hex, or worse. As soon as the soot settled, she reset the wards and padded to the kitchen for that first pot of tea for the night.
Tuesday, 4 June, 2002

Hermione's finger currently tapped impatiently over a fresh mug of tea cradled in her palms, staring at her bedroom clock. Theo would long-since have cast a silencing charm around her...

Last night she had stayed up and downed three pots of tea for nothing. There had been no activity near Ollivander's wand shop last night.

Maybe the idea was too simple...

But what if it worked?

She blinked her vision back into focus, the red numbers on her clock turning forward with the new hour. She breathed down into her tea before taking a slow sip, fingers taut around the handle as she lowered it to rest in her other hand.

It had been two hours since Mr. Ollivander closed his shop for the evening. He would be staying late again this evening, Harry, Bell and Robards all staking out the store again (Ron had been temporarily tasked to some backlog filing in the archives).

Merlin, the wait! And maybe this had just been too simplistic. Why should he fall for this? It was…

A silver stag suddenly charged through her open bedroom door, coming to a grinding halt at the foot of her bed. "Hermione, Operation Snare was a success," Harry's voice spoke to her from the ethereal charm. "Taking the suspect into custody now—"

Hermione moved her tea mug as quickly and carefully as possible to her bedside table, lunging for a pair of trainers to slip on with her denims…

"Do NOT come down to the Ministry," the stag added, but Hermione rolled her eyes, muttering indistinctly under breath. "You aren't allowed in the viewing room. Family only."

"We'll see about that. Accio!" Hermione summoned a light jacket hanging over her closet door, slipping it on and snatching her tea for one final sip, scalding her tongue in the process. She marched up the hallway, depositing the tea mug in the kitchen sink before sprinting to her fireplace, seizing a handful of Floo powder.

"Ministry of Magic!" she yelled.

Chapter End Notes

please don't kill me...
"Family only, Miss Granger," Robards glared down at her.

"But this was my idea, Auror Robards," Hermione shot back, "and if they see me here and allow me in, you can't stop me."

The Auror's snarl deepened. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave; you can't just camp yourself in hopes that—"

"Hermione, you're here!"

The witch spun on her heels, curls whipping around her face. "Theo!" she exclaimed, lightly reciprocating the wizard's side hug.

Theo gestured to the dark lumbering mass in Auror robes baring their entry through the viewing room door. "I see you've already been trying to explain to this good fellow that we're honoured guests of the family of the Deceased…" Theo trailed off, burying Robards with a sneer worthy of the Salazar Slytherin himself.

Hermione cleared her throat and turned back to Robards, aiming for placidity and innocence in her expression. "As the man said—" she waved at the door. "If you please, kind sir."

Robards pulled his brow even deeper, his dark eyes all but disappearing under large angry wrinkles. "Neither of you will be entering this room un—"

"Oh look Father, they're already here." Daphne's clear voice sang through the hall as the witch waltzed up, flashing Robards the most enchanting smile. "So good of you to keep our guests company while waiting for us to arrive."

Blaise sidled up to the other side of Hermione, nudging her shoulder and wiggling his brows.

Robards sputtered and cleared his throat loudly. "Family only in the viewing room, Miss Greengrass."

"Actually, it's Mrs. Wood now," Daphne corrected, unfazed and unwavering. "And these three are Draco's family. Mrs. Andromeda Tonks regrets that she could not be here, but there was no one to watch her grandson on such short notice."

Robards pulled his lips into a thin line at the mention of Andromeda; nevertheless, he did not falter. "They are not family of the Deceased, Miss—I mean Mrs—and—"
"The Notts and the Greengrasses have always shared a familial relationship, Robards," Mr. Greengrass boomed from behind. The Team Draco trifecta snapped their heads around as one, like children waiting for Santa to grant them permission to enter his workshop.

Mr. Greengrass sauntered up, taking his stance, powerful and strong, next to Blaise. "Young Mr. Zabini here once carried Astoria from the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch all the way to the hospital wing when she fell off a broom and broke her arm in her second year, and I will forever be indebted to him for that."

"And, Miss Granger," Mr. Greengrass continued, "was first in line to speak to the defence of my son-in-law's character. I think you will also remember that this entire idea involving the newspaper and stakeout was Miss Granger's idea and proved necessary in the first place because of incompetence of your department, Robards." The Greengrass patriarch grew where he stood. He was dark and powerful, commanding and fierce. "This is not just the moment you possibly convict my daughter's true killer, but the moment that makes Draco Malfoy innocent in the eyes of the law. They are all entering this room with us."

With a low growl, Robards moved aside. Theo may have offered the Auror a sardonic salute and Blaise may have winked as they swaggered through the door, but then again, Hermione really wasn't in the frame of mind to care if her friends were going to act like the cheeky arses they had potential to be.

Draco was all that mattered for now.

Hermione shivered and zipped up her jacket as she entered the dank room, shoving her hands into the pockets. Mr. Greengrass began summoning three extra chairs from a line along the far wall, arranging them so they would all be seated to look through the magical window pane (which looked surprisingly similar to something Muggle).

Daphne squeezed Hermione's elbow, offering a look that spoke volumes in its silence.

Hermione reached up, applying the same pressure to the witch's elbow. "Thank you, Daphne. Mr. Greengrass." Hermione nodded to each, offering a genuine smile. "I hope you know that I don't blame—"

"We know, Hermione," Daphne cut-in. "We know."

"Of course they knew you didn't blame them." Theo sniffed, sliding into a seat on the end. "Your Gryffindor Princess reputation precedes you always; now have a seat." He winked, patting the seat next to him.

"Where's Tracey?" Hermione asked, sinking down beside her friend.

"Dinner with her mother this evening," he answered, eyes glittering. "But, perfect witch she is, she said she'd prepare one of the guest suites for Draco with one of his favourite hot meals on standby and then there's an overnight bag of hers in my room for an all-night celebration."

Daphne reached over Hermione to ruffle Theo's hair humming that the witch was too good for him.

"I know," he beamed while observing Hermione squirm in her seat. "Something the matter? I'd think you'd already be planning a celebration of your..." He stopped talking at the frown on her face.

"What is it?" he asked, leaning into her.

"What if this isn't what we think it is, Theo?" She chewed her lip a moment, wringing her fingers. "Or what if it is, but Slopes finds a way to drag out Draco's release? What if he wants to make Draco
out as a co-conspirator, and—"

"I can assure you, Miss Granger," Mr. Greengrass spoke over her, laying a hand over her shoulder. "If we even so much as hear a hint of a premeditated plan or anything remotely resembling a confession, I will not rest until Draco is released, with the swine who stole my daughter's life rotting in his place."

Hermione swallowed thickly, somewhat surprised at the passion in the patriarch's speech, but Daphne offered such an encouraging smile that she found herself nodded genuinely, believing every word Mr. Greengrass uttered.

"This is it," Theo said as Mr. Greengrass moved to sit between Daphne and Blaise. Theo pointed to the pane of glass in front of them, eyes determined and bright with hope. "This is it and Draco's getting out."

Light flooded the viewing room through the glass pane as the door threw open and Katie Bell walked in first. Percy, wrists bound, red hair and robes all askew, stalked through next. Harry followed right at his heel, dried blood in the space between his nose and his lip, glasses in his hand.

"Sit," Harry barked, reaching in his robes a handkerchief. Percy slid into the chair at the table, facing the viewing room. Placid and unreadable, save for a slight twitch in his arms, as though he was wanting to straighten his robes.

Katie situated herself in a corner of the interrogation room with her back to everyone in the viewing room, and summoned a quill and parchment from her pocket. Harry started to pace the room from end-to-end behind Percy, mouth moving in apparent silent muttering as he cleaned the blood from his face and fixed his glasses.

Meanwhile, Percy gave up further futile attempts at straightening his appearance. He allowed a blank expression to overwhelm his features, blinking slow and methodical. As if he were counting blinks and breaths. "You never were going to be taking the wands in for Muggle identification tests, were you?"

"Is that a confession?" Harry scoffed at the silent incline of Percy's head and shook his scruffy raven head. "We would have," Harry answered at last. The timbre in his voice told Hermione he was struggling. Grappling with his current reality. "Your office has any number of items to select from to compare fingerprints or anything else. It would have been process of elimination from there."

Percy nodded, lips curling, slowly. "Lucky you then. I thought I was quite thorough and meticulous in my planning. Never thought to account for something Muggle. I guess there's no point in a trial now—I've been caught with my hand in the biscuit tin."

"Godric, Percy." Harry rounded the table, back to the window, arms folding. "There's always going to be a trial for justice—but I can't believe… After everything… Merlin. I can't believe this is where we are." His shoulders hunched and Hermione knew Harry was pinching the bridge of his nose.

Percy sat rigid and still, breathing and blinking controlled; an involuntary chill shot down Hermione's spine and Daphne shifted in her seat. Hermione reached out and took the witch's hand, sharing a tight smile and nod of solidarity.

"Before we begin," Percy started, arching a ginger brow, "I would like to state I simply cast that spell in general defence. I wasn't aware it'd be little brother's best friend's nose I'd be breaking."

"Save it," Harry clipped, giving Katie a nod that was apparently a signal as the enchanted parchment
and quill sprang to action catching dictation. "My wife demonstrated how easily noses can be healed years ago, but families, however..." Harry shook his head. "Damnit, I don't understand. I don't understand anything, Percy. Ron...George... your Dad. Your Mum... Were you even thinking of any of them?"


"Difficult as it may be for you to believe, but I've thought of little else outside of my family these past several years." He stared into his hands as Harry scoffed, marching again to stand behind Percy.

"I do find that very difficult to believe, actually," Harry responded, curt and hard. "All details will be necessary for Auror Bell to fill out her report, but for now we'll start with this: Did you kill Astoria Malfoy?"

"Yes."

Daphne choked on a sob, Darion growled, and Hermione had never felt so strangely conflicted. Thinking of Molly and Arthur. Ron and Ginny. And George... But Draco...

This meant freedom for Draco... Elation and angst mingled in some sort of confusing whirlpool that had Hermione's stomach twisting and lurching.

Harry lifted his chin. "Wilfully? And not under any spell, curse, or other form of duress?"

Hermione caught the hint of hope in Harry's questions, and something inside her broke for him.

Percy blinked once, floating his chin as if to answer over his shoulder. "Yes."

"Premeditated, then? You'd been planning this?" Harry asked, fists clenching into balls so tight his knuckles whitened.

"Yes."

Daphne moaned, and there was the sound of a struggle down the line of chairs. A side-glance told Hermione that Blaise was keeping Mr. Greengrass in his seat.

"Why, Percy?" Harry's shoulders momentarily sagged, hands going limp at his sides.

"You wouldn't understand," Percy snapped, features narrowing and angling as he turned, staring Harry down. "How could you possibly understand? You've been a Weasley all but in name from the moment Mum encountered you on the platform at King's Cross. I was born into the family, and I've never once just belonged for myself. Never stood out as my own person."

His voice broke, and there was a lone, shiny trickle down one of his cheeks. "Godric, you've no idea how it is to get lost in a sea of red. To live under the shadow of two older brothers at school, then be all but forgotten when your twin trouble-maker brothers come up behind you. It never mattered that I made Prefect or Head Boy, because Fred and George would always poke fun. Mum would be proud for a day, but only because I'd accomplished as much as Bill or Charlie. There was never anything that was just for me."

Harry snorted. "This is hardly something that will earn their pride and joy."

"Au contraire," Percy drawled, "If they knew all the work that went into teaching Astoria how to empty her own inheritance account without the goblins catching on for a couple of days, I'm sure
there'd be at least an inkling of pride in their hearts."

"Fat lot of good it'll do you now that you're here."

"Being caught wasn't part of the plan." Hermione had never seen those blue eyes look so dull.

"Did you really think you were going to get away with it?" Harry's emerald eyes had widened behind his glasses. "You really thought you'd be able to frame Malfoy for the murder of his wife and continue working for Greengrass? No difficulties whatsoever?"

Percy sniffed at Harry's incredulous tone. "Framing Malfoy was the least of my concerns. That was a given from the beginning. There were plenty of disgruntled Wizengamot members who'd wanted the son rot in Azkaban along with his father. I'd made some allies and I knew Slopes had taken bribes before. I didn't even have to offer him the full amount of Astoria's inheritance money."

Wood scraped against the viewing room floor and Mr. Greengrass was cursing Percy at the top of his lungs. Not that Percy could hear.

Daphne tried soothing her father as Hermione watched Harry march to the interrogation room door, opened a sliding panel. "Get someone on finding Slopes. Now."

"He's probably long gone with the money by now," Percy hummed, clasping his fingers together. "Extended, long overdue holiday or something of the like."

Hermione saw red. She was rage. She was fury… Delicate fingers squeezed against hers, and an arm on her left elbow urged her back to her seat. She hadn't realised she'd begun to stand.

Harry slammed the panel shut and rounded the table, the backside of his broad shoulders hiding Percy's face. "We'll find him," Harry hissed. "Getting back to you, though, you had the presiding wizard over the trial bribed, why frame Malfoy?"

"Convenience more than anything." Such a casual admittance, it froze Hermione's blood in her veins. "It seemed the logical train of thought—an acquitted Death Eater would kill his wife for leaving him and running off with all the money he lived off of."

Harry seemed equally shocked, snapping upright, crossing his arms. "You're telling me that the murder of your boss's daughter and the framing of her husband was all something that was convenient?"

Daphne shuddered and Hermione edged her chair closer to the witch, allowing their shoulders to touch.

"You're putting words in my mouth; killing Astoria was anything but convenient." Percy had the audacity to sound affronted. "It was actually quite bothersome and tedious looking over my shoulder all the time. Months and months of meticulous planning, following, and memorising all moving components and their schedules. Worrying I'd say something that would raise suspicions beforehand. Looking over my shoulder all day Saturday, rehearsing my story for being in Paris in case I should run into someone who knew me. Preoccupation with such worries is how I missed seeing Hermione there to begin with."

Hermione's heart stuttered and she bit down on her lip.

"Wait, what?" Harry shifted on his feet, jabbing the table with a finger. "Slopes seemed quite thorough when Hermione was questioned. How did he know she was in Paris if you didn't tell him?"
"He didn't." Harry slid out of the way in time for Hermione to see Percy shrug. "I didn't know either for that matter. I thought I saw wild brown curls bouncing in the wind at one point, but when I looked back to be sure, the image was gone. She was supposed to be in Australia anyways, so I forgot all about it. But then I saw her around our office building that week… I knew I should discuss the case with her. I needed an outsider's opinion, but she never seemed to follow my logical trails. Much to my dismay, she was always ready to jump to Malfoy's defence. It became clear she was either hiding something or had fallen for the former failure Death Eater."

He shook his head, a scoff full of disgust passing the wizard's lips. "I hadn't expected both to be true. But I advised Slopes it would be easy enough to rile her up if he pushed the correct buttons."

Hermione choked as blood drained from her face. "Theo..." She'd played right into their hands.

The wizard wrapped a warm and strong arm around her shoulders, fingers resting between Daphne's shoulder blades. "Don't go down that road again, Hermione. Do not do that to yourself again."

She swallowed hard, allowing herself a single nod. Easier said than done.

Harry shared a look with Katie across the room and took up his position behind Percy again, slow pacing the length of the room. "Why plan the murder in the first place if it was so disruptive to your life? So much to keep up with?"

"Control of Darion's company," Percy answered, blue eyes almost glittering. "I needed something that was all for me. I was another Weasley cog in the Ministry, with a pay-capped, dead-end job. That wouldn't do for a family. And it was never going to be enough for Mum or the rest of the Weasley clan. I was a glorified secretary to the lot of them. Darion handed duty after duty over to me, but they never cared about that. Nothing mattered until Penelope and I broke up and there was a failure to talk about. That simply wouldn't do, you see. I needed them to respect me. My work."

Percy scoffed and drummed his fingers against the table. "That wouldn't be happening without some push, though," he went on. "Darion had no intention letting go control of his company any time soon. But then I thought, what if he lost someone close to him? The daughter he'd pawned off in an arranged marriage and had already begun to feel guilty over. Darion married her off for the price of a wand apprenticeship and a homecare security net. His darling daughter, a radiant beauty in a loveless marriage, still flirting around with anyone on two legs with a dick."

Mr. Greengrass's breath hitched and Daphne hummed tranquilizing words over her father.

Percy continued talking. "Darion had his own suspicions about the affair, but did nothing. Didn't ask me anything, even though it would have been easy to get information from me. Astoria had had me over often enough to make inquiries about her finances. I made arrangements at times and worked cover stories for her. I was apparently involved from the beginning since I introduced them."

"Did you know she was going to leave Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes. She actually wanted to leave much sooner, just after his mother passed away, but I convinced her that would be uncouth. She agreed to wait until six months or so for the sake of appearances."

Harry's dark brows narrowed over green bespectacled eyes. "Considerate of you."

"Necessity really," Percy deadpanned. "I had no plan in motion for Malfoy to take the blame. I needed time to make good use of my talents with disillusionment charms and existing in the shadows." He jerked to speak over his shoulder. "They came in very handy the year you were on the
run, Potter. I already had access to the Malfoy household. Zabini was always too wrapped up with my baby sister to notice he was being followed, but Nott nearly caught on a couple of times…”

Theo and Blaise swore loudly in unison, so loud Hermione missed Harry’s subsequent question. Percy was already answering when she shushed the wizards.

"I wasn't entirely sure those wands would be a viable option when the plan came together," said Percy, a slight tilt to his head. "I had researched for the possibility and hoped they would, but I couldn't test them all until I stole them from Malfoy's study that Saturday morning. It wouldn't have mattered if not, I had already taken a wand from Ollivander's as a back-up. When one of them finally worked with both spells I planned to use, it was icing on the cake, as the saying goes. The portkeys were already on the ready and Darion never checked over my inventory, just always ordered what I requested."

Katie waved her quill, seeking Harry's attention, and waggled her fingers when the Auror looked her way. Harry nodded.

"To confirm: it was your idea she take her inheritance money with her?" he prodded, coming back to the side of the table.

Percy nodded. "It built a more solid case against Malfoy. I thought it would look more condemning for it to remain with her belongings, make it look more like a crime of fury. You can imagine my horror and panic when it wasn't found in her hotel room, but I needn't have worried in the end." He released a dark chuckle, drumming his fingers over the table edge again. "Malfoy only buried himself deeper when he burned her letter at the bank when the money transferred."

Hermione bit back a groan. She could not disagree with Percy there.

Harry stepped closer to the table. "Did you see Malfoy while you were in Paris?"

Percy brought his bound wrists up to stroke his chin, bearing a thoughtful expression. "You know, I didn't. The only thing I knew for certain was that he'd something with Nott that Sunday after, but Malfoy had been a loner lately, only really seeing Mrs. Tonks and his cousin outside of Nott and Zabini. But he usually spent the night before polishing his broom or flying around, and he wasn't doing that Friday night, so it was all an incredible stroke of good fortune for me that he ended up in Paris."

"Merlin," Hermione breathed while Theo loosed another string of curses under his breath. They shared uneasy looks before Hermione turned back to the glass pane.

"Had you any other thoughts of murder?" Harry pulled his glasses from his eyes, cleaning them again in habit. "Any schemes for Warrington?"

Percy blinked and shook his head. "His role as lover was done. It was extremely frustrating that the Prophet kept chasing him down, and I was reduced to using Muggle force to put suspicion on Malfoy where it belonged… I was worried cleaning up after that incident would make me late for dinner with Hermione that evening, but the witch ended up being a tad late herself." He shrugged and leaned back into his chair. "Hermione was the last of everyone I followed, and that was one final time for good measure the day Malfoy was sentenced."

Harry dragged a hand through his hair again, sharing a look with Katie across the room. "All of this," he started, stepping closer to the table. "Everything. To make a name for yourself?"

"I was going to set myself apart," Percy snapped. "With Darion too distraught, I would be in charge.
I'd run things so efficiently and well that he'd see there'd be no need for him. I'd have it all with him around as a figurehead. Mum and Dad and **everyone** would finally see all I was capable of, and if Mum wanted it desperately enough, I would have fought to win back Penelope. Nothing was going to happen with Hermione anyways."

Hermione cringed. Absolutely *cringed* recalling those moments Percy had reminded her of a romantically interested Ron.

Harry stepped away from the table, turning to Katie in the corner. "Do you have everything you need?"

"I do," she nodded, vanishing the parchment and quill, rising from her chair. "Let's get to work on the rest of the paperwork and processing."

The viewing room attendees watched as the long-last-killer padded out of the room between the two Aurors. They sat in silence for several minutes until their door opened and Robards came in. "That will be all, and there will be no need for any more such visits like this. You'll be pleased to know that Malfoy will be released tomorrow—"

Hermione's chest heaved and she nearly sagged in her seat as Theo's support was unexpectedly gone when the wizard jumped from his seat.

"What time shall I come for him?" Theo demanded.

"Auror Potter will contact you with the details," Robards drawled.

Theo shook his head. "I'm not of the mind-set to wait any longer. You may inform **Auror** Potter I'll be sitting outside his office first thing in the morning."

"Suit yourself," Robards shrugged, leaving the room, muttering under his breath.

"I'll be here too," Hermione chorused.

"Nope," Theo countered in the negative. "You most certainly will not."

"But—"

"Granger," Blaise cajoled from behind. "Draco's been in filth for a month. Think about it. He'll want a long hot shower, probably a haircut and I wouldn't put it past him to need a good kip before he's in the frame of mind to see **anyone**. And besides, I can't face the Weasley family alone tomorrow..."

Hermione pursed her lips, a weight pressing on her chest. She gave a sharp exhale with a conceding nod.

"You'll come over for dinner, though, alright?" Theo volunteered, taking her elbow in a gentle hold. "You'll have the day to spend comforting your friends and then we'll have an early dinner. We'll toast Draco's birthday and freedom and you can stay as long as you like afterwards. And have all the time after that... Because he's free, Hermione."
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

A/N: ahem...for HeartOfAspen. And you wonderful people who have made this a JOY. My love forever to Kyonomiko and CourtingInsanity for their alpha and beta expertise. All remaining errors are mine... I own no part of the Harry Potter franchise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wednesday, 5 June, 2002

"As thoughtful as this is Tracey, you don't think it's unnecessary, do you?"

"Absolutely not." Theo's witch beamed at Hermione in the mirror. "You've been with Ginny and the entire Weasley clan all day, sharing in their tears, anguish, fury and grief. So has Blaise. Andromeda and I have been transforming a couple of Theo's guest rooms into an entire suite for Draco. Draco has taken a long nap, then went flying with Teddy on the Manor grounds all afternoon. He's somehow also taken at least four showers. Theo hired on two extra house-elves for the evening to prepare more food than we could ever eat in three dinners. Tonight is for celebrating."

Such simplistic logic could not be argued or debated, which Hermione indicated with a breathy chuckle and nervous smile.

Tracy continued to beam. "Be a love and hand me that tin of pins on your vanity. I've had a sudden inspiration for a different route with these curls."

The tin floated its way up to Tracey, hovering and opening by magic. Hermione wound her fingers together in her lap as she watched the witch gather, twist, pin. Gather, twist, pin. Gather, twist, pin. She marveled at Tracey's confident ease, a stark contrast to the range of emotional stew that had been simmering and bubbling inside Hermione since the morning's grey and pink light had peeked through her window curtains.


Her thumbs twitched and fiddled, and she thanked Godric again for Tracey. Merlin knew Hermione wasn't in the frame of mind to try something extravagant on her hair. She would have given up and left it loose and wild at this point.

Credit for her frayed nerves also had something to do with underlying guilt at a night of long awaited joy after spending the day at the Burrow as a comforter and friend. She fought and warred with euphoric glee and had been near breaking point when Tracey's summoning owl an hour previous flew through the Molly's ever-open kitchen window.

She'd pressed her lips into a tight line while making the rounds, embracing every member of the grieving Weasley family once more and sharing a look with Blaise before excusing herself. Once back in her flat, she succumbed to solicing need for tea, and sat in thoughtful silence over a stiff cuppa for a solid half an hour, only moving from the kitchen when Tracey marched through her
fireplace in a blaze of green flames and dark soot, aghast that Hermione hadn’t showered and changed.

Hermione meant to take a quick shower to keep her friend from waiting. She truly intended to make this a rapid, soak, soap, rinse and exit. But nothing else quite compared to the healing power of a hot spray, and she used up twenty of the last thirty minutes they had lathering, scrubbing, and rinsing away all irrational sense of fault or blame over the shocked Weasley clan, the last of her guilt dissipating into the steam as she wrapped and dried herself in a towel.

Because tonight there was Draco. An intimate dinner party with and for Draco. It was his birthday and he was free from Azkaban.

After a month of exchanging letters, Draco was free and they could at least say everything face-to-face. She would be able to watch for that cheeky glint in his grey eyes while they flirted, instead of imagining through words on a page.

Because they had flirted in their letters. Flirted and danced around unspoken meaningful somethings. A wave of warmth washed over her as Tracey's fingers continued their deft and nimble movements. It welled and swelled so that she was drowning with dizzy glee in her vanity seat. She was sitting in her room, staring at her reflection with unseeing eyes and drunk on unconfined joy.

Draco was free.

Today was his birthday.

And he was free.

"What do you think?" Tracey's melodic inquiry poked the bubble of fantasy; Hermione swore she heard a 'pop' as her reflection in the vanity mirror came into focus.

Frothy foaming mirth floated up from her core, spilling out her ears and nose. "Wow," was the only answer she could manage. Tracey had twisted and coiled her hair, wrapping and piling it atop her head, while allowing several curls to dangle easily around her face. "I… I forgot my hair could do things like that. I get so used to leaving it down or wearing a simple plait."

"Well, now you see. And it was really easy." Tracey grinned, golden locks already combed and styled to perfection. "If it gets good results tonight, I'll teach you how to do it—now let's have a look at everything. Stand up!"

'Good results': Hermione started chewing on her lip as Tracey cast a de-wrinkling charm over her navy sweetheart-cut dress that ended just before her knees. Merlin, what did 'good results' mean? What did she want it to mean?

"You'll have to redo your lipstick if you keep that up."

"What if tonight's buggered from the beginning?"

"What?" Tracey's perfect hazel eyes widened under manicured blonde brows.

"Buggered." Hermione shook her head, loose hanging curls tickling her neck. "Abso-sodding-lutely buggered. Because what if I'm not… or he's not… but gods, no, that won't happen—because he is, you know?" The questioning crinkles forming on the bridge of Tracey's nose said she didn't, but she didn't interrupt as Hermione's monologue of fret continued to gush.

"I've known he's it for years. Years! And we've never even had a bloody date. Not a simple cuppa
on a street cafe, and I'm getting all dressed up for a dual birthday-slash-celebration dinner and I don't know 'good results' means for me. Or what it would mean for him! Or us. Or if there even is an 'us'! Gods, I don't even know how I'm supposed to greet him tonight—awkward wave, firm handshake, side hug or full on embrace? Should I try to kiss his cheek, or would that be too soon and just too...?"

Circe, the room was spinning. Spinning and swirling and she was rubbing her temples and she could actually feel the world rotate on its axis. It was too much. It was too much and she couldn't go. She couldn't face him yet. She didn't know what to say or—

"Ow!" she yelped and winced, assessing and finding the source of pain to be Tracey's fingers pinching both of her arms. "What was that for?"

"Because you're Hermione Bloody Granger and this is just dinner. Salazar, Draco wouldn't even let Theo make this a birthday thing; he said he just wanted a calm night with us..." Tracey trailed off eyeing Hermione's brown kitten heels by the bedroom door with a critical glare. She gave a flourishing wave of her wand before Hermione had a chance to protest, transforming them into nude four-inch pumps, looking positively feline as she focused again on Hermione.

"And 'good results'," Tracey continued, "simply means that Draco won't be able to think about anything but you the entire night and do cease with the withering glare. Those baby heels screamed business dinner. Tonight is for now. It's for fun and possibilities." She tugged Hermione to the door and pointed with a commanding air at the transfigured shoes.

Irritatingly irrefutable logic again.

"For possibilities, eh?" Hermione gave a girly spin, grinning and giggling as Tracey applauded in approval.

"That's the spirit, Granger." She handed Hermione her wand, smirking. "To possibilities and champagne. 'Fairies, come take me out of this dull world, For I would ride with you upon the wind...""

Laughter filled the bedroom as Hermione and Tracey linked arms. "You know you're too good for Theo, right?"

A wink and a smirk. "And he rewards me handsomely every night for it."

And with that, they loosed tendrils of magic, Apparating directly to Theo's study.

"Ah, there they are!"

Hermione leaned into Tracey to steady her footing. Apparition and heels frequently did not mix, and she had the sneaking suspicion that 'good results' did not include being sprawled out flat on her face before the evening began.

"Hello, Beautiful." Theo pressed a kiss to Tracey's temple, and Hermione decided it was safest to pull away when she caught the darkening look in Theo's eyes as they travelled up and down the length of his witch's body while the object of his lust hummed in satisfaction.

Andromeda, stunning in formal robes of green and silver, was her salvation. "Hello." She breathed in the matriarch's encompassing embrace. "How are you?"
"A great many things at the moment," Andromeda answered, eyes warm and full. "But I think for now, I'm relieved more than anything."

"Understandable. Did Teddy have fun today, though?"

"Very much. He was still sporting Draco's eye and hair colour when I dropped him off for the night at his friend's house." She shared a light chuckle with Hermione before adding, "He was nearly shaking with the effort to contain himself giving Draco the birthday present he made, and flying with his cousin all afternoon was the most I've heard him laugh in weeks."

She squeezed Hermione's elbows, leaning in to kiss her cheek. "From Narcissa," she whispered. "And I know Nymphadora would claim you've the loyalty of a Hufflepuff Hermione Granger. This family could never thank you enough."

Hermione's cheeks flamed. "I did nothing—"

"Rubbish," Andromeda interjected, stilling Hermione's lips with a finger. "You never gave up. You never stopped believing in and fighting for his innocence. And now Teddy will have the privilege of knowing another member of his family besides his aging grandmother. And I believe that I shall be able to keep a promise I once made to Narcissa now," she finished cryptically, a smile stretching from ear-to-ear, eyes floating up and beyond Hermione. "Is that champagne, Theodore?"

"But of course, ladies." Theo nearly flounced up to them, a flute of bubbly celebration in each hand. "Andromeda, I've already told you, but it's worth repeating that you look absolutely beautiful tonight. And as for you, Hermione—" the wizard waggled his brows as Hermione took up her flute "—I think it would be terribly unfair to tell you how stunning you are tonight before Draco has the chance to—" (could her cheeks burn any hotter?) "—and so I shan't." Theo winked a wicked eye and linked an elbow through Hermione and Andromeda, directing them nearer the study door. "We'll just wait together here as one cosy foursome while waiting for—"

Blaise appeared with a 'pop' at the study door, eyes tired. "Sorry I'm late." He nodded and briefly met everyone's eyes before accepting a flute of champagne with a tight smile. "Where's Draco?"

"Right here, mate."

Maddening chaos. There was no other way to describe Hermione's state of being when Draco Malfoy stepped through the study door, accepting a manly back-clap from Blaise and a flute of champagne from Tracey. He had lost a little weight this month, but nothing extreme or too noticeable to an untrained eye.

And speaking of eyes...

Draco's. Eyes. _Merlin_. There would never be such an arresting combination of shades of grey and silver with sparkling sapphire flakes ever again. Those eyes were wholly unique to Draco Lucius Malfoy, and they would never _not_ be the reason for the irrational chain event of fluttering, melting, stuttering and drowning.

He was _here_. Less than a metre in front of her.

"...shall we, Granger?"

Hermione blinked hard, wrenching herself from her own drowning fantasies. She realised she was looking every bit the part of stupid frozen statue as Andromeda slipped her arm through Draco's proffered elbow and led the witch out the study. Theo and Tracey were nowhere to be seen. Damn. Had she really zoned out for that long?
A silken chuckle slipped into her ear. "Come on, then." Blaise tucked her free hand into the crook of his bent arm. "Can't very well stare at the birthday man if you're not in the same room as him."

"Shut it, Blaise." But the command lacked all ire; there was no denying he was right. "How much later did you stay?"

"Ginny and I left the Burrow shortly after you did. I just left her in the bath. I already told Draco I wouldn't be staying for the brandy afters tonight." He gave a thick swallow. "He gets it. Ginny has a string of away games coming up I'll miss to spend time with him and Theo, but… It just seemed important I… you know?"

"I do." Hermione allowed her fingers to drum over her friend's arm. "I'm glad she has you."

Blaise may have rolled his eyes as he deposited Hermione to her seat next to Andromeda and across from Draco at the dining room table, but there was no mistaking the upturned corners of his lips just before he turned for his own seat next to Draco.

Theo stood at the head of the table and cleared his throat, welcoming the intimate gathering to his humble home with a speech most ostentatious and very Theo, easily rivalling his best man speech three years ago (but Hermione wasn't thinking about that day tonight). Tracey leaned forward, eyes all alight as she let her wizard prattle on, catching his attention with a simple drumming of her fingers just as he was about to launch into a story involving Draco, the Malfoy albino peacocks and a chocolate frog...

"...All that is to say, mate—" Theo turned to Draco, near bursting with one of the most genuine expressions Hermione had ever seen him wear "—we couldn't be happier to have you as the guest of honour tonight. And for as long as you want or need. My home is yours for as long as you'd like. Cheers and happy birthday."

Draco blinked in rapid succession several times, banishing away a previously visible glossy sheen. "Thanks, Theo. Thank you, all of you." He gestured around the table. "I've been trying to come up with an appropriate speech all afternoon, some way to thank you all properly, but it seems I'm not eloquent enough when put on the spot, at least not right now. I hope you all know how grateful I am for everything, and I shall endeavour to be worthy of your faith and efforts in these recent months."

Was it specific to Hermione, or were all female minds cursed with the need to analyse every word uttered by the object of their affection and desire? Every. Last. Word. Was there some coded message that was meant for only her in there? Did it mean anything that he only met her eyes for half a heartbeat in that speech, or was he simply trying to 'play it cool' before they could talk? Was there going to be a talk?

Thank Merlin there was no such thing as a thought bubble in real life. She was free to be lost to the woods of her plaguing worries and questions as a creamy soup appeared at her place setting. It disappeared before she was halfway finished with it, but that was just as well; between her own screaming theories and pathetic attempts at joining in with small talk, Hermione hadn't tasted a single bite.

The entrée looked scrummy—steak, bright green asparagus, roasted spuds, and a golden-brown dinner roll—but Hermione feared she wouldn't taste much of this course either. Godric, she was losing this battle with herself. He was right across from her, but everything out of her mouth was breathy, imbécilic troll. She was an insipid moron; an obsessing adolescent masquerading as an adult as she cut and chewed small bites from her plate.

"So, Hermione…" Theo was talking to her. Hermione forced herself to focus on the talking wizard
to her left. "What's next for you, dearie? The ashwinder book is off to the print. Will you be bumming around Britain for all the pending book signings, or is it off to some place no one has heard about to study some creature no one would care about until you find they're the cure we've been searching for lycanthropy?"

Hermione sipped her wine delicately. "I don't know, Theo." A hard swallow.

"Has Scamander said anything?" he prodded.

"He's presented me with some options." A delicate bite of her asparagus.

"And what does Draco think of said opt—bugging shite!" His brow wrinkled in an obvious glare to the foot of the table where Tracey sat. "That question was neither useless nor prying," he defended, jabbing his fork left where Draco sat. "It's perfectly logical to conclude that as her boyfriend, Draco would have an opinion in her future endeavours, especially if travel is involved."

Hermione's muscles froze. A loud clattering sound came from her seat. Silent curses resounded through walls of her mind as she discovered the noise was her silverware dropping to her plate. Gravy splattered the white tablecloth and her dinner roll had bounced into her lap. "So sorry," she mumbled, ducking her eyes and face.

She could hear massive stones falling, falling, falling down the proverbial well… Funny how many varieties of bread out there were, and maybe she could ask one of the house-elves what the secret was to making this heavenly buttery roll…

Theo swore loudly again as in pain and the metaphorical rocks continued to fall, fall, fall… Even so, Hermione decided to slip on a mask of indifference and braved a glance up…

Finding Draco burning a hole into his plate with the intensity of his stare, Blaise and Andromeda burying twin smirks, Tracey lowering her wand, and Theo rubbing his arm while shooting a glare between Draco and Hermione.

"I smuggled three or four letters each way, twice weekly for four weeks. Am I to understand that in all that time and parchment, the two of you never had the oh-so-defining talk?"

The imaginary rocks hit their mark, crashing into Hermione's chest. Her mouth fell open of its own accord—

But Tracey was too quick. "A toast," she blurted out, champagne flute raised high, face transforming into a bright hostess beam. "We haven't given an official toast yet! What shall we toast, hm? Draco and his free—"

"Last year's words belong to last year's language," Draco cut-in, clear and firm, looking around the table, his grey gaze finding Hermione's as he finished. "'And next year's words await another voice. And to make an end is to make a beginning.'" He cut his eyes back to Tracey, lips now quirking in a crooked smile. With an acknowledging nod to the five sets of eyes fixed on him, he downed half his flute in a single slow sip.

"Merlin's purple robes," Theo exclaimed. "Don't ever try to offer any shite about not being eloquent enough."

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Eliot. Draco had quoted T.S. Eliot with the dinner toast. And Hermione had thought of little else the
duration of the meal. She was a wanton puddle. A jumbled mess screaming to the universe for a moment! A simple moment to analyse. Assess.

Perhaps even have a straightforward conversation, but that was clearly asking for too much, as evidenced by the fact that she was now standing alone in Theo's study with Draco, and she had nothing to say.

Nothing of value or consequence to offer aloud at least.

Non-existent crickets were chirping about the grandiose study—had it always been so large? Blaise, true to his word, had excused himself after dinner with a salute and genuine smile to Draco. Andromeda left shortly after, not taking more than a few sips of her brandy. Theo and Tracey's hooded eyes found each other continuously between jovial comments and topics, until they at last excused themselves just moments ago.

Silence. Sip. "Are you tired at all after a nap today?" She winced.

'Do I dare disturb the universe?'

A half smile under beautiful grey eyes. Or perhaps forced. "Surprisingly, I am." A small sip from his own tumbler. "You're not leaving London anytime soon are you?" Was there apprehension in his inquiry? "You'll be here the rest of the week?"

"I will." A glance to the fireplace. Her doorway to freedom. The gateway to clearer thoughts. "I suppose I should let you get some rest, then." It was open-ended, but only just… She swallowed, vanishing the remaining contents of her glass and cleaning it with two snaps of the wrist. "Don't tell Theo I didn't drink the rest."

Another polite smile, accompanied by a nod. "Wouldn't dream of it." He followed her to the fireplace. Like a lost puppy. Or skittish pre-War Neville. "I suppose we've time to grab that cuppa sometime this week then."

'And indeed there will be time, For the yellow smoke that slides along the street…'

She licked her lips. "We do." She couldn't leave. Not like this.

'Rubbing its back upon the window-panes; There will be time, there will be time…'

She grabbed a handful of Floo powder. He didn't stop her. "We'll talk soon, then."

"We will, Granger." His voice was so soft. So very very soft. Was he wanting her to stay? His smile looked tired…

She decided for the two of them. "Happy birthday, Draco," she murmured, burying the sorrow within. Or sinking along with it. "Goodnight."

She slipped off her heels as soon as she landed in her fireplace, tracing the route back to her bedroom and bathroom with heavy steps.

'Time for you and time for me, And time yet for a hundred indecisions…'

Chapter End Notes
Credit to the genius of T.S. Eliot and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' for several lines in this chapter. I will upload 27 tomorrow. And the epilogue just as soon as beta finishes it.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

A/N: All Huffleclaw hearts to alpha and beta Kyonomiko and CourtingInsanity. All remaining errors are mine.
I own no part of the Harry Potter franchise...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No more than twenty minutes later...

"All that bloody time spent pining and not looking in the book and not seeing he'd written you a letter, and you wasted an entire dinner like a sodding lunatic." Hermione stabbed the mirror with her toothbrush, spat again into the sink and glared at her reflection. "You just sat there like a socially awkward halfwit."


She sighed again, coming to her bed and drawing back the sheets. She would add 'have-a-direct-conversation-with-the-man-you-love' to the list in preparation for the next time.

Godric, what an unmitigated dis—

The sound of loud pounding interrupted her thoughts. Distant, but definite, pounding. Her heart thundered and raced, and there was a slight tremor to her hands as she scrambled for a bra and jeans to pair with her large sleep shirt.

The pounding persisted, louder and almost desperate. Or perhaps it was just that she was now closer the front door of her flat.

"Who is it?" she asked, louder than usual to be heard over the pounding.

"It's Draco."

Her hand jumped to the doorknob of its own accord before freezing for half a moment. Merlin, it had to be now? In her father's old dentist convention shirt, no makeup, and end-of-the day hair?

"Salazar's balls, Hermione. It's Theo, too," a second voice yelled, yanking Hermione from her private inner turmoil. "For the love of all you deem holy, open the fu—"

"Oh my gods, Theo," Hermione groaned, throwing the front door open wide, chucking all hesitation to the metaphorical wind. "I have neighbours," she hissed, stepping aside, gesturing for the wizards to enter.

"Silencing charms," Theo explained, breezing by Hermione, shirtless, pyjama pants sitting low, hair very ruffled, wand in hand. "Right then, get in here, Draco." He gestured exaggeratedly, not lowering his arm until Draco (fully clothed in a pair of Muggle jeans, white sleep shirt and socks)
crossed the threshold. "Here we are, you have now been successfully delivered to Hermione Granger's flat. I don't know what happened when Tracey and I left, but you two sort this out. Have the dreaded 'talk'. Sort everything out, and take all the sodding time you need. I have now done my friendship duty to the both of you in this and will take my leave. I don't want to see either of you until much later tomorrow; there's a witch waiting in my bed with a full bottle of champagne and I'm very keen to see where the night leads."

Hermione wrinkled her nose, mouth opening, but Theo was already waltzing by her again, turning with a flourish, hand on the doorknob. "Ta, children. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

The door pulled soundly behind him and the sound of his Apparition could be heard a moment later.

"Erm, yeah," Draco started, shoving his hands in his pockets, shaking his head lightly. "Sorry I had to involve him, but it occurred to me after I changed I've never been here to Apparate myself, and I've heard your wards are vicious without permission to enter." He tilted his head, a tentative sort of wry smile tugging at his lips.

"His perfect lips."

"It's alright," Hermione found herself answering. She blinked a few times and brushed a handful of curls behind an ear. "Would you like some tea? I really don't have much more to offer, unless you'd prefer some sparkling water."

"Tea's fine, thank you," Draco said, following as Hermione started off to the kitchen. "And I'm really, really sorry I couldn't work up the nerve to have this conversation with you earlier, when the opportunity was right there. I just…" He gave her a helpless sort of look, swallowing hard. "I wasn't the only one nervous, was I?"

She could only shake her head, still recovering from the initial shock of... everything while he seemed to take as his hint to continue. "Theo was right; all the letters we've written over the course of the month, it's easy to presume we shouldn't have been. But letters are one thing, and then there you were, and you looked gorgeous. Merlin, you were a delectable vision and it was all I could do to just breathe around you. And there's so much I haven't said, and I need to say. It was conflicting with everything inconsequential that I found myself having to say in the present… And have I mentioned you looked good enough to eat?"

The timbre in his ask made her sneak a side glance at him as she levitated a full kettle of water to the stove top, finding his pale brows wriggling at her. Flushing, she cleared her throat, fingers fumbling with the knobs. Her heart thundered in her ears as she summoned tea bags, mugs, sugar and cream, waving everything to the kitchen table. Everything tunnelled, centring on Draco as she motioned for him to sit once everything was set up.

"I can't speak for you," he said, "but I had envisioned something different for our first sit-down together after…" His jaw closed slowly and he slid into a chair, rubbing his right hand over his left arm.

She decided not to prod, and elected for a chair next to him, instead of across, angling herself so that her knees almost touched his. He watched her in pensive silence, blowing out a long puff of air.

"It was only half the time I spent in Azkaban the first time," he resumed, tracing the rim of his mug with a finger. "But it felt longer this time. Salazar, it felt so long. I lived for the days Theo would come with your letters. I'd be torn with wanting to hear if you had any news of the case and hoping you didn't so I could just enjoy the happy tone as you wrote to me about everything else. I had this distant dream of wondering what it would be like to see you again; as long as you weren't telling me
bad news, I could keep dreaming that dream."

"I hate how long it took us," she murmured, husky and sincere. "Four endless weeks. I suppose I should just be grateful you're free now, and on your birthday no less..."

"I'm just thankful you didn't give up," he replied, equally sincere.

"How could I?" She swallowed, meeting his eyes. Flawless, mesmerising pale grey eyes. "I spent three years pining in silence, when I think that I had your explanation in my book the whole time..." She faltered. "And I ran all the way to Australia because I just couldn't anymore... I couldn't keep from... you. I almost broke down right there in your study showing you the spell for thickening your mother's fluids. Merlin, and then when you gave me the suitcase. " She blinked in rapid succession, eyes welling in memory.

"Salazar, witch," he breathed, running a hand through his hair. "You beautiful, perfect witch, you'd never been so alluring to me than when you were helping my mother drink a cup of tea. Your hair was loose and wild, just like it is now. Have I ever told you how glorious your hair is?"

Was she still breathing? "You haven't." A dumb answer, but he reached up and wound a single curl around his finger regardless.

Hermione bit down on her lip, playing with the hem of her old, worn shirt. This was real and it was happening. "You didn't really think that Theo and I..." she started. "That he or I or we..."

Draco shrugged. "Well, you had either ignored my letter in your poetry book and just wanted to continue on as friends or never read it. Either way, though—" his voice turned soft as a mark sadness crossed his features "—you were under no obligation to me. And the two of you had a seemingly closer relationship from the first."

"Because he's invasive and insufferable and never knows when to shut up or go away." Hermione sniffed, lips quirking in a tease.

"He's quite lovable."

Hermione gave an exaggerated wrinkle of her nose. "He's Theo."

"He's smart," Draco countered, a crooked grin forming on his face.

"But you're brilliant," she crooned, inching a hand towards his mug.

He blinked, allowing her fingers to trace over his. "Theo's handsome," he mumbled, lifting his eyes from their hands.

"Passible," she hummed, smiling so that she could feel the crinkles around her eyes. It was intoxicating just to at last be able to be so open with him. Free and unburdened. "But, I have this thing for grey eyes, you see. Quite a large and incurable thing, actually."

He stilled in his seat before bringing his other hand to lay flat over their hands, stilling her teasing ministrations. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." His voice thick and serious. "I let my pride get in the way when I didn't hear from you after returning you book. I could have sent you a follow-up letter after the book. I could have pleaded my case again with Gringotts for a loan. I could have left after Hogwarts to apply for loans at a French bank even."

"Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, but you didn't see any other option at the time," Hermione answered easily. It was one of the many mantras she'd repeated to herself on a nightly basis these last
several weeks. "We were younger, you had your mother and… self-preservation and all that. And besides, you and Astoria planned for an expiration date when the marriage had served its purpose."

Draco laughed bitterly. "But even so—"

"*Obliviated* parents," she interjected, shrugging a shoulder. "And everything else I confessed to you in our letters and in your holding room at the Ministry. We've each our own past baggage and this isn't a contest to see whose is the heaviest."

A pale brow arched over unblinking eyes. "I burned the letter from Astoria before the Aurors could snatch it," he countered, a final statement, as if apologising.

She chuckled in resignation, slipping her hand from the Draco-hand-sandwich as she rose to answer the kettle's demanding whistle. "I'll agree that was a very poor life choice," she said, bringing the kettle to the table, levitating it as they plopped tea bags in their respective mugs, filling their mugs carefully and sending the kettle back to the stove. "But," she continued, sitting again. "I've had time to consider the answers you gave at the trial, and it seems reasonable enough to me. People have done far worse for much less reason."

"It wasn't just for that," he added, splashing a dash of cream into his tea, stirring it magically with his wand. "She mentioned you, and I wanted to keep you out of everything too. It was my stubbornness and pride with a pinch of jealousy that kept me from talking in the first place when the Aurors showed up at the bank. I knew Azkaban was coming, so why grovel—but you were part of my mess with that letter. I wanted, I needed, to keep you as far from any implication as possible."

Hermione laughed in spite of herself as she toyed with the string of her steeping tea bag. Leaning in, she cupped one of his cheeks in her hand, forcing his eyes to hers. "I don't know if you realize, but if I'd found out that I'd needed to rearrange the stars themselves to make sure you walked free, I'd have scoured the world to find a way to make it happen."

He chewed his lip, bringing his chair closer to hers, allowing his knee to rest against hers. Merlin, his touch was so warm, even through their jeans.

"You came back from Australia for Mother's funeral," he said, hushed and tentative.

"I did." She was admitting everything else, why deny this?

"You hid yourself, though," he continued, grey gaze boring into her. "You hid in the rain. All alone. *Again.* You would have been welcome with us, but instead you kept away and didn't say anything. I yelled for you in the rain for ages with no response. I stormed Scamander's office looking for you after the wreath arrived…"

Her heart stuttered and skidded; Rolf had never told her that. Questions she wouldn't ask floated in her mind: what would have done if she'd still been there? What would *she* have done?

Draco swallowed hard. "You didn't even write afterwards."

Tears licked the corners of her eyes—was it guilt? He wasn't an accusing, but the pain his voice was unmistakable. "I did," she tried as his brows lifted at her in question. She sighed. "Well, I started a few letters, but I never sent them. They never sounded like enough. It was all pacifying dribble. But the flower you caught, and then the wreath… It was the only way I felt I could speak within the boundaries of propriety. You were *married*, and that word meant something to me. It was always a fine balancing act with you." She stopped, raking a hand through her hair. "But even though I left Britain… Godric, I just couldn't let you think I didn't care at all. You were too important to me—you
"It hurt, you know," he said, blowing into his tea before taking a slow sip. "It hurt that you kept leaving. Never staying for too long and then when you announced that you were going to be in Australia for six or seven months…" He took another sip from his mug. "It was all I could do to keep myself from making a scene at your office the very next day. To not beg you to wait. I know we gave you the suitcase and all, but I hadn't intended it as an open invitation to leave… Mother didn't have much time left and I just wanted you here."

She almost choked on her tea as he nudged her knee with his and reached out for one of her hands, folding it in his.

"I mean," he said, eyes glittering, "I thought we were solid friends, but did you really think I needed all those Magizoologist consults? That I learned absolutely nothing in all of those study sessions and seven years of school previous?"

She couldn't answer. Couldn't think beyond her hand in his. How very right they looked together… but perhaps… She loosened her grip, readjusting to lace her fingers through his, and decided that looked absolute perfection.

"I would hope—Merlin, how I would hope." She smiled up at him, unashamed of the glassy sheen she knew covered her eyes. "And then I would remember that I wasn't truly allowed to hope, and I would run again. I would bury it all away until the next time I saw you. Until the next game night or consultation. And the miserable cycle would begin again."

She pulled their twined hands to rest on her leg, squeezing his fingers. "I tried to move on in Perth, go on a couple of dates." She was wholly unashamed at the thud of glee in her chest when Draco gave a low growl over that admission. "I even begged Theo not to write me too often," she continued. "But the moment I saw you in Paris, I knew I'd never move on from you… I…" That irritating lump had returned with a vengeance, and it took a few tries to swallow it down and clear her throat for what she wanted to say next.

"'If they be two'," she started, "'they are two so'…"

"'As stiff compasses are two'," he supplied, a soft smirk etching over his face. "Told you I had it memorised."

Done. It was useless to resist the welling and streaming of tears down her cheeks now. She pursed her lips and shook her head, curls curtaining around her face. He cupped her cheek, gently swiping at tears with his thumb.

"Draco, I still can't…" She snapped her mouth shut. When had his face become so close? "Three years," she tried again, "and all this time, you—"

He didn't let her finish. Closing the gap between them, he pressed his lips to hers. He was kissing her.

Draco was finally, finally, kissing her. At long last.

She tilted her face to respond to his feather light touch. Their movements were slow, almost hesitant, as if testing uncertain waters. Until she dropped his hand to float both of hers to his face. To trace his jawline and ears and sink her fingers into his fine hair. Emboldened by his sighs and moans, she skimmed the seam of his lips with her tongue...

The dam broke.
He opened his mouth to hers and their mouths started dancing to a wild symphony only they could hear.

Draco urged her into his lap, brushing his fingers up her sides. A trail of goose bumps chased his fingers under her thin sleep shirt. His hands found their home in her hair, and he cradled and moved and angled her face to meet his as they poured years of unspoken words into their movements.

It registered somewhere in Hermione's mind that oxygen would be an important... at some point. But she just couldn't bring herself to stop, to slow any of her movements. She needed to feel his warmth, his touch, his magic over and over...

It was Draco who suddenly lingered in his touches, slowing their rhythm to something lazy and languid. Taking time to breathe her in as he explored, plundered, her mouth at an unhurried pace.

He relaxed their dance to an easy waltz, pressing light, chaste kisses to her mouth before pulling his lips from hers, still cradling her head in his hands. "Merlin." He heaved a deep, warm breath that tickled her nose, his brow pressed to hers. "I always knew that would be perfect."

Flushed and dazed and filled with a boldness she'd seldom experienced before, Hermione beamed coquettishly. "Yeah?"

"Mhm..." He hummed, pressing a kiss to the corner of her lips. "Your hair smells like..." He leaned up, nibbling on her earlobe as he took a deep breath that sent a shiver down into her core. "...That lavender and rosemary shampoo you use. It would linger and haunt me in my office for days after a consult."

He traced his nose down the length of neck, and she arched into him, humming in pleasure.

"Your skin," he breathed against the juncture of her neck and shoulders, "so creamy and..." He bit down on the bare patch of skin, and she clenched her thighs, moaning quietly. "...As soft as I imagined," he murmured, leaving a tender kiss on that same spot, nuzzling up her neck.

"Draco," she breathed, his name falling her lips, smooth and heavenly as she brought her fingers down to trace his jawline again.

His hands lowered, cupping her neck, closing his lips over hers again, setting that torturous and hazy lazy pace. As if he was memorising her every moan, sigh and gasp when he angled his face this way, pillow her bottom lip with his, moved his hands to wrap around her back, playing with her curls, and bringing her firmly against his chest.

Stars danced in Hermione's eyes when their lips broke apart again, and she couldn't decide if they were from the lack of air or from everything that was Draco... Not that it mattered...

"You know," she murmured, touching her nose to his, "you are stuck here for the night."

She heard him swallow, meeting his eyes to find they'd darkened. "Am I?" he whispered.

She gulped, uncertain how much implication he was reading into her comment. "I mean..." She faltered, biting down on her swollen lip. "That is to say you could Floo back to Theo's study if you wanted..." Merlin, what a mess. "I didn't mean to suggest that we... What I meant was—"

"Hermione." He chuckled, kissing her forehead, precious and sweet and then finding her lips again in for a brief, chaste touch. "I've waited more than three years to come this far with you." He looked right into her eyes, moving his hands to find hers, threading his fingers through hers and resting their hands in her lap. "You'll have to kick me out of your flat to get rid of me. Out of your life for that
matter. I'm not in a rush for anything we're not ready for. Both of us. Together."

"Right." She nodded, still flushed. "I'm not still… but it's been years, and—"

"Shhh," he soothed, running his thumbs over her forefingers. "I mean it, love. No pressure or hurry. We're in this together. We haven't even gone on a proper date yet."

She snorted. Merlin, she wanted to be embarrassed at that sound, but she didn't have it in her. She started to laugh and felt deliciously giddy as he joined along with her, dropping her hand and wrapping his arms around her waist.

"It's true," he mumbled into her hair.

"It is," she chortled again, carding her fingers through his hair, beaming down at him. "Completely ridiculous, but it is most definitely true." Her heart pounded and thundered as he stared at her, gazing into her eyes, dancing and fluttering across her face.

"I have something for you," he said, shifting and taking up his wand from the table.

But he pulled his wand down, drawing a straight line in the air, lips moving without sound as he did. Her heart swelled against her ribcage as a single red rose appeared from thin air...

"I love you only."

He caught the delicate beauty in his fingers, tilting it to her. "You're it for me, Hermione Jean Granger," he said, without a trace of doubt or hesitation to be found in his voice or face. "It started for me the night you gave Theo the flower wreath. And was set in stone when you started reciting that unforgettable poem. No one else could come close to comparing. I'm not going anywhere."

"Would you like to, though?" Hermione blurted without entirely thinking, overwhelmed. She accepted the rose breathlessly, studying its lovely crimson petals as she felt the weight of his eyes on her.

He cleared his throat and she blinked innocently at him, mouth bending in a broad grin.

"I hadn't said anything in my letters yet," she hastened to elaborate. "I actually haven't said anything to anyone, yet, but Rolf's next book assignment involves travel. If… If you would like… We could go together—you could still work under Mr. Ollivander."

Confusion, understanding and uncertainty met in his expression, compelling her to continue, "It could be a temporary work," she said, "and study abroad thing since Mr. Ollivander isn't making such educational trips anymore, and before you say anything against this plan," she hurried at the opening of his mouth, likely with a counter-argument. "I've heaps of money, Draco. All from the war proceeds given to me by the Ministry four years ago now, which means that it is likely all Malfoy money anyways."

He was silent, chewing his lip, tilting his head. Probably scrounging around his brain for a way to debate her offer.

"If you don't want to go, we won't," she said, decided and soft. "I'll tell Rolf that it's his turn to travel, and he can do that along with the dragon conference, and I'll take on local assignments. But I know you've wanted to travel, and if you'd like..." She floated a hand back to his face, cupping his cheek. "If you'd like to travel together, please don't fight me on the money thing. Please."
"Hermione…"

"Let me do this." She swooped in, kissing him swift and soft, forcing him to meet her gaze when she pulled away. "You're going to become a wand master someday, Draco Malfoy, and I've just wanted to be part of your life, to truly belong for years now. I love you and believe in you, and—"

"I love you, too," he cut in, voice soft and joyous wrinkles forming around his eyes.

Her mouth snapped shut as her continuing argument dissolved on her tongue. *He loved her.* "Well then, at least that is settled."

"Indeed." He beamed so bright that the sapphire flakes in his eyes danced. "When would we leave?"

"As soon as you like." She beamed back, teetering on the brink of a something so resplendent, so utterly foreign, it threatened to consume. She eyed the rose in her hand again, bringing it to her nose, drinking its fragrance. "Shall we?" she asked, tickling her head to motion beyond the kitchen. She was elated and weightless as he grinned and nodded and tucked her to his side as she led them to her room.

Denims discarded on the floor, rose lain over her bedside table, they found themselves under her sheets, limbs wrapped and tangled around each other. Hermione couldn't help a contented sigh as she ran her fingers through his fine silken locks once more, wanting to memorise and savour every detail of this night.

"'And next year's words await another voice,'" she hummed.

"'And to make an end is to make a beginning.'" He sighed, fingering a curl, tracing her face with his grey gaze.

Unburdened silence. A contented sigh.

"Is this more what you had in mind for our first reunion?" she asked him softly, teasing and playful.

"Better," he answered, pulling her closer, tucking her hair under his chin. "Because this is real."

Warm contentment seeped into her marrow as she drifted off to the rhythm of his heartbeat. And several hours later, an overwhelming joy bubbled within her as the pale-yellow light of a new morning shone through her window, finding them still tangled together.

*This. Them. Their love.*

It had been refined. It was real.

And it proved itself real over and over again in the years to come.

**Finis**
for now: Thank you. Thank you all. I uploaded this story thinking I'd sit at 40 or so comments by the end of it... and I'm just blown away. I'm humbled at all the positive feedback and I hope this was worth the wait.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Pretty emotional typing this, so I'll see you at the bottom.
Alpha love and gratitude to Kyonomiko. Beta hearts and adoration to CourtingInsanity.
All remaining errors are mine.
I own no part of the Harry Potter franchise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EPILOGUE

Friday, 3 January, 2003

Hermione woke to an incredible pain in her side and lower back, keenly aware that she needed the loo. She blinked slowly, the unrelenting tropical sunshine clawing its way around the edges of the nearly floor-length curtain panels. The mattress was quite firm (read: hard, dense, and otherwise unyielding) and the tangle of sheets holding her captive felt rough against her bare, sun-kissed skin.

It took no small amount of effort to shift and shuffle in such a way as to not wake the wizard beside her. Hermione's gaze focused on the cream-coloured curtains as she worked herself free, left foot skimming the floor, testing for temperature and sand, before rising entirely. Turning around for the loo, Hermione allowed her eyes to rest on a still-sleeping Draco.

One of his wrist bones had sunk into her side as they'd slept, and he'd shifted his leg so that his knee had been what she'd felt in the small of her back moments before. The clamouring sunbeams danced across his face and hair. His nose scrunched without warning and he muttered something indistinct, sinking his face deeper into his pillow.

Godric, he was beautiful. And adorable. And Hermione knew, she absolutely knew, she was beaming like a sodding love-struck idiot, but she couldn't find it in herself to care.

For many reasons; not least of which was the simple pleasure of having this hushed moment. Unhurried and uninterrupted.

She loosed a soft hum as she scooped up her navy lace knickers from the hotel room floor, which was currently warm and sand-free—the former indicating the hotel room air conditioner had cut off at some point in the night and the latter entirely because the couple hadn't left the hotel room yesterday...

Thank Merlin for reinforcing charms or the bed may not have survived the day... Hermione smirked to herself as she carried her knickers with her to the loo, slipping them on after relieving her bladder and flushing the toilet.

A self-examination in the mirror revealed a messy lion's mane of curls—curls that Draco was only too delighted to lose his hands in over and over again—and love bites that she would have to cover with a glamour charm if they ventured out to the pool or beach today. She made quick work of brushing her teeth and attempting to smooth down her mass of hair, but didn't bother trying too hard. Draco could help her out in the shower a little later.
She winced as the door made a loud creaking sound, loathing that the obnoxious thing opted to boldly announce when one was leaving the facilities. She slipped out, padded a few steps across the floor, peering around the corner. With any luck, Draco would still be asleep…

**Bugger.**

Glittering grey eyes were waiting for her, raking up and down her form as she stepped fully from the corner and sauntered to the bed. The wizard sucked in a deep breath as she climbed over him (low enough to brush against the thin sheet over his hip), back to her side of the bed. One of his hands had already begun to find its way to her tangle of curls. "Why is it I can never wake to the feeling of your beautiful naked arse against my glorious—"

"Because your lazy arse likes to sleep later than mine." She pressed a soft kiss to his lips, almost sorry to silence his husky morning voice.

Almost.

Draco had a way of turning an innocent touch, a simple meeting of skin to skin, into a paradox of less and more. Of nothing and everything. Their bodies found that slow grinding rhythm; his hands, lips and tongue asking, seeking and then deepening. Until it was a union of—

*Tap, tap, tap!*

"Bloody hell," Hermione groused as Draco chuckled against her lips.

"I was wondering when the owls would descend." He kissed Hermione's nose, shifted and sat upright, propping pillows behind him. He patted the mattress space beside him (which sounded very much like a rapid 'thud, thud, thud' on this extra firm mattress). "Come on, love." He bunched the sheet around their legs, wrapping an arm around her waist as she sank back into him and waved open the curtains and sliding glass door.

The effect was immediate: several owls flew in at once, bursting the bubble of peaceful calm in which they'd ensconced themselves. Envelopes and a newspaper article dropped into Hermione's lap (a letter moving of its own accord to the top of the stack), while a regal and irate looking owl spat a red envelope at Draco and lunged for his hand.

"Ow!" he yelped, cursing and glaring at the owl. "Message received, I'll open your bloody Howler first—off with you now!" Hermione drew her lips into a thin line as Draco shooed the bird away in an exaggerated wave and reached for the angry letter.

The shrieking voice of one Theodore Wyatt Nott filled the hotel room as the wax seal broke and the envelop awoke, and Hermione added an extra layer to their silencing charms on the room.

"*I am so furious with the two of you, I don't even know where to begin!*" (The couple shared a knowing look and eyeroll, confident in their friend's extensive vocabulary and command of English syntax to find a way to convey his outrage.)

"*I am understanding and sympathetic to your needs, your tropical shag-a-thon tucked away from the wizarding news after an extended work assignment in the frozen tundra looking for Salazar-knows-what and for the purpose of Merlin-only-cares why… And, Brava, Hermione on finding a secluded resort on Phuket Island, the pictures you sent before were lovely. However… What the bloody bugging hell do you mean that you eloped?!"*

"Told you he'd be mad at us," Draco smirked while Hermione tightened his hand around her waist,
allowing her hand to rest over his.

"Balls, Hermione! I kept your love-secret for two long and angsty years! And, Draco! After all we've bloody been through—I will **not** calm down, Tracey! This is inexcusable and insulting, and my anger is completely justified!"

(A snort from Draco. A chortle from Hermione which escalated into full-on giggles as her husband dug playfully into her ribs.)

"No!" Theo apparently cared little if his recipients heard the subsequent argument with his witch as the howler continued thus: "A line has been crossed! If they wanted to elope, they could have done so the night of our Christmas party! The manor was something out of a bloody romance novel and we could have all been there together. It's been a shitestorm for all of us, and hang it all! I bloody deserved to stand up with them as best man **and** maid of honour!"

There was a pause in the message as the sound of a door slamming could be heard in the background. A dramatic groan followed. "Ugh, my witch has gone off to find me a bloody calming draft, but I'm about to chase her down and let her find a more creative means of settling my nerves—you're not allowed to grimace or complain that that's too much information!"

"Kindly refrain from sending me more photographs of the picturesque sunset ceremony on the beach in an attempt to bribe your way back into my good graces. I am hurt. I am gutted to the core. Goodbye."

The envelope burst into a large, roaring flame; its ashes landing in a theatrical pile between their legs.

"Well," Draco started, vanishing the ashes with a casual flick of his wand. "At least he's consistent. Is there a normal letter from him?"

"Right here," Hermione hummed, lifting and unfolding the letter that had been charmed to be seen first. "Looks shorter, but I suppose we should hear him out." Draco's chest rumbled as he gave a low chuckle, dropping a kiss in her hair as she cleared her throat.

**Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy,**

*I'm not apologising for my 'overreaction' as Tracey put it. I, for one, believe I'm entirely justified, but what's done is done. This letter was going to be a list of ways you could begin to make this grievous offense up to me, but then I was delightfully informed you'll have a proper wedding reception when you return at end of the month. And there will be no arguments. Andromeda and Tracey have already begun to plan it. I believe I've heard whispers of seeing if the two of you will re-enact your vows. By the way, I will be taking full advantage of the romantic atmosphere to steal a moment of spotlight to propose to Tracey. Consider us even.

**Theo**

Draco's barking laughter echoed off the thin walls before Hermione finished reading, and something deep within her warmed as her laughter joined with his, a euphonic symphony of joy.

"Well, that takes care of our dramatic little blighter," Draco said, gasping for a breath as he clutched his bare stomach with one arm while softly drumming the fingers of his opposite arm over the naked patch of cool skin between Hermione's breasts. "Who's the next one from?" He settled back into the
pillows tracing along the underside of a breast and letting his hands rest over her abdomen.

The witch slid her husband's hand away from her bellybutton, not trusting that he wouldn't attempt to tickle her mid-sentence. "Blaise and Ginny," she answered, beginning to read:

_Congratulations you two. You'll have to wait for your wedding reception to get your present, but I'm sure you've been giving it to each other enough to consider this trip one massive gift—unless you're both too sunburned to have any fun. Blaise thinks that would outdo the plimpies incident if so; Theo thinks it would be sweet revenge. If that's seriously the case, though, I know the best healing charms if you're in need._

_See you soon._

_Love,_

_Ginny and Blaise_

"I think we're doing well enough for ourselves," Draco drawled, making a show of buffing his nails over his chest while shooting his wife a lascivious grin. Hermione winked and reached for the next packet, which held two letters a business card.

_My darlings,_

_Deepest and most heartfelt congratulations to you both. I could not be more pleased to have Hermione as my proper niece. Theodore's lovely witch, Tracey, and I have begun to plan your reception. It's to be held at Nott Manor the last Saturday of this month; we've already ordered your outfits for the occasion. If you have any food or decoration preferences, please send me a list._

_I've decided to give this to your early, so you'll have a place to come home to immediately if you'd like. There is a family cottage in Pembrokeshire by the sea I am gifting to you. I've already transferred ownership into your names. How often you make use of it is up to you, but I wanted you to have a home you could always come back to. The Ministry will have the Floo System activated by the time you return._

_Narcissa left me a business card amongst some of her things, and I confess it was my hope something like this would happen when I mentioned the beaches in Thailand as a getaway in passing to Hermione._

_(Draco snorted as Hermione scoffed. Slytherin…)_

_It's for a jewellery store in the northern part of the country, in Chiang Mai, I would recommend you pay a visit to before your departure to Australia. There is a substantial credit on the Black family account there, well enough for a set of rings. Thailand is known for quality sapphires and rapid turn-around with jewellery orders. You'll find the business card enclosed. It's now a portkey directly to the main office, should you choose to activate it._

_Teddy drew you a self-portrait of himself riding his broom. He wanted to make sure you didn't forget what he looked like._

_All my love,_

_Andromeda_

The second folded parchment was indeed a crude charmed drawing of a turquoise-haired 'child' flying on a broomstick. Andromeda had charmed the image to not only dart across the page, but also
stop and wave every five seconds in the loop.

The couple laughed for several minutes before turning to the next letter.

_Mione,

_Congratulations, I suppose. If you the Ferret makes you happy, we're happy for you. Mum is de-
gnoming the garden at Nott Manor with great excitement. Your godbabies are huge and loud. Be
prepared for a slobbering spit-up bath when you come home._

_Ron_

Hermione beamed with pride at her friend’s growth as she set the letter aside, looking with curiosity
at the folded newspaper. "It's from Harry," she noted, fingering the envelope attached.

"Letter first, love?"

"I guess so." She tossed a smile over her shoulder, bringing the brief note closer.

_Consider this my wedding present. The Ministry in Greece sent word he'd be coming back our way,
and our men in Knockturn Alley kept an eye out for him._

_Luna says we'll actually have a present for you at the reception, but I have a feeling you'll appreciate
this regardless._

_Love,_

_Harry_

Draco snatched the paper from her lap, swearing as he unfolded it, reading aloud.

_FORMER WIZENGAMOT MEMBER SLOPES FOILED!_

_Wanted former Wizengamot member Slopes caught in Knockturn Alley trying to purchase several
illegal artefacts, including illicit portkeys to South America. Auror Robards gives full credit to Auror
Potter; Potter to receive a promotion. Darion Greengrass calling for Potter to be new head of
department._

The wizard scoffed, lowering the newspaper to his lap. "I'd say it's more a present for himself if he
landed a promotion out of it."

"Shush you." Hermione dug her elbow playfully his side. "He's caught."

He blew out a long breath. "I'm happy for Darion and Daphne. They deserve this."

"You do, too."

He made a show of twisting his lips before giving a half-shrug. "I made my peace with everything
when we set off together last June." He tucked several curls behind her ear, tightening his grip on her
side. "You chased any lingering nightmare away and I could give a shite what anyone else says.
Daphne and Oliver married in a simple private ceremony while I was still in Azkaban, she wrote
recommending we do the same."

"Ah, the truth comes out at last," she teased, which he answered with a playful pinch to her ribs. "I'm
happy to hear from them. I mean, I expected Theo to be dramatic about not being present, but…"
She paused, mulling over words in her mind. "I'm happy they seemed to understand; that they didn't
see it as a dirty little secret we're ashamed of."

An indignant huff. "I'm not ashamed to marry you less than a year a—"

"No more explanations." She lay a silencing finger against her husband's lips. "We discussed this New Year's Eve, and again most of the day before the ceremony. We're not ashamed of our love and our wanting to spend the rest of our lives together. This wasn't an act of two rebellious youths. We're adults who decided we've waited long enough."

He wrapped a hand around her fingers, reaching up to cup her cheek with his other hand. "Happy, darling?"

She nuzzled against his palm. "Immeasurably so." Their legs shifted and twisted, tangling around each other as tendrils of something beautiful and serious wrapped around them, drawing their bodies closer as a thought darted across Hermione's mind, and she added to her previous answer. "Even though your meeting Monica and Wendell won't mean much to them, it means so very much to me."

"I'm your husband and they're your parents." The timbre of his voice told her it was all as simple as that. "They've come to know Hermione Granger, and I'm sure they'd be hurt to know you've become Hermione Malfoy if they found out through an obligatory Christmas card."

Her chest would burst... It was more that she ever imagined being loved by this man.

She murmured exactly that to him, voice some parts watery and other parts husky with need.

He stared at her for several pensive moments, more love than she knew possible swirling in those grey fathoms. And then his lips closed over hers. Hungry and seeking. Needing to be reminded that they were each others'. She answered him with eager desire. Celebrating everything in the present.

It occurred to her as Draco shoved the sheet from their bodies and began to settle himself between her thighs that she should have left her knickers off. But Draco was more than capable of fixing that. All that was necessary was to be in this moment. Marvel and unravel at each other's touch. Savour their mingled sighs and moans. And bask in today.

Because tomorrow—tomorrow was a gift. A promise to keep. A hope to cherish. A surprise to be unwrapped. An adventure to be explored.

But most of all, tomorrow was theirs.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: For those of you who've been reading from beginning, thank you for your support and reviews. If you've just stumbled upon this story, I hope enjoyed the binge read :) Thank you all for the follows, favorites and reviews throughout this. I am overwhelmed, humbled and blown away with the lovely response this story received.

I have two Draco scenes I'll be uploading as a separate piece in a few minutes. There's a fest piece I'll be uploading here at some point :) And another short story in the works. There's a oneshot I'll be uploading soon... out side of that, no large WIP ideas at the moment. But I hope you enjoy what I upload and when. Thank you all.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!