The Look on the Platform

by GinnyFromTheBlock

Summary

Was there more to the curt nod from Draco to Hermione on Platform 9¾, 19 years after the battle of Hogwarts? Set two years after the Battle, Draco has been brought in as a prime suspect in a conspiracy to return the Death Eaters to power but Hermione, new to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, believes him when he swears his innocence. Can they work together to prove it?

M for later chapters!
A/N: I don't own a thing besides the plot!

Just a quick note before you begin: this story has both a Dramione happily-ever-after ending and an ALTERNATE Dramione non-happily-ever-after ending. You'll get to a point late in the story where you can choose which ending you read (or read both, whatever you'd prefer!). In any event, there is no obligation to read the non-HEA ending once you get to that point if you don't want to. You can simply pretend it doesn't exist :) All applicable warnings for our non-HEA are included in those chapters.

Chapter 1: Prologue: After the Battle

It had been two years since the Battle of Hogwarts. It was a time of rebuilding; a time of healing; and a time of growth. Everyone who had been involved had been forever changed that night. The wizarding world had been forever changed.

If one thought back to that night, they would remember a piercing silence, broken only by the occasional sobs of their fellow wizards accepting the losses of those they loved. There was a feeling of unity and of relief that the Dark Lord had been defeated, but it was mixed with the somber reality of grief and uncertainty of what lie ahead.

When the dust settled that night, Harry, Ron and Hermione helped tend to the wounded, keeping them company as the Healers made their rounds as fast as they could. Everyone helped with the clean up after the battle, removing rubble while the more experienced witches and wizards erected new structures; new beginnings.

The Weasley's mourned the loss of Fred that summer; George vowing to continue their path of making others laugh. He had started on a new product called the Fred-ulant Friend which created a hologram replica of the user as a mirror image 10 feet away, (which would only exist for about 30 seconds before dissipating), that he hoped could be used for some bait-and-switch pranks.

Harry moved to the burrow for the summer, helping the Weasleys around the house and finally being able to spend the quality time with Ginny that he had been deprived of since he realized his feelings for her two years ago.

Ron and Hermione had set out on a journey to find her parents and return their memories. They found them in Australia after about a month and after a teary reunion, helped to move them back to England. After spending another month with the Grangers, Ron and Hermione had returned to the burrow for the last bit of summer.

Harry and Ron applied to the Auror's office, determined to be the youngest Auror's in history (and hoping to avoid going back for a 7th year at Hogwarts). They were both accepted to an accelerated program that would begin in the fall, welcomed eagerly by the Head Aurors, who had, of course, heard of their stories.

Hermione always knew she would return to Hogwarts, where she could finish her education and focus on deciding what she wanted to do for her career. She had been doing a lot of soul searching that summer, knowing that with going back to school and a lot of big life decisions ahead of her, there was one more thing she had to do.

"Ronald," Hermione grabbed his hand from behind as she followed him up the stairs one day,
"Could we talk for a moment in the bedroom?"

Harry, who was behind her, stopped mid-step, "I'll be downstairs," he said turning back around.

Ron looked back, eyes questioning, "Of course," he said, leading her down the hall and shutting his door behind them.

They sat down on the bed and Hermione looked at him sadly, "Ronald, I know that I love you and I believe that our future is together," she started.

Ron looked down, her hands were shaking slightly as she held his on her lap, "Why do I feel a 'but' coming..." he asked quietly.

"But," she looked up at him, "I think that I need to set up my own life independently before I can start a life with you."

Ron sighed, it was everything he loved her for, "I know you do," he said, a sad smile on his face.

"I'm returning to Hogwarts and you'll be off to Auror training. I think this is the opportunity for us to move forward as individuals and accomplish our own goals. When the time is right for us to start a real relationship, I think we'll know," she returned the smile.

"I've always loved you, Hermione," Ron pulled her in for a tight hug, resting his chin on her head.

"I've always loved you too, Ron."

That fall, Hermione returned to Hogwarts, picking back up on her 7th year courses, joining Ginny who was returning as well.

Hermione graduated from Hogwarts that year, choosing to follow her passion for innovating and improving the wizarding world by accepting a position in the department of magical law enforcement. She would start as a Level 1 Investigator, learning the wizarding laws and practice, and researching and helping with cases, hoping one day to find herself Minister for Magic, with the power to really make a difference in the world.

Hermione took an additional year with the department of magical law enforcement to complete their training and licensure program. Once she was licensed, the cases she took on by herself at first were small, ranging from theft to wizard-to-wizard disputes. A few months in, she found herself on a case that appeared small, receiving a tip by anonymous owl that a wizarding residence was seen receiving a delivery of large eggs, which the person believed to be dragons.

"Probably don't know what they're talking about," her boss, Alden Northcott, sighed to himself, shaking his head and calling out from his office, "Granger, I've got a new one on my desk if you've got some bandwidth to take it on."

"Of course, Mr. Northcott," she walked over from her office across the room, grabbing the file that was on its way to her in mid-air.

"Alden," he corrected with a wry smile as she appeared in the doorway, constantly trying to remind her to call him by his first name, "Suspicion of dragon eggs. You'll need to do a quick stopover to the address they noted and find out what it is they received. It's probably just a lot of paperwork, but it'll be good practice!" he gave her an apologetic look.

"Never minded a bit of paperwork," Hermione smiled at him, heading back to her desk to read.
Alden Northcott was a burly man in his mid-thirties, low voice, dark hair and dark eyes - very intimidating until you sat down and had a conversation with him. He was really quite friendly, and luckily for Hermione, very helpful as a superior. He took his time explaining cases and details, and laying out his expectations. Hermione could already see him as a wonderful mentor.

The possible dragon eggs turned out to be a much bigger operation as the initial interview with the address of interest turned out to be that of an exonerated Death Eater who was, indeed, receiving dragon eggs, along with a plethora of other illegal items.

The case kept Hermione busy for almost three months chasing down leads, eventually resulting in the capture of five "ex"-death eaters that were originally exonerated in the trials after the Battle of Hogwarts, all thanks to Hermione's dedication to digging into the case when the pieces didn't seem to be fitting together. There were signs that could have been easily missed by others that she couldn't let go until it all made sense, and the real conspiracy operation was uncovered. The exonerated Death Eaters and likely others still under wraps, were planning something new; something big.

With possibly the most dangerous and high-profile case in the department, others were brought in to help, with the understanding that she would continue as the lead investigator with the support of the department behind her. It seemed as if they, too, had come to realize that she really was the brightest witch of her age.

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"Ms. Granger," her newly appointed secretary popped her head in the door. She was a sweet girl with a french accent, a year or two older than Hermione, who had attended Beauxbatons, "They are requesting your attendance on level 10. Mr. Goyle is ready to talk, it seems."

"Oh!" Hermione jumped up, shocked that one of the Death Eaters was willing to say anything, "Thank you Chantel, send an interoffice memo that I'm on my way." She grabbed a stack of papers on her desk and placed them neatly into her briefcase. She flicked her wand and the briefcase snapped shut and followed her as she turned and walked briskly out the door.

She walked into the room on level 10 where Marcus Goyle sat at a large table, restraints keeping his hands attached to his chair.

"Hello, Mr. Goyle," she said in a professional tone, "I hear you have something you're ready to tell us." She shut the door and sat down across the table.

"You must be the Mudblood my son told me about, Detective Granger," his voice was raspy and the look he gave her sent shivers up her spine.

Without flinching, she stood back up, "If you don't intend to show me respect, I'll call the Aurors in to march you back to Azkaban." She walked towards the door, turning the knob.

"Wait, wait," Goyle conceded, "I'll play nice. I'd like to get myself out of here if I can."

She took her hand off the door, heading back to her chair and reseated herself across from him, not speaking.

"I have information I'll trade for my freedom."

"You've been arrested for conspiracy to commit terror," she said sternly, "There is no information you can provide that would let you go free. What I'll trade you, if your information is worthy, is exemption from the Dementors Kiss. As of now, you'll be receiving your kiss within the year."

Goyle gritted his teeth, eyes narrowed at the witch in front of him.

"Shall I call the Aurors back?" she asked.

"No," he growled, recomposing himself, "I'll trade my information to avoid the Dementors Kiss."

"Go on then," Hermione said, taking out parchment and quill.

"I can give you the name of the leader; the one who's trying to bring the Death Eaters back. He won't give up just because five of us have been captured."

Hermione looked at him seriously, this could be a huge lead. If he was telling her the truth, they could take down the organizer, "That would be enough to solidify our deal, assuming your accusations prove true."

Goyle sneered at her, "We'll all be in Azkaban anyway, I'd prefer to be the one who still has a soul," he paused, possibly for dramatic effect, "Draco Malfoy organized the assembly to bring the Death Eaters back together. He wants to restore dark forces to power and he has a plan to do it."

Hermione felt mildly shocked. Not that she'd ever thought of Malfoy as a particularly good person,
but she thought she had seen remorse in him, in the end. She'd caught a glimpse of him in the back at Fred's funeral. He'd attended some of the Death Eater trials. Harry had testified at his trial in defense of him and his mother. He probably wouldn't be free if it wasn't for Harry.

"You seem surprised, Detective," Goyle said, "Which leads me to believe that you don't know Draco Malfoy at all."

She straightened up in her chair, looking him in the eyes, "I can't say that I do know him," she cleared her throat, "Alright, Mr. Goyle. Thank you for your information, we will begin our investigation and if Mr. Malfoy is convicted, you'll receive your exemption from the Dementors Kiss. As of now, the Kiss will be postponed until the end of our investigation and any potential future trials."

She stood up, walking out of the room. One of the Aurors was waiting outside, "You can take him back, he's provided the information he came to tell us. Put a postponement on his Kiss Status until further notice.

The Auror nodded, "Will do, thanks Detective."

She walked down the hall, the door to the listening room opening for her boss to walk with her back to the office.

"You seem surprised to hear the Malfoy name," he noted.

"I have to admit, I was surprised. I really thought he had turned over a new leaf after the battle, but I can't say I've heard anything of him since his trial."

"Try to go in unbiased. There's an accusation that he's the ring leader to a new era of Death Eaters so this is going to be a sensitive subject to a lot of people once word gets out that he's been brought in."

"Of course I will," she nodded, "It'll be a thorough investigation."

"I have no doubt, Granger." They split ways to their respective offices, Hermione shutting her door so she could think, undisturbed.

She sat at her desk, fingers peaked and chin resting on top. She had a gut feeling that Goyle was lying. But if he wasn't… if Malfoy was behind the resurgence of the Death Eaters… she had to be completely open and unbiased.

She picked up a rubber duckie out of the bin next to her desk, squeezing it and talking into the bill, "Please send three Aurors to the Malfoy residence and bring Draco Malfoy in for questioning. No force should be needed. Thank you!"

She let the duck expand again and it squeaked dully. She tapped the tale saying clearly, "Auror Office, Level 2."

The wings on the rubber duckie sprang to life and it took flight as she opened the door for it. It was an ingenious idea from Arthur Weasley, who wanted to incorporate something like phones to the Ministry of Magic; something a little more personal than the inter office memos that had a one-time use perk. As lovely as the idea had been however, the concept of using rubber duckies as the bearer was still quite ludacris. When the Aurors office received the rubber duckie, they would simply resqueeze it to listen to the message, which would not be able to be replayed. Squeeze and release to record, squeeze to replay.
She shut the door again, returning to her desk to get back to her paperwork. It was a long and
tedious day of filling out forms for the conviction of the last two Death Eaters they'd brought it, but
it was all in the name of justice. As she filed away the last form, a knock came at her door.

"Come in!" She called, pushing the drawer back in.

The door opened and one of the Aurors walked in, a grin plastered on his face and Malfoy with
shackles on his wrist at his side.

Hermione furrowed her brows, "Did he put up a fight?" She asked.

"Nope," he responded, "Just thought it would be best to be cautious." He sat Malfoy in the chair
across from Hermione, "I'll be right outside the door."

"Thank you," she said, uncomfortable, but ready to hear his side of the story.

The door closed and Hermione walked back around the table, taking her seat and straightening her
robes, "Good afternoon, Mr. Malfoy."

"Granger," he nodded, his eyes were dark and he sat unnecessarily proper in his chair, hands in
front of him.

"Seems silly to keep you in shackles when we're just here to talk," she said offhandedly, pointing
her wand at his restraints and removing them, "I am sorry about that."

"I've had worse done to me," Draco shrugged, his face expressionless, "They'll take any reason to
put an ex-Death Eater back in shackles."

It seemed like a self-deprecating statement, again hinting at remorse to Hermione, but they hadn't
even gotten to why he was there yet.

"Look, Mr. Malfoy," she started.

"You don't have to be so formal," he cut in, "We went to school together."

She took a deep breath, "I understand, I'm just trying to be professional about this."

"You can cut the niceties," his voice was cold and she was reminded of their schoolhood rivalry.
Maybe he was still that heartless person that had called her names. Maybe the remorse had been an
act to avoid Azkaban.

"Alright," her tone became brash, more like his, "Malfoy, you've been brought in under the
accusation that the latest bout of reigned Death Eater activity was at your leadership. I am the
lead detective on the case and if you're tried and found guilty of this accusation, it will come with a
conviction of conspiracy to commit terror and a lifetime in Azkaban. The Dementors Kiss would be
administered within a year of conviction."

The room was silent as Draco took in what she was saying, "Well this is turning out to be a hell of
a day," he sat back, letting out a long breath before he looked up, locking his eyes with hers, he
couldn't say he was totally blindsided by this, "I'm not guilty and I'm likely being framed. I walked
away from that life the night of the Battle of Hogwarts." His voice didn't waiver and nor did his
gaze.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
They continued to stare at each other for a minute as Hermione searched through the empty facade of his grey eyes, looking for authenticity, or for some sign of deception. She could usually tell a lot about a person from a conversation, but Draco Malfoy was possibly the most difficult, closed off human she'd ever come across. She couldn't feel anything from him.

She finally tore her eyes away, pulling out a notebook from her drawer, "For some reason I want to believe you," she told him honestly, "But I barely know you outside of the not-ideal relationship we had at Hogwarts. Make me believe that you're innocent, Malfoy. I need a reason to want to fight for you."

Draco tilted his head to the side, she wanted to believe him? He expected she'd be the last person on the planet that would want to think that he was innocent. He had no idea what he'd been accused of before he came in, but he was sure it had something to do with Hermione Granger wanting him to end up in Azkaban once he'd heard who the detective was.

"Why do you want to believe me?" He asked.

She surveyed him, "Because I felt remorse from you. After the battle."

They were stuck in this awkward situation of only knowing the worst about each other, but wanting to trust the other.

"I have a lot of remorse for the things I've done," Draco told her, trying to force himself to be more civil if she was going to be on his side, "I put the war behind me, Granger. I'm trying to rebuild my life."

"Okay," she nodded, "Let's start with after the battle," her voice was softer again, back to her professional tone now that they'd said what they had to get off their chests, "What have you been doing for the last two and a half years?"

"I went back to school for my last year, so I could graduate," Draco told her.

"To Hogwarts?" She asked. Was he telling lies already? She'd been at Hogwarts that year.

"No," he shook his head, "I did my final year at Durmstrang."

"Why?" She asked, more curious now.

Draco looked agitated, "You really want to know?" he paused, looking like there was an internal debate raging in his head, "Fine. I went to Durmstrang because I didn't think I could handle being back at Hogwarts. Being around so many students whose families had been affected by the war. I was on the other side at the beginning of it Granger, I..." he looked down, doing his best to not break composure, and looked back up at her, "I still feel responsible for the things that happened. For the people that died."

They were silent. Hermione wrote some notes down to seem like she was doing something other than thinking on his words.

"Is that why you attended Fred's funeral?" She kept her voice neutral, even though the question had been burning in her for years now.
He looked caught off-guard, "I didn't know anyone had seen me there," he said, "I felt I had to go. I was the last one there. I felt I needed to say some words privately to one of the victims. I chose Fred."

Knowing it was absolutely not a moment to pry, Hermione just nodded, "So you attended Durmstrang for your 7th year and I'm sure you can find documentation to vouch for that. What did you do when you graduated last year?"

"Returned to Malfoy Manor," he sighed, "I've been continuing my own studies and trying to decide what I can do with my life."

"You haven't gotten a job since leaving school?" She asked.

"No," he gave her a grim smile, "Malfoy Manor is very comfortable. I've been taking my time deciding what my next step would be and I still haven't settled on a career choice where I can utilize my strengths and stay under the radar."

"What is it you think you'd like to do?" She jotted down some more notes.

"Not to be difficult, Granger, but this isn't a therapy session and I feel some of the questions you're asking me are a bit personal and not pertinent to my defense."

Hermione set down her quill, realizing he wasn't totally wrong, "Apologies, Malfoy, at the root of it I am just trying to get an idea of where you've been and how we can corroborate your story. I won't pretend that I'm not also curious."

"I'm not looking to share my hopes and dreams with you," he said, "So if we could just stick to the facts, I'm happy to share the things you need to know to prove my innocence."

"Okay," she needed to take a step back, "How about you give me your story. You can tell me anything you think is important, and leave out anything you think it too personal."

He let out a dark laugh, "You're not in for a fairy tale by any standards," he made himself more comfortable, crossing one leg over the other and leaning back in his chair, "I graduated Durmstrang at the end of that extended year. It was easier for me there, to be around people who didn't know who I was. There were also some other relatives of Death Eaters who attended, who were trying to work through their own issues and get on with their lives. They're good people over there, come off strong, but they're good. My father had some friends whose children went to Durmstrang and he felt comfortable sending me there. If you remember Igor Karkaroff, my father knew him, obviously, and his son Adrian is the same year as us so I at least had one friend going in. Blaise finished at Hogwarts our actual 7th year and I respect his decision. He never had much stock in the war."

Hermione nodded, interested where the story would take her.

"After I graduated I went back to Malfoy Manor, thinking it may just be for the summer and then perhaps apply for some jobs, but I got comfortable and the more I thought about going back into society, trying to buffer up my name that has been dragged through the mud for two and a half years… I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

"My father and mother are home as well. My father is there on house arrest. He can't leave; he hasn't left the house since the day after the Battle of Hogwarts. I understand of course, and so does he. He's lucky to have avoided Azkaban for the things he did. He's lucky he made the right decision at the right time and walked away with my mother and I or life could have been very
"We're close, my parents and I. Everything I did in the war, I did it for them. My father was in too deep the first time. He had to go back when he felt the Dark Mark burn in our 4th year. I'm not going to sit here and pretend he was a nice person to everyone around him because you and I both know that's not true, but he was tormented inside, forced to do much of what he had to for fear of death, and forced to do it without emotion. He put his loyalty in the wrong place and he could never take that back, not until my mother and I begged him during the battle. He finally walked away for us. For his family. Whether the dark side won or lost, he walked away from that life for good," Draco shifted in his chair, realizing he was off topic.

"Sorry," he cleared his throat, "Sometimes I feel the need to explain his actions because people have only seen the dark side of him, of us, and there's more to it than that."

Hermione nodded, "It doesn't hurt to understand your position."

Draco continued, "Back to my story. We spend all of our time at the manor. I go out sometimes to pick up food, books, supplies for the house, etc. Things I'd rather decide on than the house elf. The most frequent visitor we have is Blaise. We were close at Hogwarts and he checks in on me every couple of months. Comes out for a weekend of Quidditch on the pitch in back of the manor. You can ask him anything, if you'd like someone to corroborate my story, he'll be the best bet I've got for you.

"Other than that, we've had some Aurors at the house," he flashed her a sarcastic smile, "they pop in whenever they feel to raid the manor for dark objects. They got a good lot on the first raid though, so I'm pretty sure they just pop in to keep tabs on us now. Either way, hopefully the reports will show that the last few raids haven't uncovered a thing. Dark objects were more collectors items for my father. Now that our guests are seldom, there isn't much need for things like that.

"I stay in the manor reading most of the time. I've picked a few different subjects that interest me most that I think I could pick a career path in, but the willpower to put myself back under the microscope just hasn't been there," he looked up at her and shook his head, "Unfortunately that's all I've got for you. The last year and a half has been quiet for us and we were really hoping it would continue to be so."

Hermione's quill was touching her notepad, but she looked down to see that she hadn't taken a single note while he'd been talking, too intrigued to just listen. She quickly wrote down 'Blaise Zabini; Aurors' and flipped it shut, that would be enough to come back to.

"Okay," she nodded, "I think I have a few things I can go off of to get started. Hopefully we can keep this investigation quiet for now until we have some more information."

Draco stood up, sensing the end of their conversation, and glad to be done with it, "You can reach me by owl next time, or if it's urgent, here is our floo address," he grabbed a quill off her desk and wrote it down on a spare piece of parchment, "It's not a full Floo stop so you can't get all the way through, but you'll be able to pop your head into the flames. If we don't hear you, the house elf will usually be with you within a minute, just call out 'Marty'."

"Of course," Hermione said, grabbing the piece of parchment, "Sorry again for the ordeal of bringing you in today. I want to believe you, Malfoy, but the accusations are heavy and we plan to perform a thorough investigation, I hope you understand."

"Just how the world works, sometimes," his lip curled up in a half smile and he reached for the door, turning back around before he left, "Thanks for giving me a chance and not just throwing me
in Azkaban," he said. It wasn't friendly, but it was sincere.

With that, he pulled the door open and stepped outside. The Auror moved in front of him, looking behind to Hermione.

"He's free to go tonight," she said to him, "Thanks for bringing him in for me."

Malfoy side stepped around him, "Until Next time," he said bitingly to the Auror, showing himself out of the department.

"He's a cocky one," the Auror shook his head at Hermione when he was out of ear shot.

"I think he's a bit misunderstood," she said with her head high, "But he had his days of being a bit cocky alright."

The Auror chuckled, "Good luck with this one, detective, let me know if you need us to bring him in again in the future!"

"Will do," she said dryly, "Have a good night."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Hermione had requested a meeting with Blaise Zabini via owl the day after her talk with Draco. It was a little over a week later and she sat at her desk, preparing her questions when Chantel walked into her office, "Mr. Zabini is here for you, Ms. Granger."

"Great, you can send him in," she told her, moving a stack of papers from her desk onto the shelf behind her.

"Nice to see you again, Granger," Blaise drawled as he walked in, closing the door and taking a seat.

"Thanks for taking the time to meet with me today, Blaise," she returned to her seat, "Have you talked to Draco Malfoy since I contacted you?"

"I did, indeed," he said, "I stopped over to Malfoy Manor a couple of days ago to get an idea of what's been going on."

"Great, makes this easier," she smiled, she didn't know Blaise, but he had always come off as a decent person, a bit of a smooth talker, but not ill-intentioned, "So I wanted to try and build a character profile of Malfoy from someone who knows him personally and I'm hoping to corroborate his story of where he's been since the battle."

"Well you've got me here so I'll answer whatever I can," his tone became serious for a moment, "Just for the record, Draco's not the guy everyone makes him out to be. He's not even the guy I knew at Hogwarts that was kind of an arse. He's changed a lot in the last few years. He's been impacted by the war like everyone else was and I fully believe he's innocent."

"That'll be a good statement to have," she jotted down some notes.

"I'm guessing you'll leave out the 'He was kind of an arse part,'" Blaise grinned.

"I will certainly be leaving that out," she said without hesitation, looking back up from her parchment, "So I just have a few questions. First, if you could tell me a little about yourself for my notes, where do you currently reside?"

"I have an apartment in Surrey."

"And what is your current occupation."

"I run our family's store in Diagon Alley. We own Quality Quidditch Supplies. Probably a reason Draco wanted to be friends."

"How long have you known Mr. Malfoy?"

"Since we met at Hogwarts when we were 11, so about 9 years."

"How often do you see Mr. Malfoy?"

"For a weekend every couple of months since he finished up at Durmstrang."

"And how would you describe Mr. Malfoy's demeanor these last couple of years compared to how you knew him at Hogwarts?"
Blaise sat back, thinking, "Wish I'd had these questions ahead of time," he joked before answering, "Draco's always been very outspoken, popular, proud. Proud of his upbringing, his status, all of that. He's a decently powerful wizard too, smart and hardworking, but he'd never tell you that. That was the Draco I knew at Hogwarts. We got on because I called him out when he was being a prat and he respected that. I was the only one who could really reel him back in when he got a big head. Maybe Pansy as well. The other goons, Crabbe and Goyle, they just fed into him, knew his family was powerful, stroked his ego, ya know."

"So you wouldn't describe him that way anymore, I'm guessing?" Hermione asked.

"No," the answer was firm, "Draco's retreated a bit from the world. Not sure if he sees many people besides myself and his parents. He never wanted the future that caught up to him. The Death Eaters and all that, he thought it was cool when it was a symbol of power, but once it came time for him to be a part of that life, it ripped him apart inside. 6th year he was tormented with a task from the Dark Lord and it changed him. He was committed to seeing it through because he saw no other options. He feared for his family. Then he took off with the Death Eaters after that year. He was scared. He'd never openly admit it, but I saw it in him.

"Draco's… subdued now," he nodded at the word as he said it, "I think that's the best way to describe it. He just wants to stay low and find a way to move forward with his life. I think he holds a lot of regret for not walking away sooner. But if we're being honest here, he'd probably be dead if he had. There was never going to be a 'right' choice for him. Now he just wants to find some calling in life that will marginally make a dent in how far down his family has come. That calling is certainly not going to be with the Death Eaters."

Hermione sat back, tapping her quill to parchment, "What if he thought bringing the Malfoy name back to the Death Eaters was a form of redemption at least of their status and pride?"

"I won't even entertain that," Blaise said, looking annoyed, "Draco was under the impression that you were on his side here, trying to help him prepare a defense."

"I'm simply playing devil's advocate," she said, "I want to believe Malfoy, but I have to look at the case from all angles. We have to look at it how others will. The Malfoy name was destroyed on both sides. If he doesn't feel society will accept him, people may wonder if he'll try to restore the Malfoy name to the Death Eaters."

"The only testimony that I can give you is that he's not the Draco Malfoy that he was at Hogwarts. There's not a bone in him that would go back to that life."

"Okay," Hermione conceded, not wanting to agitate him further, "Did he ever mention anyone else from the Death Eaters that we haven't already brought in?"

"I think most that I knew of were rounded up or exonerated," Blaise told her, "Him and Pansy Parkinson would talk about it sometimes since their fathers were involved, but her father was exonerated for walking away like Lucius was. He was never high in rank, just friends with the wrong people. He's actually a potions master. He makes potions for the apothecaries around London."

"Is Draco still close with the Parkinsons?" Hermione asked, jotting the name down.

"Pansy and Draco were always close; that girl loved him for years. I think he kind of pushed everyone away after the war, her included. But I ran into her once after Hogwarst in a coffee shop and she said when she heard Draco walked away from it, she distanced herself from her father, hoped Draco would at least always respect her for that. She had finished Hogwarts with me and I
think she's working now somewhere in London.

"Goyle and Nott, Theodore Nott, they always seemed like toss-ups to me," Blaise furrowed his brows, "Not sure what they're up to these days but they were never directly involved in the Death Eaters, just their fathers were. They could be stupid enough to try and get involved, but I wouldn't call them ring-leader material. Might be good to talk to them though."

Hermione wrote down Gregory Goyle and Theodore Nott below Parkinson with a little note that they may have more names or be indirectly involved. She felt an odd sensation in her stomach knowing that Vincent Crabbe should also be on that list if he hadn't died in the Fiendfyre he set loose during the Battle of Hogwarts.

"So you've already confirmed that Malfoy attended Durmstrang to do his 7th year," she noted, getting back to her list.

"Yes. He had a friend there he told me about. The Karkaroff boy. Thought he'd feel more comfortable away from Hogwarts. I don't totally blame him."

Hermione wrote down Adrian Karkaroff, "Forgot about him" she said, "He's probably someone I should talk to as well."

"Seemed like a nice bloke," Blaise mentioned, "Think he just got an unlucky name."

Hermione nodded, "Okay, I think this is some good stuff to go on. This has been really helpful, Blaise, I appreciate you taking time to come down and talk with us," Hermione said, looking over everything one last time.

"Did I really have a choice?"

She looked up and saw a wry smile on his face and she chuckled, "I'll let you get back to your day, but I do appreciate it."

They both stood and walked to the door, Hermione holding it open for Blaise.

"Not a problem, Granger. Happy to help Draco out. He's a good guy just trying to start over."

They parted ways at the door and Hermione went back to write up some follow-up notes for herself. It felt like a productive meeting but didn't really give her any answers.

She wrote a quick inter-office memo for the Auror department, requesting files on Nott and Goyle to see if they were in the system. They seemed like a good place to start.

As Hermione finished up a summary document, her door creaked open and a head popped around.

"Afternoon, Detective Granger," she looked up from her work to see Harry's grin shining back at her.

"Harry!" She exclaimed, jumping up and pulling him into a hug.

"Saw your memo on Garrett’s desk downstairs, figured you must be in so I wanted to stop by."

"Oh, yes, I've got some leads I'm looking into for this Death Eater case so I just wanted to see if you had anything down there on Nott and Goyle."

"Garrett's pulling the files together. There's not much, but maybe it'll help! We're still getting briefed on it downstairs."
"How's Ginny?" Hermione asked, she hadn't seen everyone in a couple of months since she'd been given this crazy case.

"Doing great," Harry beamed, "She tries out for a spot on Puddlemere United next month!"

"So exciting," Hermione smiled, "I'm sure she'll do great."

"Well I actually wanted to run into you anyway, Hagrid is coming for dinner Friday and I was hoping you'd join us! Ron will be there as well."

"Of course!" She said. Being around Ron was still difficult, but she couldn't pass up a visit with Hagrid.

"Great! Dinner is at 6, we'll see you then!"

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Friday arrived quickly that week, with busy work days making the time fly by. Hermione packed up her bag for the evening, turning off the lights to her office and heading for the door.

"Granger?" Alden's voice caught up to her.

"Yes, Mr. Northcott?" She stepped into his office.

"How's that Death Eater case coming?" He asked, "I haven't seen the Malfoy boy in here again yet."

"No, sir, I'm chasing down some other leads first. I have a couple files I'm bringing home to read over this weekend and I should have some more interviews next week. Would you like to be more involved?" She hoped he didn't feel like she was keeping him in the dark on the progress.

"No, sounds like you're on it," he waved a hand, "Could you just give me a brief summary early next week on who you're interviewing and where your leads are? I'll read it over and just see if I can provide any insight."

"Of course, Mr. Northcott! I'll drop it on your desk Monday morning."

"And Granger," he said as she started to leave, "I mean a brief summary."

She gave him an embarrassed smile, the last time he had asked for a brief summary, she had provided him what he called a dissertation, "Yes, sir."

"Have a good weekend!" He called as she left the office.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione knocked on Harry's door that evening, excited, but nervous as always to see Ron.

"Hi, Hermione!" Ginny answered the door, "So happy you could make it," she ushered her in, "Everyone's in the dining room."

Hermione walked through to the dining room, she could hear Hagrid's story from the hallway.

"So I says to him, I say, 'where d'ya think yer goin' with that skrewt!' and wouldn't ya believe, it blasted right outta his arms! Couldn'ta planned 'er better myself."
Everyone was laughing as she walked in, and her heart lifted seeing all of their faces.

"Hermione!" Hagrid was the first to see her, standing up and bumping the table a little too hard in the process, "Get o'er here! Been too long!"

"Hi Hagrid," she flashed him a big smile, "So good to see you! Sorry I'm a little late, took me longer to finish up at work than I'd hoped!"

"Not a problem at all," Harry said, leaning back in his chair, full glass of butterbeer in one hand, wand twirling in the other, "We could listen to Hagrid's stories all night."

Ron walked in from the kitchen, setting his glass down and pulling Hermione in for a strong hug. She melted into him, squeezing tight, "Good to see you, Ron," she smiled up at him.

"Always good to see you, Hermione," he smiled back.

"Alright, alright it's dinner time!" Ginny said, levitating the food dishes from the kitchen to the table.

Everyone took their seats and started catching up on the last couple of months while they dug into the delicious dinner that Ginny had prepared.

As they finished up, Ron leaned back and stretched, "You learned a good thing or two from mum!" he said to Ginny.

"Cooking was hard to avoid when you were all out of the house," Ginny rolled her eyes, "I didn't enjoy it then, but it's much easier being able to use magic to do it."

"Well we're always happy to fill your seats!" Hermione praised her.

"So Hermione," Harry scooped up the last bite of his mince pie, "I just looked a little more into the case you've got on your hands, after that request for files you sent down."

"Well, it's still an ongoing investigation," Hermione said, looking sharply at Harry.

"Seems open and close," Ron commented, "That Death Eater gave a name to save his own skin, he's probably guilty."

"I don't think so at all," she shook her head, "I mean Harry testified at his trial. Harry, you must feel like it's not true as well."

"I'd like to believe I helped someone who deserved redemption," Harry nodded, "But why name him at all if it's not true? I don't think I have enough of the facts to weigh in yet."

Hermione looked at them incredulously, "Not that this is the place to discuss this, but I believe he's innocent. I think they have a lot of reason to name him. Namely, to protect whoever is still out there."

"Hard to imagine him much different than the git he was at Hogwarts. Doesn't make it hard to think it's true, not saying it is, just saying it makes sense," Ron said with a shrug.

"This really is invigorating," Ginny said dryly, "But a few of us have no idea what you're all on about."

"Sorry, Gin," Harry said, "Hermione's just got an interesting case on her hands."
"Well they got the righ' person on it then," Hagrid raised his glass to her before downing the remains.

"The last thing I'll say," she eyed the boys, "Is that I think there's still a lot of legwork to go before there's a clear answer."

They dropped it, Harry switching subjects to tell them about an exciting chase Ron had ended up in against an enchanted vacuum.

"He got it in the end though, had to jump onto it 20 feet in the air from his broom, but he got it back down to the ground safely."

"Dad would have loved to see that," Ginny laughed, "Are we sure he's not the one who enchanted it?"

Harry shook his head, "No, no, just some young wizard playing a prank on his muggle neighbor. Had to go in and do a quick memory charm, but that's about it!

The evening ended late after glasses of butterbeer were drained and stories of their adventures in the real world were shared.

"I really must be going," Hermione finally said as the clock ticked to midnight, "I've got to do some work tomorrow."

Ron groaned, "On a Saturday, Hermione?"

She sighed, "On a Saturday, Ronald."

They all said their goodbyes, promising to have another dinner sooner rather than later, and took off to their respective homes.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
The next week brought new information onto Hermione's desk. She had provided her summary of the leads, Blaise, Nott and Goyle, to Mr. Northcott and he had given her some talking points for her interview with Nott and Goyle. The interview was supposed to be mid-week, but had gotten pushed to early next week by higher priority informants.

To her surprise, two more Death Eaters had come forward saying that they wanted to talk. If she had to gander a guess, she assumed the solidification of the Dementors Kiss dates had prompted them to want to strike a deal. The most logical outcome of these meetings would show that the first mention of Malfoy's name had been a lie. Surely all three of the Death Eaters wouldn't be able to point fingers at the same innocent person. They weren't able to communicate in Azkaban so she felt confident that the end to this theory was near and that maybe one of them would tell the truth and give them a new lead to the actual organizer.

"Granger," Alden popped his head in the door, "I'll be in the listening room again today. We only exchange exemption from the Kiss for the leader's name."

Hermione nodded, "Of course, Mr. Northcott. I'm ready whenever they're set up on level 10."

"Alden!" he yelled in a sing-songy voice as he walked out.

The walk to the interrogation room felt longer than it ever had. Who were they going to name this time? Would it be even more shocking than hearing Malfoy's name?

"Mr. Macnair," Hermione greeted him as she walked into the room, shutting the door and taking her seat, "I hear you have some information you'd like to share with us, is that correct?"

"Yes," he barked, "Keep those Dementors away from me and I'll tell you what you want to know. Whispers came down the line that you're looking for the leader's name."

"Mr. Macnair," Hermione clasped her hands calmly on the table in front of her, "I hear you have some information you'd like to share with us, is that correct?"

"Yes," he barked, "Keep those Dementors away from me and I'll tell you what you want to know. Whispers came down the line that you're looking for the leader."

"We are," Hermione eloped her hands calmly on the table in front of her, "If you can give me that name, and your information proves true, you will earn exemption from the Dementors Kiss."

Macnair looked up at her, eyes gleaming, "They can't get me in there anymore. It was the Malfoy boy. Draco Malfoy."

Hermione felt her heart sink. There was no way Macnair could have discussed this with Goyle Sr. and here he was, giving her the same name and she could still hardly believe it, "Do you mean
Lucius Malfoy?" She asked, hoping for some other explanation.

"Nah, his son. Draco is ruthless. He wants to rule over the muggles and he's on his way to doing it right under the Ministry's nose. He's got you all fooled."

Hermione didn't show her frustration, but stood up, "Thank you, Mr. Macnair, your Kiss Status will be put on hold until we've completed a thorough investigation."

She left the room, closing her eyes briefly to prepare herself as she started walking down the hall, the next door opening for Alden to join her.

He put his hands in his pockets and looked sideways at her, "I know it's not what you wanted to hear," he said gently, "You've got one more in an hour, maybe that one will go differently."

It didn't.

Hermione walked out from her meeting with Antonin Dolohov an hour later with the same information. Draco Malfoy: ruthless ringleader.

Alden met her in the hallway looking grim, "Let's go to my office and talk through everything so far."

They closed the door and Hermione sat, trying to collect her thoughts.

"Tell me why you believe Mr. Malfoy," Alden said, taking the seat across from her.

"It's a few things," she started, shifting in her chair, "First, I knew him at Hogwarts. He wasn't a nice person and I've no reason to take his side so I'm not playing favorites here. I saw him the night of the Battle of Hogwarts. Harry saved his life, he begged his parents to walk away from the dark arts and I watched them go. Second, I saw regret in him afterwards, he attended the funeral of a friend and he looked somber, hiding in the background. Third, when I talked to him in my office, he came off very sincerely. If he's lying to me then I feel I've already lost my touch."

Alden sighed, "Granger, you're just getting started in your career, you certainly aren't losing your touch. We all get hoodwinked once in a while. He may be what they say, just a very cunning, convincing actor who knows how to work the people around him. You like to see the best in people," Hermione opened her mouth to object, but he held a hand up, "You do, Granger. You like to see the best in people and it's a blessing and a curse. You're able to let them be innocent until proven guilty, but it makes you vulnerable this early on in your career. I'm not saying you're wrong, it's just a friendly reminder to keep an independent mind. Don't get overly involved to the point that you can't accept it if it is the truth."

"I understand, sir," she nodded, "And I promise, I will keep an open mind, but there's just still something about it that doesn't feel right."

"Then keep digging," he smiled, "What are your thoughts, assuming you want to continue to hope he's innocent? How could three separate Death Eaters name him as the leader when they're not able to communicate?"

"Maybe they all decided at one of the meetings long ago who the scapegoat would be," she suggested, "Or perhaps they just all threw out the right name and had some dumb luck. Maybe Lucius is behind it. Maybe Draco is involved, but not the leader, but the best actor of the bunch."

"See at least now you're considering some options where he may not be totally innocent. That's an open mind."
Hermione looked conflicted, "Or maybe he's the leader and I've missed it along the way."

Alden sat back in his chair and gave a hearty laugh, "And now that we've come full circle, time to get back out there and see what else you can find."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione sent an owl to Draco that night, requesting that he come in for a quick meeting the next day. She wanted to get a feel for his reaction to being named by two more Death Eaters.

When he arrived the following afternoon, she received a rubber duckie from the security department. She squeezed it, "Detective Granger, we have Mr. Malfoy on our watch list and he's just arrived in the building. He says he's got a meeting with you but you'll need to escort him from the atrium as he's not allowed to wander the Ministry on his own. Thanks," she let it go and it gave a dull squeak.

Hermione groaned, pushing back her chair and hurrying to the atrium. She got off the elevator, looking around and spotting a flash of blond hair in the small entrance office.

"Hello," she said to the man at the desk, "I'm here to escort Mr. Malfoy to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

The man looked up, "Badge, please."

She handed over her badge and he scanned it with his wand, "Looks like you're authorized to take him," he said, "For future reference, if someone is on the watch list, you'll have to meet them in the atrium. Security precaution, you understand."

Hermione nodded curtly, "Thank you, sir."

She turned to Draco, who had a scowl on his face, "You can follow me."

Once they were out of ear shot, Draco spoke up, "So I'm a security risk now?"

He didn't sound pleased.

"Unfortunately, you are," she responded as politely as she could, "We've got some things to discuss in my office."

"Bet you love this, don't you?" he muttered, "Bossing me around, having a nice comfortable office to take me to."

"Malfoy I'm doing no more than I need to. We can't discuss this stuff in the hallways."

"Well I'm no more than a Death Eater to the Ministry anyway, so what does it matter."

This was not going to be a fun day.

When they finally arrived in her office, she shut the door behind them and took her seat.

"Based on the welcome wagon, I'm guessing your news for me isn't good," he looked up at her, his eyes clouded again.

She sighed, "It's not great."

"Well, get on with it then. Are you arresting me yet?"
"No, we're not arresting you," her voice was stern again, "And I'd appreciate it if you stop using that tone with me."

He was quiet while they stared at each other for a moment in an almost challenging way.

When he didn't speak, she continued, "Two more Death Eaters came forward with a name for the leader. They both gave your name, just like Mr. Goyle."

Draco shook his head, "Wonderful. Can't imagine they came up with that one with all their free time in Azkaban," he said sarcastically.

"Actually, they couldn't have," she said slowly, "You see, they're all in solitary confinement. They can't communicate with each other at all."

"Well then they obviously planned this a long time ago," he said.

"The problem is, Malfoy, that it's not obvious," she looked at him seriously, "It's three different people pointing the finger at you."

"Do you believe them yet?" he asked darkly.

"I don't know what I believe," she said honestly, "There's no evidence against you besides hearsay, it's just, unfortunately, the only evidence."

"Then maybe you need to do some better investigating."

She stared at him again, getting very irritated with his demeanor, "I'm meeting with Nott and Goyle next week," she said, "Do you think that will be helpful?"

"Maybe," he said, sitting back again, "Goyle might be dense enough to let something slip if they're involved," he paused, "Though I'm not sure who would be dense enough to let him be involved."

"Okay, I'll let you know if we do hear anything interesting from that interview."

"Could I attend?" he asked.

"Attend… the interview?" she felt a little confused.

"Yes," he said, "I'd like to be there when you talk to Nott and Goyle. Maybe it'll keep them from lying."

Hermione looked uneasy, "I'll think about it."

Draco looked at her hard, "You're really starting to not believe me."

"Malfoy, we just need more facts and right now, we don't have them. I need to be open to all possibilities."

Draco stood up, "I think I'm all set for today," he bit, "Could you please have one of your other staff escort me back to the atrium?"

"Malfoy, we're doing the best we can to piece everything together."

"I see that. But I'll still be going now. This isn't quite the collaboration I thought it would be."

He walked out and over to the main door, hands in his pockets, waiting.
Hermione let out a long breath of air, "Johnson?" She said to the girl at the desk near her office, "Could you please escort Mr. Malfoy to the atrium?"

"Sure, Granger," she said, getting up and meeting him at the door to walk down. He didn't even give Hermione a backwards glance before he walked out.

Hermione shut her door again, sitting down and ripping open the nearest book on the desk, *The Impartial Investigation: A Guide to Independence*

She read for a while, trying to clear her mind, when she came upon a section that spoke to her:

>To be impartial, is not to be without judgment. As crucial as it is to be impartial to biases and outside influences, judgment is an important part of an investigation and can often lead you to answers as you follow the signs in front of you. It's important to consider a suspect's tone, story consistency, internal motives, body language, and environment when also looking at the facts of evidence. Let your judgment guide you in your investigative steps, but not overshadow the evidence in front of you. There will always be a balance of impartiality and judgment in a good investigation.

Hermione leaned back, setting the book down and thinking on the passage. After a few minutes she sighed, grabbing a handful of Floo powder from the bowl on her desk and turning to the fireplace in the corner. She pulled the address Malfoy had given her off the shelf and threw the powder into the fire, "Malfoy Manor Sitting Room 3," she said clearly. The fire burned green and she got on her hands and knees, pushing her head into the flames.

When it came through on the other side she blinked a few times, looking around the empty room. She cleared her throat, "Marty?" she called.

She waited a moment in the silence until she heard the pitter patter of footsteps coming down the stairs in the distance. A house elf entered the room, looking curious.

"Marty here, ma'am," the house elf said, "How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Draco Malfoy," she told her, "If you could be so kind as to grab him."

"Of course, ma'am, right away!" Marty bounded out of the room, returning a minute later with Draco.

He looked at her, annoyed, and turned to the house elf, "You're dismissed, Marty."

"Hi Malfoy," Hermione said awkwardly. There was nothing worse than talking through the Floo network, "I was hoping we could talk."

"I think we had a nice chat earlier," he crossed his arms.

"I may have been a little negative," Hermione allowed, "And I'd like to talk again in person."

"I'm not coming back to the Ministry tonight," Draco said stubbornly.

"Fine. Can I come to you?" she asked.

Draco huffed, "You'll have to come to the main gates. We don't have any open Floo Networks into the house. *Security precaution, you understand.*"

Hermione bit her tongue, nodding, "How do I get there then?"
"You can apparate to the Hogs Head, I'll meet you there and bring you to the Manor gates."

"I'll be there in 10 minutes," she said, pulling her head out of the fire and back into her office. She shook her head out a little, gathering her bearings again before she stood up and grabbed her things, walking out of the office.

"Have a good night, Granger!" came Alden's voice as he watched her leave.

"Have a good evening, Mr. Northcott," she called back, mentally preparing herself for another meeting with Draco.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Once outside the Ministry, Hermione apparated to the Hogs Head. It was a little more off the beaten path than she'd like to be, but he shouldn't be long. She leaned against the building, trying to slow down her heart rate a little, hoping she hadn't just made a bad call.

After a couple of minutes, she heard a *POP* as Draco apparated a few yards away.

He walked over to her, "You can just grab my arm."

She put a hand on his forearm, still nervous, as he pivoted and apparated her along with him to Malfoy Manor. They landed outside the gates of a massive estate and she doubled back a step with a sharp inhale of breath.

"Everything okay?" He asked.

"I just... I forgot I'd been here before," her voice was barely a whisper and her face was draining in color thinking back to the night she was tortured by Bellatrix in the ballroom. Her hand moved subconsciously to her forearm where the word MUDBLOOD was still faintly etched.

Draco immediately realized what she was talking about, "We should have gone somewhere else," he muttered.

"No... I mean, I guess I have to face it sometime, don't I," her eyes were still wide and her breath was tight.

"You really don't have to, we could just go talk somewhere else. I wasn't thinking," his voice wasn't hard anymore like it had been earlier as perspective hit him like a train.

"No," her voice was more resilient now, "I'd like to talk here," she looked at him, "At Malfoy Manor. I've moved forward in my life and this place doesn't have to have the stigma I've obviously given it."

He could tell she wasn't going to change her mind. Draco looked at the house, "Welcome home," he said bitterly, waving his wand in a complicated fashion. An invisible wall fizzled in front of them and he reached through to push the gate open, motioning her in.

There was a stone walkway lined with evergreens that lead to the front doors. She could see the side yard from the gates, where an elaborate fountain stood as the centerpiece in a flower garden, it looked so much bigger than how she remembered the estate in her mind, when they were brought in by snatchers.

They walked in silence up the path and into the manor. Inside it was warm compared to the winter air on the grounds and she shrugged off her jacket, feeling goosebumps creep onto her arms. The foyer was large and almost welcoming now. There was a spiral staircase ahead that lead upstairs, and a sitting room to their left. To the right was a large dining room with a table that would fit at least 20-30 people, if she had to guess. She didn't remember being brought in this way the last time, but it was all kind of a blur.

"We used to host a lot of events," he commented, watching her take in the rooms around her, "We
can just go through to my sitting room," His voice was casual but the lightness wasn't matched by his eyes, which looked around coldly, as if the things around him had offended him personally.

"It's... grand," she said, trying to be positive.

"That could be a word for it," he lead her down the hall, which veered off into different hallways, lined with doors and different rooms, he sped up his pace and closed a set of French doors to the right as she approached, ushering her through the next doorway down, past a beautiful gallery of paintings, and into a decently sized den. A large desk sat in the corner and there were two reading chairs on the side wall, opposite a large plush couch. The back wall was covered by a tall bookshelf, filled with different sized books, crammed to fit. He gestured to one of the chairs and they sat.

"What did you not want me to see?" She asked.

"It's the ballroom entrance," he grimaced at her, "I should have just come to meet you at the Ministry."

She shook her head, "No, this is all..." she looked around again.

"A lot," he finished for her.

"Sorry," she pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, she needed to be strong, "I just have a lot of thoughts running through my mind right now."

"That's because my Aunt tortured you in the room next to us when you were a prisoner in my home," he said bluntly, "Who would ever want to see this place again."

She looked at him apologetically, "I didn't come here to give you a sob story," she said, "It just hit me all at once."

"I don't blame you in the least, Granger. I blame the same person I've been blaming for years. Myself," he paused, looking like he had something to say, "You never deserved that," he said quietly.

"You're the reason they couldn't give us to Voldemort the second we got here," she said softly, "You pretended not to recognize us. I won't ever forget that."

"I certainly don't need your pity for what happened in the war," he said more harshly than he meant to.

"I wasn't giving you my pity," she replied curtly, "I was reminding you that even I know your heart was never in it."

"What did you come here to talk about?" He changed the subject.

She sat up straighter, collecting her thoughts and addressing him, "I came here to apologize for second guessing you so quickly," she said, "My gut feeling was that I believed you and I let the lack of facts overshadow my judgment."

He didn't speak, but nodded, allowing her to continue.

"I hope we can work together to look into this. I'm sure there's no one who would rather work hard to clear your name than you."
"I obviously accept your apology," Draco sat back, "I was being stubborn earlier."

"This doesn't have to be uncomfortable," she held her head high, "I'm glad I was able to come here and straighten things out. We have a case to build."

Draco nodded, trying to push the darkness from his mind, "Who gave my name this time, by the way?"

"Macnair and Dolohov," she told him, feeling a little more eased by his change in attitude.

"Always hated Dolohov. I heard he killed a lot of people and pawned it off on others at his trial."

"I've heard the same since bringing him in," she said, "So is this scenario that's happening to you something that you remember from when you were... you know... one of them? Was there a scapegoat?"

Draco gave a dark laugh, "Yeah, The Dark Lord," he looked at her, "There was someone who actually wanted the credit for being a powerful dark wizard. Not like this lot who seem to be afraid of the notoriety that they're working so hard for."

"Why do you think they're going after you?" she asked.

"They hate us. The Death Eaters swore us off when we walked away during the Battle of Hogwarts. I think some were jealous that we walked free while their family members went to Azkaban. I think some are so deeply rooted in the dark arts that they thought us weak for walking away from it. I think some think we're liars and that we faked renouncing the dark arts to save ourselves."

"But weren't there others that walked away? I mean all of the exonerated Death Eaters that we're even bringing in now, they all renounced the dark arts publicly."

"None of them were as high in rank as my father, and none of them walked away before The Dark Lord was defeated like we did. They knew we meant it when we left. No family fell as far down as ours did."

"Do you think the Ministry made a mistake in exonerating so many people after the Battle of Hogwarts?"

"That's the tough part," Draco shook his head, "A lot of people were under the Imperius curse. It all becomes a blame game and Death Eaters are going to sell out innocent people and innocent people are going to point to Death Eaters. Who do you believe when you don't know. Some Death Eaters who were newer didn't know what they were getting into and were more than happy to walk away when it was over and I don't think those people will return to it. There are certainly people that I think are evil deep down to their core. Most of those people are in Azkaban."

"Is there anyone that's still out there that you'd be suspicious of?"

Draco thought hard for a moment, "Rowle was exonerated and I believe he's still out there. I think he'd go back to it if he could. Also if you've brought Mr. Goyle in, I wouldn't be shocked if Gregory is involved just by default. I'm honestly not sure about Theo, but I think Gregory is a good person to talk to at this point," he looked conflicted about the next thing he was about to say, "I think maybe we should talk to my father... another day after I give him some warning. He had a better inventory of the most loyal followers and what people actually did."

Hermione looked surprised, "Do you think he would be willing to talk to me?"
"I'm not going to tell you he'll be the most pleasant person you'll ever interview, but I think he would talk."

"Okay, I'll set up a meeting and come back," she smiled, "That's a great idea."

"I'm sorry he can't do the interview anywhere else," he looked down at his hands.

"It's in the past, Malfoy," she gave him a small smile that didn't quite break through the pain in her eyes.

"Maybe I'll read some investigative books and see if I can find some helpful tips," Draco looked over at the bookshelf.

"Looks like you've got a nice collection," she commented politely.

"What this?" he pointed at the bookshelf, "This is nothing," he paused for a second, "You want to see something in this house you'd actually enjoy?"

Hermione tilted her head at him, "And what might that be?"

"The library," his lip curled up on one side as he tried his best at a grin.

Hermione's eyes finally started to light up again, and she stood up, "I mean, I wouldn't be opposed... since I'm already here. And then I should get going."

They walked down a few more halls until he stopped in front of a large stained glass door, and looked at her, "You may faint," he said, "Don't say I didn't warn you." He pushed the doors open, revealing a sprawling library the size of a small cottage. Book shelves lined the walls on every side and more rows of books were suspended 15 feet in the air with a ladder hanging on a bar that somehow seemed to connect all of the shelves together.

Hermione's jaw dropped open and she tried to keep her composure, "There must be thousands of books in here," she said, staring at the suspended bookshelves in amazement.

"We ran out of room on the built-in shelves so father created another level. This is my favorite room in the house."

"Mine too," Hermione breathed.

"What kind of book would you like?" He asked, moving farther into the room.

"Gosh, I don't know, I'd like a... suspense novel."

"Come with me," he walked off towards the ladder, "Hop on."

He climbed up a few rungs to give Hermione room to climb on as well and he waved his wand to start the ladder's movement. It moved all the way down the track of the first bookshelf, making a sharp turn around the corner and past a few more rows, turning into one in the middle of the room. About halfway down, it stopped and Draco began to climb. Once he was up at the level of the shelf, he moved over so Hermione could stand down one rung next to him.

"This is our section on suspense novels," he gestured to the shelf behind him.

Hermione grabbed one off the shelf and flipped to the back cover, reading it aloud, "Fast-paced, in-your-face action!"
Draco grabbed another, "This is one of my favorites," he handed it to her, "I read it years ago, but who doesn't love a good re-read."

"A spellbinding rollercoaster of twists and turns until the very end," she read with a small laugh, finally starting to relax.

"Take it with you," he said, "Something to get your mind off the real-life suspense novel we're living right now."

"You don't mind?" She asked.

"I think we'll manage without it for a few days."

Hermione noticed how close they were, standing on the ladder next to each other and cleared her throat awkwardly, "Well, thanks," she said, "Should be a good read."

"It's been a while since I've had anyone in here to share this with. Forgot how much I enjoyed the awestruck look of a book lover in the Malfoy library."

"Awestruck is a good word for it, indeed," she allowed herself a smile as their eyes that roamed the room finally locked on one another.

She noticed they weren't clouded over this time, in fact his grey eyes shined almost silver in the dim lighting of the library, deep and alive. She felt bad for thinking of them as empty before. They weren't empty at all, just guarded perhaps when he felt they needed to be.

"Would you like anything else?" He asked, breaking her out of the momentary trance she'd found herself in.

"No," she tore her eyes away, looking back down at the book, "This is lovely for now."

"Back down we go then," he climbed past her down the ladder, brushing past her as he went.

She felt a shiver go up her arm as he passed, which she forced herself to ignore as she followed.

"I should be going back home," she said, feeling as though it was time for her to leave.

"Right, of course," he nodded and they started walking, "When are the interviews with Nott and Goyle?"

"They'll be early next week," she told him, "So I will... see you then," her heart was beating faster than it should be.

They walked outside and down the stone pathway and she did her best to keep her focus straight ahead.

Draco walked her all the way to the gates, "Just want to make sure you make it past the charms to apparate. Feel like I can't be too careful these days knowing someone's got my name on the top of their list."

"I don't blame you at all," she said, "Thanks for meeting with me again tonight, hopefully we can learn something new at one of these interviews. Investigations are just a process, always takes longer to get answers than you feel it should."

Draco nodded and she stepped out of the gates, "Hey Granger," he said and she turned around, "I'm sorry," he said slowly, "I never got to tell you that I'm sorry for all of it, all the way back to the
names I called you at Hogwarts, to what happened in the war, to how you felt just seeing my family's home. I'm sorry for my part in it and everything it caused you."

Hermione looked at him sadly, "I forgave you a long time ago. I hope you'll forgive yourself one day. You deserve a chance to move forward like everyone else."

He gave her a half smile, "That's nice of you to say," he kept his voice even, "And thanks for tracking me down. I can be a bit of a prat when I don't get my way."

"You sure can," she agreed with a grin, "You and me working together feels right. We're going to figure this out and get your name cleared."

She turned and stepped past the charms, looking back at him before disapparating to her apartment. She walked inside and dropped her bag on the floor, collapsing on the bed. She sat there staring at the ceiling, finally letting her walls down, allowing all of the thoughts from the night she was tortured to flood in. She lifted her arm up in front of her face and pulled the sleeve back. She traced her fingers along the letters, M-U-D-B-L-O-O-D. She burst into the tears she'd felt since the moment she apparated in front of the manor. She cried for a long time, not moving, not trying to stop it, just allowing it to make its way out. When it finally subsided, she pushed herself up into a seated position, wiped her face on her sleeve and took a deep breath.

Maybe she could put the memory of that night behind her now. She'd faced Malfoy Manor again and she'd seen a beautiful side of it full of books. She thought back to the moment their eyes locked on the ladder. He'd seemed genuinely content sharing the library with her and she'd felt so comfortable being close to him. And then there was that electricity that had flowed through her from his touch as he brushed past her. She cleared her head again, no, she just wanted to help him and right the wrong she had done to him by doubting him earlier. They had a case to solve and his help would be invaluable.

She laid back down, curling onto her side and opening up the book she'd brought home. She read until her eyes were tired. It had been an emotional night, but as she drifted off to sleep, her mind wandered to the library and the ladder and the look in his eyes, which subconsciously brought a smile to her face.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to my beta, @GlassThorn, who worked hard for her shoutout this week!! If you’ve got a minute, please leave a review, I’d love to hear what you think so far! Xoxo
The next week brought new hope for Hermione, who felt confident that having Draco with her would help keep their leads honest. Draco was to meet her at the Ministry at 10AM, so at 9:45 she made sure she was outside of the Ministry entrance waiting for him, aiming to avoid another security mishap.

Draco apparated in at 10AM on the dot, greeting her with a nod, "Morning, Granger."

"Morning," she said, feeling unnecessarily short of breath again, "We're going to Theodore Nott's house first for a 10:30 meeting."

"We've got some time then, mind if we grab coffee on the way?"

"Sure," Hermione smiled, trying to show him that her emotional reaction to being at his house the other night was in the past.

He held his arm out and she grabbed it while he apparated them outside of a hole-in-the-wall cafe in Diagon Alley, "Best spot in town," he said, pushing the door open.

"I see you're really going for a life out of the spotlight," she looked around the drab cafe. It was cozy, but looked like someone's grandparents dining room.

Draco huffed, "The coffee is what matters and they do it right here."

He ordered them each a coffee and handed the old man behind the counter two galleons with a friendly nod, passing one on to Hermione and leading her back outside.

"I can pay for my own coffee," Hermione told him.

"I'm sure you can Granger, just a gesture," he rolled his eyes.

"Well, then thank you," she straightened her scarf and took a sip.

Draco watched for her reaction and his lip curled up, "Damn good coffee, isn't it?"

"It's quite good," she admitted, "And it was nice of you to tip that man so generously."

"I go in there whenever I come into town and he always treats me with respect. Not something I experience on a normal basis anymore. I tip him what he deserves for his service."

"Shall we get going to Theodore Nott's?" she asked, holding her arm out this time.

Draco took it and they apparated to the address that had been given to Hermione, coffee splashing slightly as they landed. They appeared outside of a townhouse in Wales. It was a quiet street in a nice neighborhood. They walked up to the door and Hermione knocked. After a moment they heard a voice on the other side of the door call, "Password?"

She looked back down at the paper with the address, "Canons?"

They heard a few clicks and the door opened revealing a boy their age with dark hair and dark eyes, "Come on in."

They walked into the entrance way and he lead them up the main stairs, "Draco, I didn't know
"you'd be coming," he said, looking back at him, "Do you work at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?"

"No," Draco said shortly, "Just helping out."

Nott shrugged, "Nice to see you, Detective Granger. I don't think we ever officially met at Hogwarts but I remember you."

She didn't remember him, "Nice to see you as well, Theodore, and thank you for taking the time to talk with us."

"You can call me Theo, and it's not a problem," he said. They had reached the landing and he gestured to the couches ahead, "What do you think I can help with?" The main floor was sleek, like a designer had personally picked out each piece.

"Well, we've got an interesting case on our hands centered around some of the exonerated Death Eaters," she gave a side glance at Draco, whose expression was blank, "We were hoping to see if you could give us any information, if you've heard anything or know anyone who may have been involved."

Theo let out a long breath, looking back and forth between them, "I don't think I'm going to be much help," he said. They had reached the landing and he gestured to the couches ahead, "What do you think I can help with?" The main floor was sleek, like a designer had personally picked out each piece.

"Well, we've got an interesting case on our hands centered around some of the exonerated Death Eaters," she gave a side glance at Draco, whose expression was blank, "We were hoping to see if you could give us any information, if you've heard anything or know anyone who may have been involved."

Theo let out a long breath, looking back and forth between them, "I don't think I'm going to be much help," he said, "I was never a part of that life. My father was, of course, but that's why he's sitting in Azkaban. We were never close so I never had any reason to take interest. I fought with Hogwarts at the Battle."

"Did you ever have any friends that were involved?" Hermione asked.

"Honestly Draco, Pansy, Crabbe and Goyle were the only ones who talked about the Death Eaters in the common room. Not trying to sell you out or anything, mate," he turned to Draco, looking a little uncomfortable, "I assume that's not new information. And I get that sometimes you've got to do stuff for your family. Never had anything against you."

"It's fine," Draco said, "The reason I'm here is because my name is being thrown back in the ring as a Death Eater and we're trying to figure out why. I gave up that life the second I talked my father into walking away during the Battle."

"Happy to hear that," Theo nodded.

"We came to talk to you because of your father's involvement," Hermione said, "A lot of people our age that are involved seem to be the kids of Voldemort's followers."

"I understand," Theo gave a half smile, "Not the most convenient last name to have these days. That's why I've got a bunch of protections on my door. I'm sure you, of anyone, would understand, Draco."

"All too well," he said dryly.

"I haven't been in contact with many people from Hogwarts since we graduated. I work in the back office at Gringotts in finance. I spend about 80 hours a week there so there hasn't been much time for me to keep up with people. I see more goblins than wizards these days."

"Explains the fancy house," Draco grinned at him.

"Almost makes up for the lack of a social life," he grinned back, "What have you been up to these days, Draco?"
"Not much of anything," he said honestly, "Finished up at Durmstrang and have been taking some time at the Manor to realign."

Theo picked up on the unspoken reason, "Always good to take some time. No doubt you'll do something impressive when you figure it out."

"Are there any names you remember hearing around the house when you still lived with your parents that we haven't picked up yet?" Hermione asked him.

"The names I've been hearing about in the Prophet haven't surprised me," he said, "Only other person I remember as a regular around the house was Rowle, but don't bring him in on just my account."

Hermione looked over at Draco, "Told you," he shrugged and Theo looked relieved.

"We won't be bringing him in on just your account," Hermione assured him, "We're talking to Gregory Goyle next. Do you have any insights on his involvement."

"He didn't have any back in Hogwarts," Theo said, "I'm sure Draco has vouched for that. Since then I'm really not sure who he's spending time with these days. I wouldn't doubt it though, he always talked about it like it interested him."

"It did," Draco nodded.

"Okay, well we really appreciate your time today, Theo," Hermione stood up, "You've solidified another lead for us."

"Glad I could help," he said, walking them back downstairs, "And hey, Draco, if you put that life behind you, let me know if you want to fly around and pass a quaffle sometime, I remember you used to be pretty good."

"Still am," Draco said, "I've got a pitch out back at the Manor, sounds like a good time."

They parted ways outside and heard the locks click back up.

"We're not meeting with Goyle until 2," Hermione held him, "I was going to run home and grab a couple files I'll need to bring back to the Ministry later."

"I could come with you," Draco suggested, "If you don't mind. I don't have anything else going on today and it's quite nice being away from the Manor."

"Sure," she said coolly, "It shouldn't take long and we can grab lunch. Debrief," she held out her arm again, an uncharacteristically shy smile on her face, avoiding his gaze.

He grabbed her arm and looked at her, a smirk playing at his lips, "Sounds lovely."

She apparated them outside her apartment and cleared her throat, "It's not much," she said, "Just somewhere to put myself up on my own."

She pushed the door open and they walked in. She'd never been more aware of how tight the apartment was. It was just a studio so her bed was in the corner, a couch and coffee table in the middle of the room and a kitchen with bar seating on the other side. It was perfectly in order and the furniture was new at least.

Draco scanned the apartment, "Very nice," he said.
She rolled her eyes, "It's smaller than your sitting room," she said, "But it's home for now."

"You have your own place and there's a lot to be said for that," he told her, "I still live with my parents."

"Do you even run into each other in that house during the day?" she joked.

"Sometimes," he shrugged, "You know, if I veer into the wrong hallway."

Hermione walked over to the coffee table and grabbed some files, adding them into her briefcase. As the last file slid down, Draco caught a glimpse of his name.

"Is that my file?" he asked, tensing up slightly

"It is," she said, "Honestly I haven't had time to read through it yet but my boss, Mr. Northcott, requested the files I have so he can do a readthrough himself, so I probably won't get to it til he's done. I just wanted to see if there was anything in there that could help your case. Not being nosy," she added.

"Probably nothing in there that would help," he said dismissively, "And nothing you'd want to read."

"I know about your past, Malfoy," she smiled at him, "Can't imagine there's anything in here that I wouldn't already know."

He looked away pointedly, trying to find a way to switch the subject, "So where does Goyle live?" he asked, trying to calm down the anger and guilt that had boiled within him, thinking about what must be in his file.

"Looks like a flat in London," she said, pulling the address out of her pocket and handing it to him.

"Okay, I know a good spot around there for lunch." He wandered the room while she gathered her things, looking around at the pictures on the walls.

"Are these your parents?" he asked, pointing to the one picture that wasn't moving.

She looked over and smiled, "Yes. That was on Holiday in France."

"So funny to see it sit still like that," he commented, noting that her parents' smiles looked genuine and carefree, like they were just ecstatic to be spending time with their daughter.

"Muggles don't have moving pictures in frames," she said, "They think my photos are quite odd as well."

He kept moving, stopping in front of a picture of Hermione with Ron and Harry. Ron's arm was around her waist while Harry's arm was around her shoulders. Ron was looking at her and Harry and Hermione were looking at the camera, they were all laughing.

He felt an odd sense of jealousy, "Are you and Weasley dating?" he asked before he could stop himself.

"No," she answered quickly, "We're just friends."

"He's got quite the eyes for you here," he said.

She sighed, "Yes, I know. It's always been complicated."
"Like, you're in love with him complicated, or like he's in love with you complicated?"

She looked at him, "It just is complicated."

"How so?" now he was curious, did she love Ron or not?

"I have a lot of things I want to accomplish in my life," she told him, going back to what she was doing. "Settling down at 18 wasn't going to give me my chance to grow as an individual or get my career off the ground. Maybe I could have done both, but I needed to feel completely that I'd forged my own way and that I could focus all of my energy on that."

"You certainly know how to prioritize," he said, content that it sounded like she wasn't looking for settle down with Ron any time soon at least. Not that it mattered.

"Shall we get lunch?" she waved her wand and her briefcase clicked shut.

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Hermione and Draco apparated in front of Goyle's building after lunch, another fancy building in an expensive part of London. They walked into the atrium where Goyle was waiting. Goyle looked calm as Hermione entered, but his expression changed as Draco walked in behind her.

"Good afternoon, Gregory," she said as they approached.

"How are you Goyle," Draco said, his tone a little cocky.

"F-fine," Goyle said, looking dumbstruck, "We can go upstairs."

"I thought you said there was a business center we could use in the atrium," Hermione said.

"Oh, oh yes that's fine. It's over this way," he turned nervously and started walking. Hermione gave Draco a confused look that he returned and they followed Goyle.

The business center was just a conference room with a big table and chairs, and the three of them sat at the end of it.

"Thanks for taking the time to talk with us today, Gregory," she addressed him, and he gave her a curt nod, glancing over at Draco, "We just wanted to talk to you because of your father's involvement in the Death Eater conspiracy going on right now."

Goyle nodded again, swallowing hard.

"Is there anything you're able to tell us about things your father may have said?" She asked.

"Why is Draco here?" he asked her, looking highly uncomfortable.

"Mr. Malfoy is helping with the investigation," she said simply.

"He doesn't work at the Ministry," Goyle said.

Draco was watching him curiously. He'd never known Goyle to fidget like he was and him and Goyle had never had issues before. However he also hadn't seen Goyle since the Battle of Hogwarts.

"Come off it, what's the big deal?" Draco asked.

"It's... it's just that my- my father told me if I ever saw you, I should refer to you as... as," he paused dramatically.

"As what?" Draco asked, getting annoyed.

"As 'Master.'" he said quietly, like he was trying to keep Hermione from hearing.

Draco looked angry, "Oh he told you that, did he?" he said loudly, standing up.

"Malfoy, please," Hermione tried to reason with him, "We need to get through this interview."

Draco sat down, hands in fists.

"I don't want to talk with him here," Goyle said.
"Why? Because you can't tell the lies your father wants you to with me here?" Draco said scathingly.

"Malfoy," Hermione looked at him sharply again before turning back to Goyle, "Gregory, if your father has threatened you in some way for meeting with me, you can be honest here. If you're not involved then we're on the same side trying to round up the people that want to incite terror again."

Goyle looked back and forth between the two, "Draco is on the other side," he gulped, "He's got you fooled."

Draco slammed his fist on the table, "He's LYING," he yelled.

"Malfoy, can you wait outside?" Hermione looked at him apologetically, "I just need to get through this interview."

Draco stood up furiously, "We were friends Goyle. We watched Crabbe die together for the Dark Lord, and here you are taking their side again. Lying for the Death Eaters. You'll end up in the same place as your father when this is all over." He ripped the door open and stalked out.

Hermione turned back to Goyle with a serious tone, "Why do you say Draco is one of them? Is it from your father, or are you involved?"

"My father," Goyle said, "Told me I should address Draco as Master if I ever saw him in person again. He said Draco would be the next Dark Lord and he had pledged himself as a loyal supporter to him."

"Did you ever see Draco with your father?"

"Not since the Battle of Hogwarts," Goyle said, "My father said the meetings now are held in a top secret location."

"Have you ever been to one?" Hermione asked.

"Of course not," he shook his head, looking at the ground. Something felt very off here, "So likely only the new Death Eaters would know the secret locations. Very exclusive," she commented.

"It really is," he agreed, looking up at her, unable to hide the gleam in his eyes.

"It must be an intimate group of really powerful wizards. Did your father ever ask you to join?"

"Of course he did," Goyle said defensively.

"But you didn't think you could match up?"

"Of course I could," Goyle said.

"I mean, It would be really intimidating to be around that kind of power though, I can imagine. Better to stay away."

"It's not that intimidating at all," Goyle looked offended.

"I'm not saying you're not powerful enough," Hermione held a hand up, "It's just that that kind of power probably wouldn't be something you could handle anyway."
"I most certainly can handle it. I'm more powerful than half those wizards," he said definitively, "Before they all got arrested I was tested in a duel with Macnair and I passed." He was standing now, defending his honor.

Hermione set down her quill, "So you admit that you're a Death Eater?"

Goyle stammered, "I… I never said those words."

"What were you tested for with Macnair?" Her voice was casual now, she'd already gotten more out of him than she'd ever expected.

"For… just to see where I was at as a wizard."

"For what purpose?"

"To test my power."

"To do what?"

Goyle just stared at her stupidly.

"Where are the meetings held?"

"What meetings?" It was the dumbest thing he'd said so far.

"Look, Gregory," she folded her hands on the table, "You've already told me you're involved at this point."

"I have not," he said.

"You have," she smiled, "Tell me where the meetings are held and we'll see if we can work you a deal," it was an empty offer.

"I… I'd never been to one," he said.

She stared at him and he fidgeted again.

"I'd only been to one," he tried again.

"Where was it?"

"Malfoy Manor," Goyle said.

"Did you apparate to his house?" She asked.

"No of course not, there are too many wards around the gates for us all to get through easily. We just used the Floo network into Malfoy Manor," he said incredulously.

"Sounds like a real lack of security," Hermione commented, eyebrows raised.

"It's just a very exclusive Floo Network," he said, nodding his head.

"Well, thank you, Gregory," she said, "I'm sure you understand, but we'll be taking you in now."

"But we'll be talking about a deal, right?" He asked, "Because I told you about the meeting place?"

"Of course we'll talk about it," she said, "Please put your hands in front of you."
He did as he was told, looking disappointed with himself, and Hermione magically bound his hands together. They walked out into the atrium where Draco was sitting, seething in his chair.

"Malfoy, I'm going to take Gregory in and have him booked. I'll come by the Manor later tonight and we can chat."

Draco stood up, glaring at Goyle and then looking back at Hermione, "Fine," He walked out the door and disapparated. She sighed, walking Goyle out and disapparating with him to the Ministry entrance.

It didn't take long to get him booked in, so she went up to her office and dropped the files off in Mr. Northcott's office, who wasn't there at the moment.

She walked back to her office, leaving the door open and writing down some notes that she wanted to follow up on or look into. About an hour later she heard Alden's voice from across the office.

"GRANGER," he didn't sound happy, "Are you over there?"

"Yes," she called back.

"Get over here!" Is wasn't angry, but it was an annoyed voice.

She walked in cautiously.

"Close the door and sit," he stood up, hands on his hips and started pacing the room.

"Did I do something?" She asked, "Goyle admitted to being a Death Eater in so many words."

Alden stopped and looked at her, "You brought the MALFOY boy to an INVESTIGATION interview about MALFOY."

"I... I did, sir," she acknowledged, "But I think it proved fruitful."

"You didn't even run it BY me," he was very frustrated, "Now I've got Aurors asking me why a terror suspect is going along on investigations when he's the main suspect! Do you know how this looks, Granger, have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," she countered, "I believe him and I want to find the truth."

"Well you've got to do it without him being present for these interviews. It looks bad on our department. It's extremely unprofessional."

"I think it's just unorthodox," Hermione said, "I use my judgment to make decisions sometimes and inviting Malfoy along felt like the right thing, and it panned out."

Alden sighed heavily, "You're a difficult person to reprimand, Granger," he said.
"I'm not trying to be difficult, Mr. Northcott," she started.

"Alden, Granger. My name is Alden and you are my colleague," he finally sat down, looking defeated, "And you are not difficult, you are just difficult to reprimand because you constantly remind me that you do your job well."

She looked at him, confused.

"Your method did bring in another Death Eater and I do understand and appreciate the importance of that," he told her, "But you need to be careful of getting personally invested in Malfoy being innocent and making him feel included in this process. Other departments cannot see his involvement because it honestly looks suspicious. If you feel the need to keep him abreast of information that comes in, then by all means just do it quietly and away from the Ministry and away from our leads. You've gotten good information and you've brought in six Death Eaters off the street now. I'm not questioning you, I'm just telling you to do it smarter."

Hermione nodded, "Sorry… Alden," she said, "I didn't mean to make a statement bringing Malfoy with me, I just honestly thought it was the right move."

Alden rubbed his face, "I know, Granger. You're almost too intuitive for your own good. Sorry to get frustrated like that, but I need to be able to 100% back your decisions and I was completely caught off guard."

"I understand," she said, "I will talk to Malfoy tonight and tell him he's got to take the bench while we do our investigation, but I will be keeping him informed. While we're on the subject of interviews, however," she gave him a small smile, "I've got one with Lucius. He said he'd talk for the first time since the trials. We haven't set a date yet because he wants to mentally prepare, but he agreed we could talk by the end of the month."

Alden looked stunned, "Lucius Malfoy is going to talk to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?"

"Yes, sir."

Alden continued to stare, wide-eyed, "This is why you make it difficult to reprimand you," he reiterated, "Take a rubber duckie with you and record the conversation and then let's set up a meeting the day after that interview and go over everything that's discussed."

"I'll put it on your calendar," she said.

Alden sighed, "Dismissed, Granger, get out of here for the night."

She stood up, "Thanks, Mr. Northcott."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione apparated outside Malfoy Manor that evening at the predetermined time of 7PM. Draco was standing just inside the gates and lifted the wards for her to enter. She looked at the manor with resolve, taking a deep breath and then looked back at Draco, stepping through the gates.

"Evening," she said uncertainly, unsure of what his mood would be.

"I've calmed down," he told her, "Sorry I kind of blew up at Goyle."

"Well he kind of called you master," Hermione said with a small laugh, "Talk about selling you
Draco shook his head with a groan, "I can't believe how much they're selling this story. It's almost impressive."

"Look, Malfoy, there's one thing I do need to confirm with you," she told him and he looked over at her as they walked up the path to the house, "Goyle said they met at the Manor once and that they entered your house through the Floo Network. Can you prove that the Floo Network into the Manor is closed?"

Draco grinned, "He's an idiot. That used to be how the Death Eaters would get into the Manor. After the war we had them all sealed by a Floosmith. I can get you his name. He sealed every fireplace in the house and we had him document it for our sanity. The only one he left open was the partial Floo stop that you've used to stick your head in. No one can get farther than that."

"Good to hear," she said, "It was going to be a real issue if you did still have a Floo Network open."

"Well that is one good piece of news," he said as they walked inside and made their way to the sitting room.

Hermione settled herself into one of the reading chairs, knowing Malfoy wasn't going to love the conversation they were about to have.

"So you arrested Goyle," Draco said, "How did you get him to confess?"

"Oh he practically did it himself," she told him, "The answers he was giving me felt rehearsed so I turned the narrative and started talking about how the Death Eaters were probably really powerful and exclusive so of course he wasn't involved."

Draco laughed, "Oh I bet he couldn't stand that. He knows everyone thinks he's pretty dumb — because he is— so that's probably his nightmare for people to think he's not included because he's not smart enough."

"Yes, it was honestly quite quick after that."

"So did he give you anything else that was helpful?"

Hermione sighed, "No, just tried throwing your name in again. I think he thought if he was going down, he had to at least bring you with him."

Draco sat back, "You know, we were friends. He's not the smartest of the bunch, but we were friends for 15 years," he shook his head, "And he just sold me out to my face."

"I'm sorry, Malfoy, it must be hard to see your friends change like that."

"It's just sad to see him siding with the Death Eaters. I'm not surprised. But it was hard to see how deep he's in."

"Well I've got some other news," Hermione looked at him warily, "Goyle was not quiet about you attending the interview. He ranted to the entire Auror department about it, in fact. So my boss had some words with me and he doesn't think you can be there anymore. BUT he said he has no problem with me keeping you informed on the case and discussing interviews with you afterwards."

Draco looked a mix between angry and tired, "Well it worked, didn't it," he said, "Goyle was
caught off guard and confessed."

"I know," she gave him a look, "Obviously I think it was the right call having you along, but we can't play it like that in the future if I'm going to keep this case… and my job."

Draco sighed heavily, "Fine," he said, not wanting to be annoyed any more today.

"So you're okay staying behind?" She asked, expecting much more of a fight.

"Of course I'm not bloody okay with it," he bit, "But he's the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and I'm the main suspect in your case. Safe to say I don't have a choice so what's the point in arguing."

"That was pretty much how I saw it too," Hermione said, "Don't think I didn't stand up for you though, I told him your help has been invaluable."

"But he wants you to keep an open mind, I'm sure, in case I am guilty in the end."

"Which you're not," she narrowed her eyes, "We're on the same side here."

"I know," Draco huffed, "I'm still not used to it."

She almost laughed, "Well here I am, sitting in Malfoy Manor having a chat in your reading chairs so I would say you should get used to it. Times are changing."

"You're annoying sometimes, Granger."

"You're grumpy sometimes, Malfoy."

They sat looking at each other challengingly before Draco groaned, "Fine, I'll try to be more pleasant."

"Wonderful," she smiled again, "So have you talked to your father about a potential interview date?"

"He's still coming around to the idea," Draco said, "He'll do it, he's just not ready to pick a date yet."

Hermione nodded, "No need to push him, but I'm sure whatever he can tell us will be helpful."

"Can you tell me the Goyle story? I'd really love to hear how you caught him in his own ego."

Hermione grinned, "It was one of my best I think." She went on to tell him the story of how Goyle couldn't accept not being included in such an exclusive group and how she talked him into circles until he had nowhere to go.

Draco truly seemed in a good mood after her story. He was smiling broadly, "You're as smart as people give you credit for, aren't you?"

"I don't usually go around telling people how smart I am, that's more of a Slytherin quality," she winked at him.

He rolled his eyes, "We're a proud bunch, Granger."

Hermione didn't stay much longer that night, she still had some work to get done at home and took her leave on good terms.
The day after her meeting with Goyle she arrived to the Ministry with an interoffice memo flying above her desk. She grabbed it and opened the parchment:

_Hermione,_

_Let's grab lunch today!

_Harry & Ron_

Hermione didn't know why but she felt a little unexcited for their outing. At noon, Harry and Ron popped into her office.

"Wow, I haven't been up here before," Ron said, looking around, "This is a great office they gave you!"

"It's very nice," Hermione smiled, "I had a much smaller one until this case fell into my lap.

"Shall we take a break at the Three Broomsticks?" Harry suggested.

They left the Ministry together, apparating into Hogsmeade and finding a back table at the Three Broomsticks.

The conversation was light, Harry and Ron telling her about their visit to the Burrow the prior weekend.

"Sounds lovely," she said, "Please tell your parents I say hello next time you're there!"

"I will," Ron agreed, "They miss you."

"So Hermione," Harry started, and she immediately knew where the conversation was going, "We heard you brought Malfoy with you to an interview with Goyle."

"I did," Hermione said, putting down her fork, "It was the right call and I think Goyle would have fed me a lot of bully if I hadn't."

"Why did you bring him?" Ron asked.

"Because we thought Goyle would be more honest if he was there. It's harder to lie to someone's face. He started fidgeting as soon as he saw Malfoy."

"By 'we' do you mean you and your boss, or...?" Harry let the sentence drift off.

Hermione pursed her lips, "Myself and Malfoy."

"Do you think it's a good idea to be working closely with the main suspect?" Harry asked.

"We're just worried for your safety," Ron added.

"I'm perfectly capable of handling myself," Hermione told them, getting quite annoyed now.

"You're more than capable, Hermione," Harry said, "But do you really trust him so much that you don't think he's at all guilty? Even if he's not the leader, that maybe he's still involved? It just seems
like you're putting a lot of trust in him."

"I believe him," she said firmly, "I know it's difficult to understand, especially given our history with him, but I've been talking to him a lot over the course of this investigation so far and there's nothing he's said or done that's given me reason to doubt that yet."

"Sounds rough," Ron wrinkled his nose, "Having to talk to Malfoy so much, innocent or not."

"He's not all bad," she looked down at her food, picking up her fork to take another bite.

"What did he do with the old Malfoy then?" Ron joked.

"I think the old Malfoy grew up a little," she said.

"How much time have you been spending with Malfoy?" Harry asked, noticing her tone.

"I debrief him a few times a week," she said nonchalantly.

"At the Ministry?" Harry asked, and she looked at him sharply.

"Originally yes, but it's become a hassle to bring him into the Ministry, honestly," she told him, "It's easier now to just stop by Malfoy Manor to debrief. It's not a big deal."

"You've been to Malfoy Manor?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Yes. I actually think it helped me work through some lingering issues I had from... you know, being there before."

"That was kind of insensitive of him, don't you think?" Ron said, looking angry, "Making you come back to Malfoy Manor."

"He wasn't thinking," she said defensively, "Neither of us were. I didn't even remember that that's where we'd been until I was at the gates. That whole adventure leading up to the Battle was such a blur in my mind."

"I try to keep it that way still," Harry gave her a half smile.

"Well it's not as difficult for me anymore, to be there again," she said.

"You've been there multiple times?" Ron said.

"Just a couple," she said, "It's a convenient meeting place."

"How about the Three Broomsticks," Ron suggested, "Or at the Ministry, under supervision."

"Ronald, it's really not a big deal," she said.

Harry watched her quietly, picking up on an uncomfortable demeanor while they discussed Malfoy, and choosing to change the subject, "We just wanted to ask, Hermione. I know you're just doing your job and you're clearly very good at it. We heard from Neville the other day. Did you know he interviewed for a position at Hogwarts?"

Hermione relaxed a little, "No, I didn't hear, in Herbology?"

Harry nodded, "He should be hearing back soon, I'm sure McGonagall will give it to him though, he's been doing research for the last couple of years with a famous herbologist that Sprout put him
in contact with. She's retiring at the end of this year."

"That's great," Hermione said, "We'll have to celebrate if he gets it."

Ron still looked like he had a lot of questions, but took the hint that the conversation about Malfoy was over. The remainder of the lunch was smooth and they returned to the Ministry shortly after, parting ways with a hug. Hermione felt an oddly disconnected sensation when she hugged Ron. It wasn't the extra tight hug it usually was, but maybe it was just because she was still a little frustrated with their reactions to her partnership with Malfoy. It was for the best for her case.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Over the next couple of weeks, Hermione would go to work and then stop over to Malfoy Manor a few nights a week with updates, or to bring files they could read through together. Mr. Northcott still had Draco's file, which she'd asked for and he'd offhandedly mentioned he was still reviewing. Draco's input was always helpful, his perspective much different than her own, which oftentimes made their discussions into debates.

They'd stay up late into the night sometimes, coffee in hand and files spread over the den. When they exhausted a theory, they'd take a break, talking about books they'd read or places they'd traveled, two things they had in common (possibly the only two things). Hermione had taken to the couch more than the reading chairs. She could sink into it while she read through papers, a little too comfortable sometimes to the point where she'd doze off for a few moments and then move over to the reading chairs to keep herself awake. She was happily surprised to find Draco quite witty and smart himself, challenging her, making her laugh, welcoming her into his home so they could work together. When he wanted to be pleasant he could really pull it off. Deep down she thought maybe he was just happy to have someone else around the Manor to talk to. Either way, he was much better company than she ever anticipated.

She had found herself thinking about him when she wasn't there, but that wasn't odd based on the amount of time they'd been spending together. Sometimes they'd be reading a file closely together and she'd feel her heart beat faster in her chest, or she'd feel his arm graze hers and she'd get goosebumps. She could tell she was starting to feel something for him, maybe just a friendship? A partnership? It was comfortable and inviting and she could tell whatever it was had been evolving for them both in an unspoken way.

It was another evening at the Manor, spring was fresh on the grounds and the sun was setting out the window in the den. Hermione shifted in her chair, pulling her legs up underneath her and leaning towards him, needing a break from their work, "So tell me, Malfoy, what have you been considering for work when you get yourself out of here?" She hadn't asked him about it again since their first meeting where he told her it was more than he'd like to discuss.

"Well as of now I think I'd make a great prisoner for the dementors," he sighed, putting down the file he was reading.

"Stop," she rolled her eyes, "We're going to clear your name. We've just got clearance to bring in Rowle. It's a matter of time. What do you really want to do?"

"You know I love personal questions, Granger," he eyed her, but she didn't falter, "But you're not going to drop it this time, are you?" he said.

"No, I wasn't planning on it," she stretched her arms above her.

"Aright, fine. I'll take you to my 'professional studies' library section and show you."
They got up and he lead her into the library. They'd been in there a few times for Hermione to swap out books, but always in the novel areas. They hopped on the ladder and it took off to the other side of the room in the corner. He started climbing, "We've got a hike," he said, and she followed. When they reached the top he gestured to the books behind him, "This is what I study on my own time. This is what I'd like to do with my life."

Hermione pulled a book off the shelf, it was called Modern Day Healing: Ailments and Antidotes. She looked up at some others, Healing for Beginners, Magical Maladies A-Z, Advanced Healing, Heart of a Healer.

"Kind of ironic, isn't it," he said, "Death Eater turned Healer."

She tilted her head at him with a smile, "I think you'd make a great Healer."

"I know I would," Draco said with a bit of cockiness, "It's just that no one would want me as their Healer."

"I would," she said, "Once your name is cleared again, I think you should do it."

Hermione reached over to grab Heart of a Healer, Which seemed to be a little further away than it looked, just out of her reach. Draco placed a hand on the small of her back to stabilize her.

"We're 20 feet off the ground, Granger, be careful."

She cleared her throat, fully aware of the blush creeping onto her cheeks with his hand on her back, "Sorry," she said, "Thought it was a bit closer."

He didn't move his hand, but moved the ladder a foot to the right. She grabbed the book and he peeked his head over to read the back cover with her.

Do you have the Heart to be a Healer? We've compiled stories from hospitals around the world that can give you first-person perspective of the workplace and the normal (and crazy) things you'll see throughout your career.

"Why do you want to be a Healer?" She asked.

"Well, I did some research on career options for people who excel in potions, charms and arithmancy, my best subjects at Hogwarts, and what the most difficult of those professions were. Healing caught my attention pretty quick. It's complicated and combines a lot of those aspects of study. Something I would feel accomplished in and, if I'm being honest, as an added bonus, maybe something that would redeem me a little from the Death Eater days. Save a few lives."

"That's right, we did have arithmancy together," Hermione said, remembering him sitting quietly in the back of the class, for once not surrounded by Crabbe and Goyle.

"We did," Draco grinned at her, "Hard to forget the image of your hand shooting in the air from the front every day."

"I may have been a bit of an overly ambitious student but I'm proud of it," she said confidently, looking down at the book again, trying not to lock eyes with him for too long, fully aware of the butterflies in her stomach, "If it's any consolation, I really think you'd make a great Healer."

"That's nice of you to say," he said. His voice felt so close to her and she looked up at him again. His eyes met her gaze and she saw passion there.
She tried to say something witty, but her words caught in her throat and she didn't speak, didn't move, just continued to stare.

"Hermione Granger with nothing to say," he said it quietly and his gaze moved to her lips and back to her eyes.

She subconsciously licked her lips, feeling quite parched all of a sudden, trying not to bring attention to her increased heart rate.

"Doesn't happen often," she finally got out in barely a whisper. He was closer than he was before, had he moved closer to her? When did that happen?

He pulled her ever so slightly to him and captured her lips with his. It was soft and quick as he pulled his face back an inch to look at her again. She looked flushed and her hand had moved to his arm. They looked at each other, waiting to see if the other would pull back and when they didn't, their lips came together again.

She couldn't breathe, she couldn't think. She felt his tongue push past her lips and slowly, tantalizingly, massage hers. She felt warm. Maybe it was their bodies pressed together, or the heat coming off of his hand resting on her back. Who would ever know. But it felt good and she felt a way she'd never felt before. She wanted more.

"Draco?" It was Lucius' voice from the doorway, "Are you in here?"

They broke apart, breathing heavily and eyes wide at each other, feeling caught in the act of something highly off limits.

"Yes," He called back, "Yes, be right there, father, just looking for a book."

His look of shock had worn off into a coy grin, "20 feet in the air probably wasn't the best place for this anyway," he whispered in her ear, climbing back down the ladder.

She waited an extra moment, catching her breath and running a hand absently through her hair before she followed him, a lot of thoughts racing through her brain.

His father was walking around the corner as they reached the bottom, he looked surprised to see Hermione.

"I didn't realize you had a guest," Lucius said, and she could tell his eyes still looked down on her.

"Granger is the detective on the Death Eater case," Draco said, "I believe I told you that. She's been stopping over to brief me on the progress.

Lucius eyed the book in Hermione's hands, "Not sure a book on Healing will help much with that," he said snidely.

"We just got caught up in the library for a moment," Draco said smoothly.

"I've decided on a date for the interview," Lucius said, now addressing both of them, "We can schedule it end of the week. Just you. No one else. I'd like to keep the number of Ministry guests we have at the Manor to a minimum."

"I understand," Hermione nodded, "How is 2PM on Friday?"

"I'll be prepared," Lucius said.
"Great," Hermione turned to Draco, "I should be going. Early day tomorrow."

"Of course," Draco said, "Father, I'm going to make sure she gets past the charms," he nodded at Lucius and led Hermione out of the library and towards the exit. They didn't speak until they were outside the Manor.

"He's got impeccable timing," Draco said with a hint of humor.

"He does, indeed," she still felt a little uncertain addressing what just happened.

"I can be in the room for your interview with my father," Draco offered, "Hopefully that would keep him as cordial as he can be."

"I'm not scared of interviewing your father," she told him, "I have a feeling he's got information that will make it worth it."

"I know you're not scared, Granger, doesn't mean I don't want to do what I can to help it go smoothly."

They reached the gates, "I need to do this interview on my own," she said firmly and he nodded in acknowledgment, "But I will see you Friday," her eyes looked up at him as she paused for a moment.

"Alright," Draco pulled her into him with a grin on his face and kissed her again. It wasn't long, but it was lingering and he pulled back, "Looking forward to our next debrief."

Hermione smiled, biting her lip gently, "Goodnight, Malfoy."

She stepped through the gates and apparated back to her apartment.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione arrived home that evening with a thousand thoughts to sift through. Draco Malfoy had kissed her. She had kissed him back. He was a suspect in a Death Eater case. That they were working together. He was a Malfoy. But he was so much more than that. He'd made her feel something deep within herself that she'd never felt kissing Ron. What a horrible thing to think. She shouldn't be comparing them. Ron was her best friend. Was she betraying him? Of course she wasn't. They had no obligation to each other. But what would he and Harry think? Would she tell them? Would Malfoy kiss her again on Friday? The interview was on Friday. The interview was what she should be thinking about, not a boy. A very captivating boy. Still a boy.

She sat down on her bed, groaning loudly so all of the noise in her head would shut up for a minute. They were working together. She could not go around kissing Draco Malfoy. But then again, no one really had to know she was kissing Draco Malfoy. She flopped back on the bed, covering her face with her hands. One case file drops in her lap and all of a sudden she's snogging Draco Malfoy in the library at Malfoy Manor. She just needed a few days away from him. Once he came to his senses he'd probably realize it was a mistake anyway. But did she want him to think it was a mistake? She rolled over, pulling a pillow over her head and engulfing herself in silence to think logically about the facts:

Did she enjoy spending time with Malfoy? Yes, their time working together had been more than pleasant to a point where it was comfortable.

Was she attracted to him? He was objectively attractive, so yes.
Did he make her laugh? Yes, he had a quick wit that rivaled her own.

Could he hold his own in conversation? Yes, he was very well read.

Did they have much in common? Not really but then again she was still just getting to know him, skimming the surface even.

Did she feel some kind of deep connection? ...Maybe? There was something unspoken between them, but what was it?

She finally pushed it all to the back of her mind, it was too much to handle on a Tuesday night. The only thought that lingered was the feeling of his hand on his back and his lips on hers and she smiled. If she didn't think too hard on it, maybe she could just enjoy whatever it was. They were adults, after all.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Hermione had spent the week preparing for her interview with Lucius, reading up on his original trial at the Ministry, reading the details in his file that put knots in her stomach. He'd killed four people that he confessed to and tortured five others. The only thing that had saved him had been the fact that he had walked away, shown remorse for his crimes, and spent a year in Azkaban as punishment before being put on house arrest indefinitely. He made her skin crawl. How could this be Draco's father?

Nevertheless, he could be an important pawn in their investigation and she had to have the mindset that the system had done its job and he was not a threat to society anymore. She had to let him put his past behind him. If she could treat someone like him with respect, maybe Draco would see that and believe that he, too, could be forgiven by society.

She apparated to Malfoy Manor that day, appearing outside the gates. She saw Draco walking down the path towards her, as he got closer she noticed a bit of a forced smile on his face.

"Afternoon," she said, looking at him questioningly.

"Afternoon, Granger," he lifted the wards and she walked in.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Do we have a minute to talk before the interview?" he asked, glancing over at her.

"Well I am a bit early," Hermione said, "We've got at least 10 minutes."

Before they reached the row of evergreens, he veered them off the main path towards the flower garden, which really was quite a sight in the daytime. He walked over to the fountain and she sat on the edge, waiting for him to speak.

"I wanted to apologize for the other night," he said, looking at her seriously, "I know we're working together on this case and your career is your focus and it wasn't fair of me to take that step. Besides, I'm not someone you should be associating yourself with."

Hermione stared back at him, trying to figure out which statement to tackle first, "There's no need for an apology," she said, "I hope you didn't get the idea that I was opposed in some way."

"I didn't get that impression," he gave her a half smile, "But that doesn't mean it was appropriate for me to make that assumption."

"I also fully disagree that you're not someone I should be associating myself with," she said, ready to take that statement on.

"That's something you and I will be wholeheartedly disagreeing on," he grimaced and she could tell he didn't want to dive into it any more.

"You're too hard on yourself," she said, leaving it at that.

"Maybe you don't realize that you're not hard enough on me," he countered.
"Either way, it happened and I don't regret it," Hermione said, getting back to the matter at hand, "I would even say I may have enjoyed it," she felt a blush creeping up, but she held her head high, "I do agree that professionally it may not be the best idea… but I also am not sure how much it matters if we just… keep it to ourselves and don't let it get in the way of doing our job," she said slowly.

Draco nodded, "We can just keep what happened to ourselves then and keep our relationship professional."

"Well I never said we had to keep it professional all the time," she said without thinking, "I mean when we're working on the case, of course, but I don't know, when we're not working on the case, whatever happens… you know," she drifted off, not even sure herself where she wanted this conversation to go.

"You've worked hard to get where you are Granger. I'm not going to let you lose sight of that because an overly charming, handsome man landed on your desk," he said, trying to lighten the impact.

"Keep that up and I'll be uninterested in no time," she laughed. When had his cockiness become endearing? "Look, Malfoy, we work great together. Let's just do that and whatever ever else happens is going to happen and we can just let it be that for now."

"Whatever happens, happens," he smirked at her attempt to be casual.

"I'm doing my best here," she said warily, "Right now, I see you as my partner. And I happened to enjoy snogging you, too. I'm trying not to overthink it, give me some credit here."

"Alright, alright," he conceded, holding his hand out to help her up, "I'll drop my case for now. We've got work to do today, partner."

She rolled her eyes, "You're a brat. Take me to your father."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione and Lucius sat at the end of the dining table, Hermione had her parchment of questions in front of her, a quill to the right and rubber duckie to the left. The air felt tense, but she'd have to push through it.

"May I ask what that thing is?" Lucius asked, eyebrows raised, staring at the rubber duckie.

"It's the Ministry's new recording system," she realized entirely how ridiculous it was, "I'll just squeeze it to begin the recording and place a spell on it to hold the squeeze until we're finished. Once I let it go, the recording will be inside until I play it back in my boss's office tomorrow so we can discuss."

Lucius eyed it distastefully, "It looks like a child's toy."

"It is," she said bluntly, "But it serves its purpose and it's Ministry certified. When you're ready, Mr. Malfoy, we can begin. I'll be referring to you as Lucius for our discussion as to not confuse you with Draco," she picked up the Rubber duckie and squeezed it, waving her wand and setting it down, "Lucius, you and I are here to discuss information you may be able to provide to assist with our round up of new age Death Eaters, is that correct?"

"Yes," Lucius enunciated the word.
"Is there a reason any information given today wouldn't have been given at your trial after the Battle of Hogwarts?" She asked.

"I gave the information asked of me at the trial, but did not provide anything additional for my own safety and the safety of my family. If I had named names and someone had gone free, we'd likely all be dead by now."

"I understand, I just want to give a reason on record for the lapse in information. Are there any exonerated Death Eaters that you believe were wrongfully let go?"

"Yes," Lucius looked uncomfortable, but definitive, "Rowle was fully exonerated in the trials, but I watched him murder three people that he blamed on someone else who took the fall for it in his own trial. There was never any regret when he murdered. I believe he is still a threat to the wizarding world. Yaxley, similarly got off by blaming his murders on someone already in Azkaban. I'd heard of him killing seven, but only witnessed one. And Parkinson was exonerated for being merely associated with the wrong people, but he was as bad as the rest of us. He killed two that I was present for and I watched him torture another Death Eater for an hour when he saw them waiver in their loyalty. He was rewarded generously for that."

Hermione's eyes were wide taking in the new information, "We'll need to know all the names," she said, "Who took the fall for whom in which murders."

Lucius pulled a piece of parchment out of his pocket and slid it across the table to her, "If I'm going to talk to the Ministry, I'm going to let out everything I've been holding in," Lucius said directly.

Hermione nodded, skimming the parchment that had everything they needed before continuing with her questions, "Why did you renounce the Dark Arts? I've read your file. I know your numbers."

Lucius momentarily looked down at the table, collecting himself again, "I did it for my family. I never wanted this life for my son or for my wife. And I never wanted the price that came with it."

"Do you regret the people you killed?"

"Every day," Lucius said, a dark look in his eyes, "I will never pretend that the dark arts doesn't fascinate me. It does. And power does. But not for the price of family. And not for the price of someone's life. There is a stark difference between idealizing power and using that power to rule over others. By the time I realized that difference, it felt far too late for me and I thought my only option to save my family was to be as loyal a servant to the Dark Lord as one could be.

"I did the things he told me to do without question, but also with never ending regret. When Draco became involved in his sixth year I was tormented knowing he'd be joining the life I wished I could escape. When we walked away from the Battle of Hogwarts, I thought we would all be killed, but the light side won, and we were tried and exonerated for the split second decision we made to leave. My wife made it for us when she misidentified Harry Potter as being dead, knowing full well he was alive, but trading his life, for Draco's life that Potter had spared. I am forever grateful to her for that decision."

"And to Harry?" Hermione couldn't help herself but ask.

"As much as it pains me to admit," Lucius looked annoyed, but continued, "I am indebted to Potter for saving my son's life."

"Did you ever tell Draco that you didn't want him to join the Death Eaters?"
"On the contrary, I told him he had to. For us. And he did."

"And he was tasked with killing Dumbledore, which he didn't. Why couldn't you have said no to other things, like Draco did."

"Draco got away with that because he was young and new. They tortured Narcissa for his weakness. They tortured her in front of him for half an hour. He knew at that point he had to do what he was told in the future. Everything that happened in the war felt like there was no other choice for us," Lucius saw a look of confusion on Hermione's face and shook his head, all too aware of the time she had been spending with his son, "If you think Draco is completely innocent in the war, you clearly haven't taken time to read his file. We all walked away from that life, but we all have our scars."

Hermione wanted to press him, but felt in her gut that it wasn't a conversation she'd like to have recorded, so she continued down her questions, "If you had to take a guess as to who the leader is now, who would you point to?" She asked.

He thought for a moment, "I don't think any of them are strong enough to lead a new era of Death Eaters. I think it's someone new."

"Is there anything else you can tell us that you think would be helpful?"

"One more thing," Lucius looked hesitant, but continued, "The Dark Lord had written plans. Once he had defeated Harry Potter, he had steps he planned to take to rule over the Muggles. I don't think those plans were ever recovered by the Ministry, but I don't know who would have had the access to take them."

"Where was the last place you remember them residing?"

"Malfoy Manor," he gave her a grim smile, "Most of the activities during the war happened here because we had the largest space. That's why we have so many charms protecting the house now. I looked high and low for them when we returned so I could hand them over to the Ministry as a peace offering, but they were gone. It didn't look good for us, so I never mentioned them, hoping whoever took them would destroy them."

Hermione looked at him for an extra moment, taking in the impact of what it could mean. On that note, the interview concluded and Hermione removed the charm from the rubber duckie, placing it in a box and back into her briefcase.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Malfoy. We know this wasn't easy for you, but I think the information you provided gives us a big leg up on the opposition," Hermione said, standing.

"I don't like to say things that may put my family in danger. But it's information you need to keep my son safe and out of Azkaban."

Hermione opened the door back to the entrance way and saw Draco in the sitting room across from them. He met her in the hall and they walked towards Draco's den, Lucius eying them as they went.

Hermione told Draco the highlights, the names he'd given and the plans.

"Mr. Parkinson was as bad as the rest of them?" Draco said, surprised.

"That's what your father said," she nodded.
"Wow, Pansy never gave me the impression that he was in as far as my father and I never saw any of it."

"Maybe she just wanted to think it wasn't true."

They spent the afternoon going through some of their old files with their new information, seeing if any of it fit with some big plan of attack.

Hermione was laying on the couch, Rowle's file in front of her face when she felt Draco standing over her. She lowered the file and smiled at him.

"It's 8pm," Draco said, "I asked Marty to bring up some wine," she sat up and he handed her a glass.

"Alright, we can be off the clock," she sighed, setting the file back with the others and taking a sip, "Maybe next time you could just go grab it, give Marty a break."

He sat down next to her, "That's her job," Draco laughed, but saw her pursed lips looking back at him, "Fine, next time I'll grab the damn wine," he rolled his eyes at her, leaning back in the corner and ushering her over. She looked at him hesitantly.

"Professional time is over and official personal time has begun. I don't bite unless you want me to," he said smoothly as his lip curled up.

"So tactful," she said sarcastically, moving closer to him, still not totally sure how to be… romantic with Draco Malfoy.

When she was close enough, he pulled her to him so they were laying back side by side, stretched out on the couch, "You're going to have to get comfortable being close to me if you were planning on snogging me again."

Hermione gave him a look, "This is all still very new to me," she said.

"Which part," he asked, "Myself? Or the romance?"

She didn't break eye contact, "Both," she said honestly.

He turned her head slightly to the side and whispered huskily in her ear, "I enjoy the prospect of that very much."

She felt chills go up her arms again and she closed her eyes, shaking her head with a small laugh. Why did he always make her feel like that? She turned to face him again, he was grinning, "Tell me something I don't know about you," she said, trying to relax into him.

He leaned his head back, "Most of the things about me that you don't know, you wouldn't' want to," he said evasively.

"Tell me something I would want to know. Tell me your favorite place in the whole world."

"In the whole world?" Draco thought hard, "Alright. There's a lake in Germany. It connects Germany, Austria and Switzerland. It's quiet there in the winter and we have a house on the lake that overlooks the mountains in this small wizarding community. We used to go there when I was young to take a break from the Manor. My mother and I would go on our own a lot, when my father was busy with work. I just remember it feeling so far away from our life and feeling like I could be whoever I wanted there. I didn't have to be Draco Malfoy, King of Slytherin."
"You didn't hate it though, did you? Ruling Slytherin?"

"Of course not," Draco's eyes were light right now, his arm draped over her casually, "I loved it when I was at Hogwarts. But sometimes I needed a break to just go be on my own, away from Crabbe and Goyle, or with my family, away from the darkness of the Manor."

"There are two sides to every stone, aren't there," she commented, looking up at him.

"If you take the time to stop and flip it over, yes, I like to think there are."

They lay there talking for a while that evening, enjoying a few glasses of wine, some light (and not so light) kissing, and a comfortable evening embracing whatever this feeling was and letting themselves be taken down a new path, wherever it may lead.

Hermione sat in Alden's office the next day, replaying her conversation with Lucius. As his last statement ended, the rubber duckie gave a dull squeak and Alden clasped his hands on the table, still staring at it.

"We need to bring them all in," he looked up at her, "Everyone Lucius mentioned. It's more than enough."

"What did you think about the last thing he said?" Hermione asked, "About the plans."

"I think it's what we're looking for. And it begs the question of how far they've gotten on taking those steps. It's big. Let's start with the new leads. Rowle first since his name has come up the most. Great work, Granger. To both you and Draco. I'm sure his help solidified Lucius' interview with us."

"Sir..." Hermione paused, thinking back to the recording, "What did he mean when he said I should read Draco's file?"

Alden surveyed her cautiously, as though she'd just asked a question he was really hoping she wouldn't ask, and then looked over at his drawer, "Granger, you've been working well together with Mr. Malfoy, I'm not sure if this is the right time to have you read through it."

"I'd like to see it," she pushed back, "There are clearly things that I don't know."

Alden walked over and grabbed the file out of the drawer, holding it in his hands hesitantly, "There's a reason I've been telling you not to get personally involved with Draco," he said gently, handing the file over, "But every time I doubt you, and doubt him, you show up with more information and names and I haven't had the heart to give this back. There's a part of me that wants to keep telling you not to get involved and a part of me that hopes you continue to fight for him. But I guess you need the whole story to make that call."

Hermione took the file, feeling her stomach clench, and she stood up, "Thank you, Mr. Northcott. I'm going to head home for the evening and take this with me."

He nodded solemnly, "See you tomorrow, Granger. I'll be here if you want to discuss, or we don't have to if you want to digest first."

She left the Ministry, apparating back to her apartment and sitting down on her couch, Draco's file still in her hands. She stared at it for a moment before she finally set it down on the table and flipped it open. Her eyes scanned the summary of charges and her heart felt like it stopped dead in
her chest.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Would love to hear what you think if you've got a minute! Thanks for reading so far, next chapter already in the works xoxo
The File

It was right there in his file. On the first page. The first line.

_charge: Draco Malfoy has been officially charged with the murder of Octavius Pepper.

_Plea: Guilty._

_Trial Notes: Shows heavy remorse and signs of obvious coercion from fellow Death Eaters. Five other Death Eaters were present, was chosen to kill Mr. Pepper as punishment for not killing Albus Dumbledore with the threat of watching his mother be tortured if he did not succeed. Walked away prior to the downfall of Lord Voldemort._

_Status: Convicted as charged._

There was a bright red stamp over the status that read EXONERATED.

Hermione sat back on the couch. Her mind was blank and everything around her felt a hundred miles away. Draco was a murderer. He'd killed Octavius Pepper. She remembered the name from a list of missing people in the Prophet during the war. She took a deep breath and it felt labored. How was she supposed to face him again? She knew he was a Death Eater when Voldemort was in power, but she'd always thought he was just... what? Just there? Just watching? How had she never considered that he had killed someone. Just because he couldn't kill Dumbledore? He obviously would have had to pay for that. And then they made him kill Octavius.

But what was he supposed to do? Sacrifice his mother? She felt a tear fall from the corner of her eye and she pulled her legs up on the couch to hug them in front of her. No choice was the right choice, but his words had ended someone's life. She felt sick to her stomach.

She didn't move for a long time that night, staring at the wall across from her and letting all of the points, good and bad, make themselves in her head. She wasn't sure she could ever look at him the same, but how fair was that? She knew he was doing everything he could to start fresh after the war. The person she knew wasn't a killer. But somehow he was. He had to mean it to use the killing curse. He really had to mean it to make it work and he had.

The next week and a half was a blur. They brought in and interrogated each person Lucius had mentioned. She went into the Ministry each day with her work-face on, putting her personal life and feelings in a little locked box in the back of her mind. Every time they said Draco's name, she relocated her emotions again before responding. She'd never felt more emotionless in her life than she had this week, trying to separate Draco out of her thoughts. When she let him slip in… it was the same thing all over again every time. It was a thousand unanswerable questions and heart-wrenching choices. It would impact her work if she let it get to her so instead she compartmentalized it, not letting herself feel those things while she was getting through her day.

They hadn't gotten any more information from the new Death Eaters, but it was obvious they had all been briefed to point to Draco. She stayed at the Ministry late into the night trying to overturn every rock in their files, asking them hard-hitting questions, and not getting anything in return. She was working more closely with Alden now, since she wasn't going to Malfoy Manor in the evenings. He had immediately recognized that she didn't want to talk about Draco's file and they would refer to him as Mr. Malfoy when discussing the case.

At night she'd return home and lay in bed staring at the ceiling, trying to find a way to unlock the
box and flush out whatever it was that had crept into her head that evening so the next day she could file it all away again.

Draco had sent her 4 owls that week and to show for it, there were four owls sitting on her ledge outside, instructed not to come back without a response.

Granger,

Free Friday night to debrief? Looking forward to it.

-DM

Granger,

I didn't hear from you regarding a meeting and you didn't come on Friday, is everything okay?

-DM

Granger,

I'm getting the idea that you're ignoring my owls. They won't leave until you respond.

-DM

Granger,

Are you getting sick of the owls yet? We've got a whole flock. What in the bloody hell is this about. It would be nice if we could be adults and talk about whatever is obviously bothering you.

-DM

The parchment sat on the coffee table. She'd put owl feed out each morning for the owls, but still felt she didn't know what to say to Draco. It was Sunday and she'd spent her weekend going in and out of the Ministry. She lay in bed that evening, on her side staring at the coffee table. There were tears in her eyes again as she thought about what it must have been like to watch them torture his mother when he didn't kill Dumbledore.

A banging on the door shook her out of her thoughts but she didn't move. They'd go away and she wasn't in the mood for visitors. After a minute they banged again and she looked over at the door, her heart rate starting to increase. What if it was another Death Eater they hadn't brought in yet that had found her.

"Granger! Open the damn door." Nope, it was Malfoy.

She stared at the door, trying to decide if she would answer it.

"I'm not going away," he yelled, "I know you're home because you're not at the Ministry."

She still didn't respond. What was she going to say to him? Was she ready to face it?

"Do you want me to have to break into your house?" He sounded very annoyed, "Because I will break into your house right now."

She sighed, sitting up, knowing he'd do it if she didn't just answer the door. She collected herself, taking a deep breath, it was time to confront what she'd read.
The door cracked open and she looked at him sadly, "I'm sorry I've been avoiding you" she said, eyes still red.

He took in her appearance and her tone and his look of frustration ebbed immediately as the heavy realization dawned on him, "You read my file." His voice was quiet and his arms hung awkwardly at his side.

She nodded solemnly, "Come in," she said, "You're right, I owe you an explanation for not addressing this."

"You've never owed me a thing," he looked defeated, "I'm sorry I came here."

Hermione's neighbor, an elderly man with a lot of cats, creaked open his door, "Can you kids keep it down, please?"

"Sorry Mr. Hooper," she cleared her throat uncomfortably, "Malfoy?" She looked back at him.

He sighed heavily and followed her into her apartment. The door shut and the silence was deafening as they sat on the couch. Draco couldn't bring himself to look at her.

"I read your file," she said slowly, "And I can't pinpoint what to take from it. I feel completely that I don't know the person this file is about. But it's yours and I feel I do know you. That's where my head is right now. That's why I haven't responded to you. I don't know if I hate you or if I... if I don't hate you. If I'm sickened or if I can sympathize."

He finally looked up, "Well then maybe you finally see me how I see me," he said, his eyes dark, "I'm a monster. For the rest of my life I'll always be a monster. Even if I let myself move past it for a day, the next day I remember what I was and what I'll always carry with me."

She felt the tears again. She wished she could stop them, but she couldn't. He was a broken man and she couldn't fix him. A part of his soul was broken in two.

"You're the first person in two and a half years who's looked at me like I'm a normal person again," he said, "But now you know the truth."

"I know you're trying to restart your life," her voice was constrained.

"It can't ever restart, Granger. I can't ever erase what I've done."

"I need you to tell me what happened, from your own perspective. Tell me what went through your head."

"I murdered another wizard," the words were tense and dripped with hatred, "It doesn't matter what was going through my head. At the end of the day, that's the only thing you need to know."

"Make me understand," her eyes were pleading with him.

He paused, shoulders slumped, "It won't make you feel any different," but she didn't waiver, "Fine. I'll do the best I can to give you my perspective," he averted his eyes to look at anything but her, "After sixth year, when I ran with the Death Eaters, they took me to the Dark Lord. He knew I couldn't kill Dumbledore and saw weakness. He brought my mother in, told her to kneel in front of him, and he tortured her. I thought he was going to kill her but I couldn't cry and I couldn't help her. Neither could my father who stood there with me. When the Dark Lord finished with her he flicked
his wand and cast her aside. She was barely breathing and it took her a month to recover. She was never the same after that, not until we finally broke free of that life.

"A month after I left Hogwarts, they brought Octavius Pepper to the Manor. They tortured him for information and when they were done, the Dark Lord told me to finish him off or my mother wouldn't remember my name by the end of the night," he shook his head, "I still remember the feeling of my heart beating out of my chest, the ringing in my ears, the jeers of other Death Eaters around me. Some wanted me to fail, you know," he glanced at her for a second, "I tried two or three times and it wasn't working, Octavius would just flail for a second and become still again, still breathing.

"The Dark Lord brought my mother into the room and made her kneel again. She had this resilient look on her face, like a part of her wanted me to let them torture her to save myself of having to do this deed. But it wouldn't have mattered and I knew that. If I didn't do it, they'd torture her and kill me. When I saw her there looking at me, it only took me one more try and the killing curse worked. I murdered a man and I saved my mother from losing her mind. What was I supposed to do?" Draco looked up at her and the look on his face tore her to shreds inside, "I know it doesn't change what I did. I know all the regret in the world won't bring Octavius Pepper back to his family. But what was I supposed to do."

Hermione wiped a tear off her cheek, still at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier," Draco shifted next to her, "For a time I thought you already knew and when I realized you hadn't read my file, I couldn't tell you and ruin the partnership we had. You believed me and you trusted me. Even the people that don't know that about me, they still think I'm the monster that I am just because I was involved with the Death Eaters. You knew that and you still gave me the benefit of the doubt. I couldn't lose your support. And the more time I spent with you, the more I enjoyed your company and this thing grew between us. How was I supposed to tell you then? I could warn you to stay away from me, sure, but I couldn't say the words to you, I couldn't tell you I was a killer. I never wanted you to look at me like you are right now," his expression turned to disgust, "Like I'm a monster and like you pity me all at the same time."

Hermione opened her mouth, she knew it was time for her to say something but it was still stuck somewhere in her throat.

"I can go now," Draco stood up, but she grabbed his hand before he could move.

"Wait," she said quietly, pulling at him gently to sit again.

He hesitated, but sat back down, waiting for her to continue.

She hadn't let go of his hand, "I'm sorry you were put in that position," she said slowly, "I can't imagine what I would have done."

"You never would have gotten into that situation," he said darkly, "You would never have walked on the side of the Dark Lord. That's why you can't pity me, Granger. There was no right choice in that moment, but I made a wrong choice a long time before which is how I got into that situation to begin with, so there's no way to feel bad for me."

"But if I'm able to see past you being a Death Eater, I should be able to see past what you had to do when you were one."

"No, you shouldn't," he sighed, defeated, "There's no part of you that will ever understand how I
got into that situation, which means there's no part of you that can ever truly accept what I felt I had
to do because of it."

"I'm trying," Hermione felt another tear roll down her cheek, "I'm listening."

"Do you at least understand now why I've told you to keep your distance?" He asked, "Why your
boss wanted you to keep your distance."

"I still believe you," she said, "I still believe what's happening now isn't your fault."

"I know you do," he looked away again, the purity in her eyes was burning through him like fire,
"But we should go back to only meeting at the Ministry. Stay under their watch, keep yourself from
getting too close to me."

"I don't need to be protected from you," she said strongly, "And if you just give me time, I'm trying
to reconcile what I read with who I see in front of me."

"There isn't a reconciliation, Granger. I'm not who I was but who I was will always be who I am,"
Draco stood up, pulling his hand from hers and walking to the door, "I need to leave, I'm sorry."

He walked out before Hermione could protest and by the time she made it off the couch to run after
him, he had already apparated from her apartment. Hermione stood in the doorway speechless. She
did understand what he meant now, when he told her not to associate with him, when he told her
she didn't really know him.

She wanted to run after him, to wrap him in her arms and tell him that one day it would be okay,
but even if she did he would fight it and she still didn't know if it was the truth. She knew he was a
changed man because he couldn't let go of the darkness he'd lived in the past. If he were still that
man, he would have moved past it a long time ago.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Nature vs. Nurture

Hermione entered the Ministry Monday morning finally ready to discuss Draco's file with Alden. She walked into his office and shut the door.

"Mr. Northcott, what did you take from Malfoy's file?" She sat down and he looked up from his papers.

"Good morning, Granger," he greeted her, finishing up what he was writing and placing the parchment to the side.

"Do you think he's a terrible person?" She asked bluntly.

He sighed, "I think he is troubled," he said, "He was raised in a family where the Death Eater lifestyle was normalized. Whether it agonized Lucius or not, it was normalized."

"It's just that the man I know," she thought for a second before finishing, "Now anyway, maybe not in the Hogwarts days, but the man I know now... it just doesn't fit in his personality. And even the Hogwarts version of Malfoy, he was childish and mean but he wasn't evil."

"Now you're talking nature versus nurture, Granger. How about you tell me the difference and we'll discuss."

"Well, nature would be how he was born. His genes, his personality, the things that are inherent without outside impact. And then nurture would be how he was raised, and how his environment shaped him."

"He was nurtured to follow Voldemort," Alden nodded, "His environment created the Death Eater within him when by nature, he would not be a killer. Do you see where the issue comes in? He was brought up for something he didn't have the heart to do."

"I don't know, I do have to remember that back in Hogwarts he could be cruel. Maybe it was in him all along. He used to... he used to call me 'Mudblood' all the time."

Alden paused for a moment, "That's certainly not a nice thing to do, and it's certainly not okay. But I think that's nurture again, Granger. He was nurtured to be arrogant and superior. I don't think his nature kicked in until he was pushed past the boundaries of his natural instincts. I think when he was, when they made him a killer, then all of the nasty things he'd said and done in the past presented themselves on a platter and he had to make an internal decision to either follow his nature or his nurture... and eventually he walked away from Voldemort. I think at the end of the day, that decision was nature."

"But how do you know a person is good when they've been horrible in the past."

"You saw past it when you first brought him in," Alden said simply, "It wasn't until you realized how far down he had fallen that you let his past overshadow his character."

Hermione sat back, thinking before looking at him again, "You haven't answered my question as to whether or not you think he's a bad person."

"It's not a question I need to answer. I'm the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and he is the main suspect in our biggest case. All I need to know is whether he is guilty or innocent, and my best detective has been telling me for months now that he is innocent to the point
in which I believe her. You believed he had changed and you saw truth in him that no one else seems to be able to find."

They looked at each other quietly for a moment.

"Do you think he's a terrible person, Granger?"

"No," she said honestly, "But what does that make me if I can look at a killer and think he deserves redemption?"

"It makes you human, Granger. It makes you compassionate. You can't change the past, but you can help him find a brighter future if you think he's innocent now. He's answered for the crimes he committed in the war. He was set in front of a jury and they exonerated him. He was honest, took responsibility and apologized for everything he did. He went to the home of the Peppers. Did he tell you that?"

Hermione looked shocked, "No, he didn't tell me that."

"Well he did. He went there and apologized in person, asked if there was anything he could do for their family, offered Octavius' wife a large amount of galleons as some kind of compensation, which of course she didn't accept. I did some asking around about him after I read his file. You had so much faith in him, I needed to know more before I passed judgment. He made his mistakes, but he's done more than most to climb back up. I also think it's important for you to remember that a lot of people had to do things during the war that they wish they hadn't on both sides."

"I know, sir. It's just that this was an innocent person that they sought out to kill, it feels different than what happened during the battle," Hermione hesitated for a moment, "Mr. Northcott, do you think I can ever look at him like I did before?"

"As innocent?" He raised his eyebrows, "For his sake, I hope so."

Hermione nodded, realizing the question was probably much too forward. Draco was like her partner on this case. She got up, and walked over to the door to take her leave.

"As whatever else he may be to you?" Alden said a little quieter, "Well, as your boss, I don't think I can opine. But he seems like a good lad at heart from all you've told me."

Hermione gave him a small smile as she pulled the door open, "I appreciate that."

"And Granger," he said, seemingly making a last minute decision on his final thoughts, "I'm going to keep telling you not to get personally involved because I have to. You still need to separate your feelings for him from this case and be objective. But you can make your own judgments. You're allowed to forgive him. It doesn't make you a bad person to be able to see past someone else's flaws. No matter how big they are."

Hermione had never felt more lucky to have him as a mentor as she did in that moment, no matter how awkward he may have felt saying it, "Thank you, Mr. Northcott," she stepped through the door and heard him faintly yell "Alden!" As it clicked shut.

As the work day came to an end, she walked outside the Ministry and apparated to Malfoy Manor. She hadn't told Draco she was coming, so she knew it would be a few minutes before he met her at the gates, once he realized the sensors had been tripped.

She stood there for a good ten minutes before she saw a figure walking towards her up the path. To her surprise, it wasn't Draco. It was Narcissa.
"Can I help you?" Narcissa asked once she reached the gates.

"I'm looking for Mal- Draco," Hermione said, "We're working together on his case. I just wanted to go over a few things with him."

"You're the Granger girl?" She asked, and Hermione realized again how crazy it was that they never ran into his parents around the Manor when she was there. "You've been here a lot recently. I don't think he mentioned you were coming tonight."

"I wasn't planning to," Hermione said, "But we have some important things to discuss."

Narcissa looked down her nose at her, "Can you prove that you are who you say you are? These are not the easiest times for us."

Hermione pulled the sleeve of her robe up to reveal the inscription on her arm, "Your sister gave me this in your ballroom," she said.

Narcissa looked huffy, "Well there's no need to be rude," she said, lifting the wards on on the gates and ushering Hermione through, "I was just trying to be careful."

"I wasn't trying to be rude," Hermione held her head high, "But that is something that you and I both know that others wouldn't."

"I suspect Draco has apologized for those times?" Narcissa asked.

"He has."

"Good," she said, "He'd be getting an earful if he hadn't. We're a changed family."

"He's been nothing but pleasant to work with," Hermione said earnestly.

"Yes, he speaks very highly of you as well," Narcissa looked over at her curiously, "And you do spend a decent amount of time here. Are you interested in my son?"

She certainly was forward, "Your son is my partner right now. I believe he's innocent and we're working to piece this all together."

"You're evading my question," she said as they reached the doors. Instead of opening them, she stopped and faced Hermione, "He's a good boy. He's been through a lot but he is good. The last thing he needs is his name dragged through the mud again. We are incredibly grateful for your help with his case and your faith in him. But beyond that, you should both be careful. You've lived very different lives."

Hermione was about to respond, but the door opened and Draco stood inside.

"Mother," he tilted his head at her and she turned from Hermione and walked inside past Draco, patting him on the shoulder, and headed towards the kitchens.

"Granger," Draco turned to her, "I didn't know you'd be stopping by."

"I wasn't sure if you'd want me to so I just didn't tell you," she gave him a half smile.

"Well come on in, you're here anyway," he said, stepping aside. She couldn't immediately tell his mood, he didn't seem angry, maybe a little annoyed but also a little happy to see her.

They walked to the den, which was still littered with files, and sat on the couch, ready for round
two of their discussion, now that they'd had the night to sleep on it.

"I still have a lot of things I'm sifting through in my head," she told him, "But I still believe you're innocent, I still want to work with you, and there's a very large part of me that wants to put your past in your past," she saw him open his mouth to interject, but she held up a hand and continued, "I'm not going to tell you it's easy for me because it's not," he shut his mouth again, waiting patiently to hear what she had to say, "You were right when you said I'd never truly understand, but that doesn't mean I won't ever be able to sympathize and separate who you had to be from who you are. I already know you're not the same person you were at Hogwarts. If you were, this would be much more unpleasant for us both."

"Of course we can still work together, I'd still like to clear my name," he said, "But as for the rest of it, I don't think you'll ever be able to fully see past it. I think you should put whatever we had out of your mind and we can just forget about it."

"I'd like you to give me the chance to see past it," she said again, "I've looked past a lot of things, maybe this is just another obstacle. I'm not saying I can I'm just saying maybe."

"You mean like seeing past me calling you a Mudblood for the entirety of our childhood? Or my Aunt torturing you? Or trying to stop Potter from getting the Diadem in the Room Of Requirement? Or letting Death Eaters into the castle to kill Dumbledore? If you can see past those things, what's murdering another wizard?" His self-loathing was palpable.

"When you put it like that, it's a miracle I ever did look past it," she raised her eyebrows, "Do you want me to think badly of you, Malfoy? You're absolutely correct that there's a lot I could pull from to hold against you. When you first walked into my office I believed you because I'd already seen change in you after the Battle and I wanted that to be who you are. So yes, I did try to put all of that behind you until I read your file. So what do you want from me right now?"

"I don't know," he looked frustrated, "Obviously I don't want you to think I'm a monster. But I think a part of me needs you to so you can protect yourself. Part of me needs you to see me how I see me so I can come to terms with it. If someone else tells me I'm horrid, maybe I won't have to keep reminding myself."

"I'm not going to do that," she told him, "I won't put you down more and I don't need protecting. I need you to let me work through this and see where I come out. Will you let me do that and not try to make me think worse of you until I come to my own decision?"

Draco just nodded, he still looked like he wanted to keep pushing it.

"Until then, I need my partner back."

Draco was out of arguments, "Fine," he said, "But not tonight. It's been a hell of a day."

Her eyes sparked with a hint of laughter, even when he was frustrated he still had a wit about him, "I just wanted to come talk so that next time I send an owl you won't ignore it. And maybe next time I'm here we can have a nice friendly conversation again."

She was easy to be annoyed at but hard to be mad at. He rolled his eyes, "Yes, yes, I'll try again to be more pleasant. It's not really in my nature."

"I think it's entirely in your nature," she gave him a small smile and he gave her a sarcastic one back.

She stood up and they walked to the front gates, discussing the files they could look at tomorrow,
trying to relax into a more normal demeanor, the hardest part of the discussion behind them. As they reached the gates, she paused, unsure how to say goodbye now.

His eyes were still guarded, but his lip curled up and he pulled her in and wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug, "Is this pleasant enough for you, Granger?" He said wryly, but she could feel the sincerity behind it. It felt warm and comforting, absorbing some of the agony of the last two weeks. They stood there for a minute before Draco finally pulled back, "It sure has been a rollercoaster working with you."

"Well buckle up, the ride's just getting started," she said as she stepped out of the gates, "See you tomorrow."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

The next few weeks at the Ministry were hectic but Hermione had fallen back into her stopovers at the Manor throughout the week. Things felt friendly but strained, like they both wanted to move past what was said, but they couldn't. They kept things professional, no more late night kissing or couch cuddling, but there was always a strong hug at the end of the night, which was just more evidence that they wished things could go back to how it had been before. She missed his embrace, his smooth hands running up her arms, the feel of his breath on her neck or his lips on hers. Their eyes would meet every once in a while and she'd feel her breath catch in her throat. She missed it all, but she still hadn't come to terms with his file and she wasn't sure he'd ever let her even if she wanted to.

They'd made a list of more names, relatives of the Death Eaters they'd arrested and so forth, but nothing had yet panned out. Late one night they were looking back over some of their earlier notes and Hermione stopped, "We never reached out to your friend Adrien," she said, "I think it's worth talking to him since he was Igor Karkaroff's son."

"Oh yeah," Draco nodded, "He was never into that stuff when I was at Durmstrang, but he still might know something from his father."

"Can you send an owl to him? Try to set something up soon?"

"Of course," Draco said, grabbing some fresh parchment and drafting a letter, "I'll have one of the owls fly out in the morning."

"Great," she smiled, "Glad we at least found someone we haven't talked to yet. Feels like something."

Draco didn't look quite as confident but tried to be positive, "Whatever makes you feel better."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

At the end of that next week, she walked into her office to see Alden sitting in the chair across from hers, waiting for her.

"Morning, Mr. Northcott," she greeted him, shutting the door.

"We've got some bad news, Granger," he said, "Words out that Draco Malfoy's been named as the leader. Everyone is calling for his imprisonment."

"Well that's crazy. There's still no evidence that he's involved," Hermione said incredulously.

"That's not entirely true," Alden looked at her warily, "He's been named by seven Death Eaters, and
his own father admitted that something was hidden at the Manor that's missing now. It doesn't look good on Draco."

"Do people know what's missing?" Hermione asked.

"Of course not," Alden waived his hand, "All just speculation around that of course, but they know something was there and now it's not and with Draco's name on the list, that's not a helpful detail."

"We just need to buy some time," Hermione said.

"I'm not sure how much more we can buy," Alden told her truthfully, "I'm doing everything I can for you, Granger, but without another name, it's a hard fight."

"I understand," Hermione nodded.

"I'll need you to get a statement from Malfoy for the Prophet," he looked apologetic, "I know it won't be a fun conversation to have, but we'll try our best to give him a voice."

"Alright, I'll get one this afternoon," she said, "I'll go send an owl to the Manor,"

Alden stood up and walked out of the office with her, "Things are going to start getting tough without more information. We need something new and we need it yesterday."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Hermione showed up at Malfoy Manor later in the afternoon to talk to Draco about the most recent snag. Once they were settled into the den, she clasped her hands in her lap and turned to him.

Draco noticed the formality in her posture, "Looks like you've got something you don't want to say."

"I do," she said, "Word's gotten out that you've been named and the evidence against you, however subjective, is out there too so it doesn't look good."

Draco looked annoyed, "What evidence?"

"The fact that everyone else is naming you and that something is missing from Malfoy Manor," he opened his mouth but she cut him off, "And yes I know none of that is concrete, obviously, but there's no evidence in your favor so that's what everyone is clinging to. Your name is the only name and your house is the only clue."

"Who's the leak? How did it get out?"

"Sometimes these things just do get out after a bit of time, Malfoy, but of course we're trying to figure out if someone leaked it on purpose."

"Fan-fucking-tastic," Draco said, anger building as he got up and walked over to the cabinet behind his desk, opening the door with a little more muscle than he needed to, and grabbed a crystal decanter full of an amber liquid along with a glass.

"I know it's a snag," Hermione allowed, hoping he would be reasonable, "But it's not the end of the world. Maybe it'll light the fire we need to find something new."

"Maybe to you it's not the end of the world, but to me it feels like a nail in the coffin," he said darkly, pouring the amber liquid and taking a swig, leaning against the desk trying to avoid her gaze, "Now everywhere I go people will be giving me that look like I'm dangerous again."

"I think you're being a little dramatic, Malfoy," Hermione eyed his glass warily.

"I'm not getting drunk, Granger, it just takes the edge off," he snipped back.

"How about you come sit down so we can talk this through," she suggested, trying to keep her voice even.

"I'm fine where I am, thanks," he said.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, "There's no need to be short with me. I came here to get a statement from you so we can paint you in a good light in the Prophet."

"Thought you just came to enjoy my company," he said sarcastically.

"Come sit your arse in this chair so we can talk about your statement," she was more than over his current mood.

Draco slowly turned his head and they stared at each other, both with fire in their eyes.

He finally pushed himself off the desk and put his glass down hard, walking over and dropping
into the chair, arms crossed.

"Honestly Malfoy, it's just something we need to deal with," she sighed, "It's just a hurdle right now."

"Not a hurdle I should have to fucking jump," he was glaring at the floor, "Can't believe we haven't found anything to help my case yet."

"Can you please lose the attitude," she groaned, "I'm here to help you. We'll find something, they just have their story together and it's making it difficult."

"You're here to help your own career," he bit.

"Oh yes because fighting for the person everyone thinks is guilty is certainly helping my career. And I heard snogging your main suspect is usually great for a successful career too," this was going even worse than expected, he really knew how to get under her skin.

He looked over at her, "Well at least you don't have that going against you anymore."

She met his gaze, "You're stepping on your own foot right now if you were hoping it would start again."

"Of course I wish it could go back to that," he shot, "But what, are you going to tell me that you're totally over that I'm a murderer now?"

"Gods if you would just drop it and let me get over it, maybe I would be eventually," she threw her hands in the air, this wasn't even what she came here to discuss.

"It's hard to drop when it's always in the back of my mind," he said, his tone a little less brash this time. He stood up and walked over towards the bookshelf, trying to calm himself down and looked back at her, "This is why I told you not to even bother trying."

Hermione paused for a moment, making a decision, before she got up and walked over to him, "Alright, kiss me," she said when she was a couple of inches from him. Her eyes searched his for something she needed to see.

"Don't joke about that," he said.

"I'm not joking," even being close to him she felt the spark. It was that something she could never explain.

"You shouldn't do this to yourself," he sounded frustrated, but he didn't move and he didn't break eye contact.

She saw the frustration and anger flickering in his eyes, but there was something else too. There was sadness and regret and wanting. She grabbed his hand in hers, "I've been thinking about this a lot and I want to move past it. It was a time of war and things happen in war that would never happen outside of it. Let me try to forgive you again. Kiss me."

He looked conflicted, like it wasn't a decision he felt he could make.

"This is the chance," she said, unsure but determined, heart pounding in her chest.

"Why couldn't you just let yourself forget about it," he said under his breath, pulling her into him and capturing her lips with his. It was hungry and full of all of the emotions they'd been feeling the
last few weeks. It was rough, probably rougher than he meant it to be, but it had been so long since they'd been entwined like this.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and let her fingers slip into his hair. It was soft and silky, so unlike her own fierce mane. Everything seemed to slip away in the moment into a blur of roaming hands and lips, heavy breathing and accelerated heart rates. Everything in the world felt right and she knew her answer was there. He wasn't a monster. No matter what anyone ever told her about Malfoy again, she knew he wasn't the monster he wanted her to see. Every time their eyes met she melted into him again. She subconsciously acknowledged the cool wall on her back. At some point they must have stumbled backwards into it, but she didn't mind, it felt welcoming and helped to stabilize her.

Was this what pure passion felt like? Was that the dizzy feeling in her head, or the goosebumps that popped up on her body even when she felt warm to the touch? Is this what it was like to want someone and be wanted? She felt him pull her hair in his fist and she let out an inaudible gasp, eyes opening. There he was, looking back at her, eyes unguarded, confident, slightly cocky, but just as impassioned as she was sure hers must look. He leaned back in slowly for a tantalizingly soft kiss. It was so soft it was almost unfair after the passion he had thrown at her until now. She tilted her head back up to him but he didn't meet her there. She opened her eyes again and was met with his signature smirk instead, "Just wanted to make sure you were into it," he whispered and she gave him an incredulous look before he swooped back in.

Did she like that he was cocky? Of course not. Maybe? Who cares, she wouldn't admit it. Whatever it was between them made everything else in the world make sense when in reality nothing in the world made sense. She'd acknowledge that again later, but until then she wanted to be here, in this moment, with Draco Malfoy.

He finally pulled back after what felt like hours, but what was the concept of time in moments like these. The kissing had slowed and they had ended up on the couch. No idea how they had gotten there, but there they were. Hermione looked at Draco, her eyes soft, hands on his chest, hair feeling heavy on her shoulders like it needed to be wrangled back into a ponytail.

"This is bad for you," Draco said quietly, "But you're doing it to yourself."

"You're hard to stay away from for some reason," she gave him a small smile.

"I've been told that too many times before," he sighed, "It's the charm and good looks."

She hit him on the arm, "That's not funny. For the record, I don't know what I expect from this Malfoy, but can we just try to enjoy it for now? I feel as drained as you probably do fighting back and forth about everything."

"Trust me, it's an exhausting fight to have with yourself for three years, too. It's almost been nice to fight with someone else about it," he sighed, pushing a strand of hair out of her face, "So is this what you really came here for?"

"It's actually not what I came here for at all," she almost laughed, enjoying the calm between them again, "I still need that statement from you."

"How's 'I'm innocent'?" He grinned lazily at her.

"We're going to need a bit more than that. I was thinking something positive, where you're not blaming anyone for doing a bad job, and putting faith in the Magical Law Enforcement group to clear your name. That way it doesn't look like you're talking against the Ministry or being
"Alright," he nodded, "How's this, 'When asked in a statement to discuss the ongoing investigation, Draco Malfoy told the Prophet 'The allegations against me are wholly false. I've been cooperating with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement since the beginning and providing whatever support I can to ensure a thorough investigation is performed that will, without question, clear my name. I hope to continue on my path to add value to the wizarding world, as promised when I was exonerated in the original trials. I have faith that the system will do its job and am not worried that the outcome will free my name once again. I'm grateful for the work the department is putting in to ensure the right person is put in Azkaban where they belong.'"

"I think that's great," she smiled, leaning up and kissing him again before she rolled off the couch and grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill to jot it down.

"Public statements aren't foreign to a Malfoy," he said smoothly.

She stayed the evening, reading through some more files, before she took her leave back to her apartment.

She thought hard that night about how she felt. If she felt uncomfortable with the decision she made or if she felt mad at herself, but at the end of the day she just felt relieved. Being around Malfoy in that capacity felt right for some reason. Being so close to him felt comfortable, like it held a warmth she'd read about in books but never fully felt.

Her thoughts drifted to Ron and she felt a pang of guilt again. He was the only boy she'd really dated and after the Battle she'd thought they'd end up together in the end, but here she was snogging Draco and feeling things she hadn't felt with Ron. Ron had made her feel safe and happy and loved. Draco made her feel passionate, emotional and wanted. It had also been years since she'd been with Ron and even though their feelings for each other had lingered a long time, she didn't think he was sitting around waiting for her to give him the green light. He was as busy as she was and as free as she was to see other people. Surely he knew that.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

They published Draco's statement in the Prophet the next morning and by mid-day her office was flooded with inter office memos and a flock of rubber duckies hovering over her desk. She was happy to hear that at least a few of the messages were positive, thanking her for upholding the justice system, doing a full investigation and not giving in to what the people want. However most were not so positive, asking her what in the world she was thinking and if she was siding with the Death Eaters.

Alden walked in, looking around at the mess of parchment and batting a memo out of his face, "How's it going in here Granger?"

"It's been a day," she forced a smile at him, "A few of these are actually positive."

"More than I expected then," he sat down, "Let's talk strategy. What're the next steps you're taking?"

"We sent an owl to Draco's friend Adrien from Durmstrang. He's Igor Karkaroff's son and someone we haven't talked to yet. Draco thinks he'll be on our side and will be as helpful as possible."

"That's good, new leads are always a step," he nodded, "I do think we'll need more than that very soon. I know this process is never a quick one, but if you want to keep Draco out of Azkaban, we
need to work faster."

"I understand, sir. I'm going to do some new interviews with the Death Eaters we have. I think I specifically want to talk to Gregory Goyle again. He seems the most likely to let something slip."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help," Alden said, getting up to head back to his office.

Hermione went back to her files with determination that afternoon, reviewing notes from her original interviews.

Another interoffice memo flew into the room and she grabbed it.

_Hermione,_

_I was hoping we could get lunch this week. How's Friday?_

_-Ron_

Hermione felt a heavy weight in her chest again and sat back in her chair. She knew she'd have to face him eventually.

She scribbled back an acceptance and sent it on its way back to the Auror's department.

The rest of the week brought more memos and rubber duckies to her office and she did her best to sift through them, replying with a standard response:

_Thank you for your note, this is still an ongoing investigation but we promise to do our duty to uncover the full truth as quickly as we're able. At this time Draco Malfoy has done nothing to warrant an arrest and is cooperating fully with the department. The department has no affiliation with any groups and are committed to relying on all facts presented to come to our conclusion._

_Hermione Granger_

_Lead Detective_

_Department of Magical Law Enforcement_

Thursday evening she found herself back at the Manor, settled onto the couch with Draco, two large half-drunk mugs of coffee and a pile of old notes on the table. She grabbed the top one and started scanning it.

"Did you ever hear back from Adrien?" Hermione asked.

"I did," he looked over at her, "Says he's on Holiday for a month in Africa but will let me know when he's home for a meeting."

"Well that's not very convenient," she said, not looking up from what she was reading.

"I know. But what's another month at this point, right? It's already been, what, five or six?"

"Time does fly during these investigations," she met his gaze with a half smile, "Alright, let's set a reminder to follow up with him in a month."

"Are we forgetting anyone else?" Draco asked, leaning over her shoulder to look at her list of names. She felt warm again, but shook the feeling, concentrating extra hard on the job at hand.
"No we've brought everyone in that was on the list," she took another sip from her mug, "But I think I'm going to talk to Gregory Goyle again."

"See what stupid thing he says this time?" Draco grinned, "Sounds like a good plan to me."

"Do you have any suggestions as to how I get him to tell me anything?" She asked.

"Bring me with you," he said.

"We're not going down that path again, Malfoy, especially not with all the heat around you right now."

"Did you get a lot of backlash from showing support for me in the Prophet?" He asked, "I saw the article came out earlier this week."

She looked at him hesitantly.

"I suspect you did then," he looked away, huffing slightly.

"I did," she nodded, "But I've been responding to each criticism stating that there are no hard facts against you, that you have been cooperating with the department and that we're committed to finding the truth."

"Sounds like a Ministry statement," he rolled his eyes.

"I will roll my eyes right back at you," she said dryly.

"Fine, fine, no need to get sassy with me," he relaxed again, enjoying the reminder of why this girl was so enticing to him; she was feisty, smart, witty, challenging... "Would it help if I made an appearance at the Ministry? In the department, not in an interview, of course. Something that shows that I am cooperating?"

She looked at him again, "Yes, actually I think that's a good idea."

"Okay, I could come tomorrow if you want."

"Maybe not tomorrow. How about Monday?" she returned to her notes, thinking about her lunch with Ron the next day and not wanting that awkward interaction between them.

"Why not tomorrow?" He noticed her evasion.
"I think Monday works just as well," she said, "No need to rush it."

"Why not tomorrow," he pushed again.

She sighed heavily, "Ron invited me to lunch," she said, knowing there was no reason to lie about it, "I just don't feel like having an uncomfortable exchange between the two of you."

"Not fun to have your two boyfriends meet?" He said a little harshly.

"Stop, Ron is a friend. He is not my boyfriend, and quite frankly neither are you, Mr. Keep-your-distance."

"You sure are sassy today," he said again.

"I'm not sassy, you're just being smart with me and we've got bigger fish to fry," she said, not giving him the satisfaction of a glance.

"What does the Weasel want?"

"Don't call him that."

"What does Weasley want?"

"I'm sure he just wants to grab lunch. Perhaps he wants to talk about the case. Perhaps he just wants a reason to leave work for an hour and chat with a friend."

"Perhaps he wants to rekindle a flame with his long-time love," Draco said.

"Perhaps he does," Hermione finally looked back up at him, "Either way, I am going to go to lunch with one of my best friends and if the subject comes up, I must assume you know how I would feel about that."

"How would you feel about it?" Draco asked, quite curious of her response in all honesty.

"I'm quite happy spending my time with you," she said, "I'm not looking to rekindle an old flame, and I'm not looking to lose a best friend either. Right now my feelings are with you, Malfoy, if you'll just let them."

Draco gave her a cocky smile, "Just wanted to make sure," he said, "Tell Weasley I say hi."

"You're a handful sometimes," she said.

Draco grabbed the papers out of her hand and put them on the table, pulling her on top of him.

"I quite enjoy you spending your time with me," he leaned up and kissed her, trying to make it clear that in this moment, she was his.

"We've got work to do," she said, even though the look in her eyes betrayed her.

"I know, I just thought a good snog might rack some ideas in our brains."

"You were just jealous, I think," she grinned down at him, planting another kiss on his lips and pushing herself up, "Would you like another cup of coffee? Marty left a pitcher on the table."

"Maybe I am jealous, but I think you like it," he grinned back at her, "And yes, more coffee, more file review and then more of this later," he wagged his eyebrows at her and she shook her head with
a laugh.

"It's work time, Malfoy," she said, coming back with two more mugs of coffee and settling back into her reading chair on the other side of the room.

O-o-o-o-o-o
A/N: Hi All! I just wanted to give a quick update that I’ve changed the rating from T to M on this story for later chapters. I had a feeling this might happen but you never know where a story will take itself sometimes and I knew it would be a slow burn before we got to this point. That said, this is your warning that there are some M rated scenes coming up in the future, if that impacts your interest in the story.

Hermione was finishing up her interview request form for another interview with Goyle as Ron knocked on her office door. She looked up and smiled, "Hi Ron, sorry just give me one second, I need to get this request form out today."

"Sure, of course," he said, leaning against the doorway as she dipped her quill in the ink pot and signed her name at the bottom of the parchment.

She folded it up and sent it off to its destination, grabbing her bag and joining him.

"How've you been?" Ron asked as they made their way out of the Ministry.

"Good, everything is going well, it's just been so busy with this case," she shook her head, "I keep hoping we'll find the answer somewhere and it'll all be over but it's certainly running its course right now."

"I heard you've been getting bombarded with opinions after the Prophet statement," he looked at her apologetically, "You must really believe Malfoy to go to the Prophet."

"I do," she said, not meeting his eye, "People will have their opinions, but my job is to find the truth and I don't think we have yet."

"I overheard a few blokes talking about it a few days ago and told 'em you're the best witch to have on the case," he said, "It'll blow over soon enough."

"Thanks," she gave him a small smile and grabbed his arm that he'd held out for her. They apparated to the Three Broomsticks and found a table by the window to enjoy the rare sunshine that proved summer was on its way.

"How have you been Ron?" She asked as they put their butterbeer orders in and scanned the menus.

"Busy now that your case is on our radars," he told her, "We've been doing more dark artifact raids and trying to place some Aurors undercover in the Hogs Head and the Leaky Cauldron, see if we pick anything up."

"Glad I'm able to keep you busy," she laughed, "Doing my best to get it wrapped up for all of us."

"I know, I know. Other than that, I've been spending some time with Harry and Ginny. I think they might be a little sick of me by now," he joked, "We're hoping you'll come over soon for another dinner, felt good to be all back together last time."
"It's been too long again, hasn't it?" She furrowed her brows, "I'm sorry, Ron, I've been so entangled in this thing that time's gotten away from me. Yes of course we should do another dinner soon."

"Maybe we could do a dinner, just, uh, you and me sometime too," he cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Hermione felt the guilt creep in again and she looked at him sadly, "Ron you can say whatever's on your mind. We're adults and we can have these conversations. Was that your way of asking me on a date or did I totally misinterpret that?"

Ron gave her a sheepish grin, "That was my attempt at asking you on a date," he said, "I know you're focused on your work, but I've been thinking about you a lot lately and missing you and us and, yeah, all that. We can keep things casual, of course, if that's still your main focus, but I was hoping we could spend some more time together, you and me. I think being around Harry and Ginny so much has probably made me miss our relationship even more."

The barmaid put their drinks down in front of them, "Orders?" She asked. They put their orders in and she walked away.

Hermione pulled her butterbeer to her, looking down at it for a moment to collect her thoughts, "Ronald, you know I care about you very much. But when we broke things off in our relationship, I knew we both had a lot of growing to do. And with growth sometimes comes change," she could tell by the look on his face that he saw where the conversation was going, "You are one of my very best friends and you mean the world to me, but my heart isn't in it."

Ron leaned back, looking bummed and taking a sip of his butterbeer, "You know what's funny is that over the last few years I find myself going in and out of how I feel too," he told her, "Sometimes I miss you so much I can't think straight and other times I'm just fine with life how it is and our friendship how it is. And with growth sometimes comes change," she could tell by the look on his face that he saw where the conversation was going, "You are one of my very best friends and you mean the world to me, but my heart isn't in it."

"Honestly I've felt very similarly over the last few years, Ron," it was true, she missed him so much sometimes, but it had been a long time now since she'd felt that, "But I know for certain right now that I can't be with you."

"Now, or ever?" He asked.

"I… don't know," she said honestly, "I think it's hard to speak to the future. Which isn't fair of me to say since three years ago I told you I saw us together in the end. I think I was young and I didn't know what the world held for us as we grew up. But I think one thing I've learned is that you can only decide on what you want right now, in this moment and go with it and the future is just a big black hole of possibilities from there. Things happen that you'd never expect."

"You love planning!" He joked, trying to lighten the tension he felt, "But yes I understand that, Hermione, and of course I respect it, I just didn't know if you still felt that you saw us together when you're ready."

"I just don't think we'll know what the future holds til it's here," she paused, "But I will be honest and tell you that I don't see it like I used to," it hurt to say it out loud, but she had to.

They were silent for a moment as he took in what she was saying.
"Is there someone else?" He asked.

She hesitated a moment, "Yes," she couldn't lie to him.

"Is it serious?" He asked, "I didn't get the impression you were dating anyone a few months ago when you came for dinner."

"It's not... serious," she said somewhat uncertainly, "It's new and there's a lot to figure out."

"Would I know them?" He couldn't help his curiosity.

She thought for a moment of how to word her response, "Not personally."

"How did you meet?"

"Work," she said evasively, "Look, Ron, I know I told you I wasn't ready for a relationship because I was focused on work and that was, and still is, true. Even now work is my priority, this thing just sort of happened and my gut is telling me to give it a shot. I don't want you to think that I was just telling you that to break things off. Especially at 18, I needed to be on my own to start my career, and my career is still in the forefront of my life." She knew she didn't have to be apologizing or explaining herself, but she did feel she owed him and explanation because he had always been incredibly important to her and she would never want him to think she was insincere. Time had just changed things.

Ron gave his best attempt at a grin, "Hermione I know your intentions were good. You're too honest and blunt to brush me off with an 'It's not you, it's me' excuse and I know how important your career is to you. Things do change with time and a lot of time has passed, but hey maybe they will change again. It's certainly not the outcome I was hoping for today, but I want you to be happy. I guess we still never know what the future might hold, right? Black hole of possibilities?"

"Black hole of possibilities," she gave a small laugh.

The barmaid returned, setting down their plates of food and hurrying on to the next table.

"Alright, that's enough of the real talk," Ron waived his hand, "Tell me something new. How are your parents getting on?"

Hermione was relieved at his change in subject, "They're well," she smiled, "They're actually back in Australia on Holiday, they seem to think it feels like a second home now."

"That's great," he said, "Are you going to visit them at all?"

"I will eventually this summer, yes, once I have a lull at work... if that ever happens."

"Well you should make time for it, even if work doesn't lull. Mum would kill me if I'd gone six months without a visit."

"I know you're right," Hermione sighed, "I let my work take control of everything sometimes. I'll make a point to visit them this summer no matter what."

"Book the portkey ahead of time, then you'll have to go," Ron suggested.

"You know what, I will," she said with determination, "That's a great idea, Ron."

They finished up lunch before they left the pub and apparated back in front of the Ministry. They walked towards the entrance, chatting between themselves until a voice cut into their conversation.
"Afternoon, Granger."

Hermione looked up, more than surprised to see Draco leaning on the fountain outside the Ministry entrance.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
"Malfoy," she gave him a perturbed look, "What brings you to the Ministry right after lunchtime on a Friday?" She asked, making it clear that she knew why he was there.

"Don't we have a meeting this afternoon?" He tried to downplay his pleasure from catching her off guard, "I had some more ideas I wanted to share with you for the interview you're trying to get with... well you know with whom," he said.

"Our meeting was supposed to be Monday," she stared at him extra hard, but kept her voice casual, "But since you're here, I can make time for you this afternoon if you prefer."

"Must have written the date down wrong," Draco pushed himself off the fountain to walk with them, "Afternoon, Weasley."

"Malfoy," Ron nodded, not keen on his intrusion.

"I'll take her off your hands," Draco gave him an overly friendly smile, "Important things to discuss today, you understand."

Ron looked between Hermione and Draco curiously, her discomfort apparent.

Hermione turned to Ron with an exasperated look, "I'm sorry Ron, work calls, but it was great having lunch. Let's do it again soon. Let me know when everyone wants to do dinner."

Ron stopped, "Is this what you meant when you said you met at work?" He said in a low voice, realization dawning on him.

Hermione and Draco stopped a step ahead of him and Hermione opened her mouth, brain working overtime to decide how to handle the situation, "Ron this isn't the place for this conversation," she said, looking around at the passersby.

"It might not be the right place for it, but I've never had more questions in my life," Ron's eyes were wide, his arms hanging awkwardly at his side.

Hermione glanced at Draco, who was still smiling, watching from the sidelines.

"There is a very reasonable explanation for everything," she assured him, "But can we discuss this another time, please?"

"Just tell me yes or no," Ron said, "Is this what you meant when you said you met at work?"

She should have just told him earlier, why had she thought she could avoid this, "Yes." It was quiet, but decisive.

They looked at each other for a moment and she could see the pain in his eyes, "Have a good weekend, Hermione."

"Ron-" she started, but he was already walking away, eying Draco as he brushed past him towards the elevators to Level 2.

Hermione wheeled around on Draco once Ron was out of earshot, "What was that about!" She exclaimed.
"Careful now, we're still in the atrium," he gave her a smug look.

"You're incorrigible," she said under her breath, turning back around and leading them to an elevator to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. They were stopped by security outside the elevators and she showed her badge, explaining that she was escorting Draco, as previously requested, to her office for a meeting. They scanned her badge for approval and let them pass.

She smiled cordially at the onlookers as they entered her department. Once they were in her office with the door shut, he took his seat and she walked around to her side, placing her hands on the desk and leaning towards him, "Now you can tell me WHAT that was about," she said, clearly annoyed.

"I just thought it'd be fun to say hi to Weasley myself," he said nonchalantly.

"You came to spy on us on our way back in," she said pointedly.

"I thought you liked me jealous?" He pulled his foot up to rest on the opposite knee lazily.

"Well is that what you wanted, to put a rift in my friendship with Ron?" She collapsed into her chair, "We'd had a perfectly nice lunch. Malfoy you have to know that it was going to be a difficult conversation for me to tell Ron and Harry that we're seeing each other. Why wouldn't you just let me do it on my own time when I'm ready."

"Why would me showing up for a meeting be equivalent to you dating me?" Malfoy asked, confused by her overreaction.

"Because I had just told him I was seeing someone. He asked how we met and I said at work, and then you come galavanting in with that smug look on your face to talk to me and it was pretty obvious to him what I had meant."

"Well how was I supposed to know you'd told him that?" he sighed, "I just thought it would be fun to pop in on the end of your lunch date. It was supposed to be harmless, I'm sorry if it caused a scene."

She stared at him, arms crossed.

"Did he tell you he was still in love with you?" Draco asked.

Hermione glared at him, "Yes he kind of did," she admitted.

"Then you see my concern," he said, trying to validate his actions.

"Well I didn't need you to be concerned about it," she said, "I told him I didn't know what the future held anymore and that I was seeing someone. I handled it just fine myself."

"But did you tell him whom you were seeing?" Draco pointed out.

"Honestly I didn't think it would look good on your case if I told people we're… whatever we are," she said.

"And what would you like us to be?" he tilted his head, his voice casual and a smile playing at his lips again.

"You really enjoy it when I'm frazzled, don't you?" they stared at each other for a moment, his smirk becoming significantly more annoying than endearing currently.
"I think it's cute," he said.

"Are you even the least bit sorry that you just put me in that situation? I had already told Ron I had moved on and then you had to parade around that it's our sworn enemy that I'm dating?" she shook her head, trying to get him to understand where she was coming from.

"Look, Granger, I already apologized," he said, throwing his hands up in defeat, "I didn't like that you were spending time with Weasley. However I also feel like I should say you're welcome."

"For what now, exactly?" She looked at him with her eyebrows raised.

"Well now that hard part of telling your friends is out of the way," he grinned at her, "You may have some damage control, but at least you can say you were honest about it and I'm sure with time it'll be fine."

"You treated us horribly at Hogwarts, you know," she reminded him, "Especially Ron. That's why this is difficult. I was going to tell them, I just needed some time."

"I don't know how many times I can apologize for the person you knew at Hogwarts. If you think that's still who I am, then I don't know why we're sitting here right now."

"I don't think it's who you are, but that certainly wasn't a nice thing you just did."

"I will make it up to you," he said, giving in and accepting that showing up at the Ministry unannounced was not the right move, "And if you want me to be there when you talk to you friends so I can apologize to them, I will do that. I'm sorry."

Hermione surveyed him, he looked sincere and there wasn't much else she could think to fight about at the moment, "Okay. I'm sorry if I overreacted," she allowed, "That was just incredibly uncomfortable for me, and probably for Ron."

"I acknowledge that," Draco said with finality, more than ready to move on.

"Did you really have something to discuss today?" Hermione asked with a sigh.

"I really did," he gave her a half smile, "I made a list of some things I think you could ask Goyle when you interview him again." He pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket and handed it across the table.

She grabbed it from him and scanned the page, "Yes, these are good," she nodded. She would let Ron cool down a little and ask him, Harry and Ginny to have dinner after the weekend so they could talk. With some time, she hoped they would understand. Draco didn't have the best intentions, but she did believe that he hadn't meant to cause that much drama for the afternoon.

"He responds better to positive reinforcement," Draco cut into her thoughts, "He likes feeling smart and if you just butter him up a little, I think he'll talk more."

"But he said so much when I broke him down," Hermione said.

"Yeah, you needed a confession and he wanted to be a part of an elite group," Draco shrugged, "But now you've got him and the best way to keep him talking is to make him feel big and important."

"Okay I'll give it a try. These questions are good, I can tell you put some thought into them."
"I learn from the best," he said with a wink.

"You're really a lot today," she leaned back in her chair.

"Sometimes I'm just on my stride," he said smoothly, "But I have been reading through one of the books in the investigation section of the library - added a few books to it since we've been working together."

"Well I appreciate it," she ignored his first comment.

"And we had some people in the atrium seeing me come in and work with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," he said, "That was on the list of things to do."

"Yes, yes I know," she said, "Guess you won't need to come in Monday."

"I'll take the trade off," he looked like he was still gloating a bit for getting her riled up, "So should I stay a while, keep you company while you work? Make it look like we're doing some serious business in here?"

"You can stay a bit," she nodded, more than ready to knock him off his high horse, "But I'm going to be putting you to work." She flicked her wand and a large stack of files flew towards her desk.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

A couple of hours later Draco sat back down in the chair with an irritated look on his face, "All of the folders you gave me are filed back in their drawers," he said.

"Great, I have another stack here that I'd love your help with. So glad you came in today," she smiled at him, picking up another pile and handing it to him. The first file fell off the top, spilling papers onto the floor. The file sprang to life, opening slightly and pulling the papers back in neatly like a vacuum before snapping shut again.

Draco eyed it with bemusement, "That's a useful little charm."

"Quite," she smiled, levitating the file from the ground and placing it back on top of the pile in his hands, "Off you go!"

He looked at the new pile and then back up at Hermione, his expression becoming highly unenthusiastic as he turned and walked back over to the filing cabinet in the corner, muttering something under his breath. He set the pile down, "Accio," he said as the top file flew into his hand. He read the name and waved his wand to locate the appropriate drawer. He opened it and levitated the file into its place, summoning the next file into his hand.

After another hour he sat back down in front of her, "They're filed, am I done now?" he asked, looking tired.

"Yes, you're done," her eyes twinkled as she looked up at him, "I think this was a great way to show how cooperative you've been with the department."

"You're just getting back at me for coming in today."

"Also that," she conceded, "Two can play your games, Malfoy."

"You learn quicker than most," he admitted with a sigh, impressed overall with her quick comeback to his visit.
A knock at the door broke their conversation and Alden popped his head in, "Granger, I have some notes for the Goyle interview on Monday when you have a minute to stop over," he said, and then noticed Draco was there as well, "Mr. Malfoy," he nodded, walking fully into the room, "How are you? Not sure if you remember me from one of your earlier visits when we met briefly, but I'm Alden Northcott, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," he held his hand out and Draco stood up.

"Nice to see you, Alden," he shook his hand firmly, "Thank you for all of the hard work your team has put in to help clear my name."

"All of your thanks goes to this one," he nodded towards Hermione, "She believes in you and we all back her. She's a good one to have on your side. Hope we can wrap up this investigation so you can get back to your day-to-day."

"I do like having her on my side," he agreed, turning back to Hermione, "I'll be heading home so you can prep for your meeting next week, if you'll escort me to the Atrium."

He said goodbye to Alden and they left the department together. They reached the visitors entrance and he looked over at her, "How about you come over Saturday night and we do a little more file review before your meeting with Goyle on Monday."

"Sounds good, Malfoy," she smiled, feeling that they were even now, even if she still had to straighten things out with Ron later. But as much as she'd hate to admit it, it probably was better to have the conversation now rather than months down the line and have to make up excuses until then.

"I may have dinner for you, if you're interested."

"Well file review does make one quite hungry," she nodded, "Don't make Marty spend all day on it, though."

"Oh no, Granger, I'll be cooking," he flashed her a grin and took his leave.

O-o-o-o-o-o
Hermione arrived at the Manor Saturday evening and was greeted by Draco at the gates. They walked into the Entrance Hall and she started for the den, but he grabbed her hand, "Dinner will be in the private dining room tonight," he pulled her through a different door and down a hall she hadn't seen before. They emerged in a candlelit room with a significantly smaller table in it than the main dining room. This one couldn't fit more than four people. It was covered with a fancy ivory tablecloth, set with fine china for two. The ceiling reflected the night's sky, moon beaming from the corner of the room.

Hermione took in the setting, "You are full of surprises, Malfoy."

"Well I've had a long time to spend alone in the Manor," he reminded her, "I've acquired some skills while I've been here."

Draco pulled out her chair for her and she sat, "I feel sorely underdressed for the occasion," she remarked.

"And still the most stunning thing in the room," he said in her ear, pushing her chair in from behind.

"Now I feel like you're trying to butter me up," she looked at him suspiciously.

"I just thought you deserved something for all of your hard work," he said smoothly, pouring her a glass of wine and handing it to her.

"I feel like we're not getting much work done tonight," she laughed, his suave demeanor relaxing her. He was quite entertaining when he wanted to be.

"No, I honestly just wanted a reason for you to come over for dinner. But I promise we can work tomorrow," he said, taking a sip from his own glass and sitting in the seat next to her, "Now I'd like you to remember that even though Marty will be delivering the food, I spent the afternoon slaving away preparing our meal in the kitchens."

"I'm not sure if you're being serious or not," she swished the wine around in her glass.

"I'm being quite serious. Marty didn't have to lift a finger."

On cue, Marty appeared in the doorway with a silver tray.

"First course, Master Draco!" She pipped, setting a board of different cheeses, meats and crackers for each of them down on the table and scooting back out the door to the kitchens.

"I hope you like the assortment I chose, I picked them out from the local cheese shop in Diagon Alley and accompanied each with a spread, cracker and fresh cut charcuterie."

She shook her head, his confidence felt endearing again, "We really do come from different worlds, you and I."

They ate and chatted, Hermione telling Draco stories of her family dinners growing up, about her mother's 'famous 20 minute meals', how she would tell them about school and about the weird things that seemed to happen around her before she knew she was a witch, and how her father would fall asleep in the armchair by the end of the night watching the television (which she also
explained). Marty brought out new courses as soon as they had finished the last.

"Ah the main entree!" Draco said as Marty brought in course number four, "It's grilled salmon with a jalapeno apricot glaze," he lifted a piece from the serving dish onto each of their plates, and scooped the side for her, "Pairs beautifully with a jasmine rice. I had the salmon flown in from the coast, got in this morning. Wanted to make sure it was fresh."

She took a bite, it was spicy and sweet with a melt-in-your-mouth texture, "Well if it makes it taste like this, I'll fly my fish in every day. Where on earth did you learn to cook like this?"

"Marty taught me a lot of it over the last couple of years," he shrugged, "I got bored around the Manor sometimes, feeling like I was cooped up here, so I had her teach me my favorite dishes that she made so that one day I could impress someone with them."

"I owe Marty a big thank you then," she said, taking another bite, "Were you close with Dobby when he lived here?"

"Honestly I wasn't," he told her, "He was my father's house elf, stuck by his side and did his bidding. He wasn't very nice to Dobby so I just stayed out of it. Marty was my house elf, I probably wasn't the nicest to her growing up, but I was never mean like my father was to Dobby. Father still doesn't really see house elves as anything but servants, but like I've mentioned, all this time at the Manor, you need someone to talk to sometimes and Marty has been good to me," he paused, "I'm sorry for what happened to Dobby."

"I am too," Hermione gave him a sad smile, "He was a good soul. He saved our lives though, we'll always remember him for that." There was an awkward silence at the mention of what happened at the Manor three year ago and Hermione cleared her throat, "Would you ever consider setting Marty free?"

"Why would I ever do that?" He furrowed his brows at her, ready to move past the Dobby discussion, "She's a wonderful house elf and my only housemate that's not my parents or the other house elves that tend to my parents now."

"Well, have you ever considered that maybe house elves want to be free? Like any other creature?"

Draco chuckled, "You can ask her yourself, Granger."

They had finished the main entree and Marty had come back in with fresh garden salad for each of them.

"Marty, have you ever thought about being a free elf?" Hermione asked her, taking a bite of her salad.

"Did Marty do something wrong?" She looked between Hermione and Draco, ears falling back with worry.

"Not at all Marty, you've done a wonderful job, I was just wondering if you'd ever considered it. Being free, working for pay, living your life?"

"No, ma'am," she shook her head, "Marty is very happy in Malfoy Manor. Draco has been a wonderful master. Marty and Master Draco cook food together and Marty watches Master Draco play Quidditch in the yard. Marty loves her family and she doesn't want to leave, not when they need her most now, when everyone is saying horrible lies about them. Marty will stay by their side, through and through."
Hermione looked up, Draco looked quite satisfied, "Alright, Marty, I just wanted to hear your thoughts. I'm glad you're happy here."

"Yes, ma'am! Marty will go bring the last course around!"

"If you try to slip a sock to this one, she'll be traumatized," Draco said, "I told you, I treat her good."

Hermione sighed, "Yes, I know, I've just always advocated for House Elf rights, I think they deserve to be free and paid for their hard work."

"Very valiant of you," Draco grinned, "How was the salad? Not the most impressive dish but you've got to have a palate cleanser before dessert."

"Everything is delicious," she said with a broad smile, "You've really gone to a lot of trouble tonight. Can I ask how you kept the food warm if you made it before I came?"

"It's a wonderful little charm I found in a book called The Magic Of Cooking. Lots of tips and tricks for hosting parties and cooking large portions and keeping it warm throughout the night, that kind of thing."

"You're very well read, aren't you, you've got a book for everything," it was one of the many reasons she was so drawn to him.

"I feel I could easily say the same for you," he quipped.

Marty brought out the last course, a creme brûlée with fresh cut berries on top.

"Now you're just showing off," she said, trying to downplay her excitement.

Marty came and cleared the table as they finished and they were left with the last few drops of their bottle of wine.

"So where in the world will you visit next?" Draco asked, topping off her glass.

"Well I'm actually going to go to Australia in a couple of weeks," she said, remembering she had done as promised and gone home Friday night to set up a Portkey to visit her parents.

"What's in Australia?" He asked.

"My parents are there for a few months."

"Do they go often?"

"Only recently," she said, realizing Draco didn't know her story from the war, "You see, after our sixth year, I knew I'd be going off with Harry and Ron to help piece together how to defeat Voldemort and I thought there was a good chance either I would die, or someone would go looking for our families for information and I didn't want them being caught up in a war that wasn't theirs," she gave him a bit of a guilty look, "I erased their memories before I left that summer. I deleted myself from every picture and every memory they had so they no longer had a daughter and I sent them to live in Australia."

Draco didn't know what to say, he'd never imagined some of the things the other side had to do to protect the ones they loved during the war.

"I found them, of course, after Voldemort was defeated. Ron came with me to look for them and
we found them in Sydney and restored their memories."

"That's some powerful magic," he finally said, trying to ignore that Ron was there for her in one of the most paramount moments in her life.

"It was," she said with a half smile, "I'm just glad it worked. But anyway, now they love Australia and have a second house there. I haven't seen them in almost a year so I wanted to go spend a weekend with them."

"That sounds lovely," he said, "You'll have to leave me some research projects when you go so your work is still getting done. Then you won't have to worry about it."

Hermione looked down at her glass, taking a deep breath, "I was thinking you might come with me."

"To Australia?" He asked.

"Well, I know you enjoy your travels like I do and I don't see my parents often so I guess if you're ever going to, you know, meet them, maybe this would be a good opportunity."

Draco just stared at her, deep in thought.

"I mean you can think about it, don't feel obligated," she said, "I just thought it might be something fun, away from here."

"But what will your parents think of you bringing… a Malfoy with you? Won't they be worried for you, upset that you're with me?"

Hermione gave a dry laugh, "Malfoy, they know nothing about you. I've probably complained about you a few times in the summers, but they aren't a part of the wizarding world and they don't really know the drama that goes on in this world. They would treat you with as much respect as I do. They'd probably just be happy I was bringing a boy with me at all. They think I'm married to my work."

"You are," he said, half-jokingly, "I'll think about it. It's not that I wouldn't like to come, it's just that I'm still uncomfortable with you allowing yourself to be with me… when there aren't any expectations it doesn't bother me as much but meeting your parents feels like you've made a decision that you're okay with more than that and I don't feel I deserve it."

"You're being hard on yourself again. We've talked about this, we've fought about it, we've made up about it, I did make my decision, Malfoy. And it is just a 'we'll see where this goes' scenario, but my decision was that I put everything else in the past because I believe in who you are now," she paused, "Just think about it. I think it would be fun to explore Australia with you."

He nodded, draining the rest of his glass of wine.

"Dinner was remarkable," she changed the subject, finishing her glass as well.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," his lip curled up, trying to release the tension from their conversation again, "How about I give you a tour of the Manor, you've really only seen the den. The garden out back is almost more magical at night."

"This feels like a real date, you know," Hermione took the hand he had held out and stood up with him.
"Well then first thing's first," he said, walking over to the wine cabinet on the back wall and pulling out a few different bottles before settling on one, "More wine."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Romancier

She let him refill her glass and he held out his arm for her to grab before leading her down the hall and out onto the back patio. She could see the gardens from the balcony, the rows of flowers were lined with sparkling lights, which were really jars of fairy dust that glowed in the night sky, as Draco would later explain, and there was a gazebo in the middle. In the distance she could see the goal posts of a Quidditch pitch off to the right. To the left of the gardens was a small pond, which shimmered in the moonlight. She put her hands on the railing and gazed out onto the grounds, they were, indeed, magical. Draco walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his head on her shoulder. She closed her eyes, embracing the silence and the warmth of his body against hers.

"Ready for a walk in the gardens?" he asked.

She sighed, so content already where she was, but nodded, regretting her answer the second his body moved away from her. They walked down the stairs onto a cobblestone path and he grabbed her hand lightly, letting it swing back and forth with their steps.

"So is this whole evening due to your jealousy over my lunch with Ron?" She asked with a bit of jest.

"Only partially," his eyes met hers with a charm about them, "But I also felt like you deserved a nice night away from your office and your files to be appropriately romanced. And I promised I'd make it up to you for my disruption at the Ministry. A Malfoy always keeps his word."

"Such a gentleman."

They stepped into the first row of yellow roses, "This is my mother's garden," he looked around at the patches of flowers, "She designed it with an herbologist two years ago so that the right plants were next to each other creating a positive energy on the grounds. I still find her out here all the time sitting in the gazebo, surrounded by it all."

"It really does feel calming," Hermione said, entranced by the leaves swaying in the light breeze.

They wandered the gardens, Draco telling her about some of the more interesting plants they had scattered about, before they went back inside the Manor. He lead her through a beautiful room with a grand piano and a small dance floor, through an open courtyard in the middle of the house, down into the sprawling kitchen where they encountered Marty sweeping the floor as a brush in the sink scrubbed the dinner plates on its own accord. Next they stepped into a peculiar room with a broom levitating in the middle.

"It's my Quidditch training room," Draco explained, "I hop on the broom and I've enchanted two mock bludgers and a quaffle to fly around the room for me to practice dodging and catching."

All of the balls were stagnantly hovering a few feet in front of the broom. She grabbed a bludger, it wasn't hard like a real bludger, but soft and squishy like a toy. She squeezed it and looked at him with a laugh.

"Well I'm not going to hurt myself practicing," he said incredulously.

"This is quite interesting," she said, "Is it normal for wizards to have things like this? Do other people have these? It's almost like a video game or something."
"A video game?" He said rhetorically, "No idea what that is, Granger, but no I wouldn't say this is normal. I did a lot of research and charms on the room to set this up. Plus, my practice broom is the new Nimbus 2005, certainly not your everyday broom."

She rolled her eyes at him, "Well I think the idea is really impressive."

"I do as well," he looked around proudly.

He ushered her through another door into a gallery of moving paintings and then through to what looked like a small museum exhibit.

"This used to be where we kept the dark artifacts," Draco sighed, "But since we've gotten rid of all of those, my father started collecting rare historical items to display that are not cursed."

They went down a few more hallways and Draco pushed open the next door, turning to her, "And this is my bedroom."

Hermione looked at him with careful intrigue before stepping through the doorway. It was lit by candles along the wall, a deep green paint wrapped around the room with grey borders. The fixtures were ornate and the furniture grand. She felt like she'd just walked into a king's bedroom from an ancient castle in the north.

Draco walked over to his bed and sat down, patting the seat next to him.

Hermione followed him, her heart beating a little too fast, and sat down next to him, unsure what to expect but throwing caution to the wind. The spark between them captivated her, begging her to explore it more.

"Very soft," she commented.

Draco pushed her hair back and turned her chin towards him, "Are you uncomfortable?" He asked her.

"No," she breathed, "Nervous maybe, but not uncomfortable."

He kissed her softly, one hand moving to the back of her neck.

"Nothing to be nervous about, just thought it'd be a nice place to talk," she could tell he was trying to hide his enjoyment of their precarious situation.

"I highly doubt you thought this would be a nice place to talk," she said with a half smile. She felt very warm and tried hard to concentrate on the words as she said them. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was his presence, but it felt difficult to focus on anything but her heartbeat and his hands on her skin.

"Would you rather go back to the den?" He asked, his voice a bit cocky, like he already knew the answer.

"Not at all," she replied in a whisper as he captured her lips.

Draco moved back on the bed, pulling her with him until they were pressed against each other. She draped a leg over his, noticing already that her mind was overly cognizant of where each part of her was and what it was doing. One leg draped, the other caught under his, one hand around the back of his neck, the other wrapped around his waist. She felt his tongue massage hers and moaned softly into the kiss, wanting to somehow be closer. She was hyper aware of his hand slipping past
the fabric of her shirt and her stomach tensed as his cold hands moved slowly up her side and around her back.

His fingers outlined her bra, sending chills up her spine and she leaned her head back, allowing him access to the bare skin on her neck. He kissed her softly a few times before dragging his teeth lightly across her skin. She breathed in deeply, trying to control all of the thoughts and feelings fighting for her attention.

She felt both of his hands move back to the bottom of her shirt and start to lift it up. Their eyes met and she nodded ever so slightly. He grinned down at her, pulling it over her head and lifting his own off. He took a moment to look down at her, vulnerable, innocent, opening herself up to him. It was everything he shouldn't have.

He leaned back in, hands on either side of her body, and kissed her with more intensity this time, feeling himself give into his instincts, biting her bottom lip gently. He felt her hands reach up and tentatively grasp his back. He knew he needed to be slow with her, but she drove him crazy and she probably didn't even fucking realize it.

He lowered his body onto hers, propped up on his elbows, her bra brushing up against his chest. He wrapped his arm tightly around her, pulling her into him. His other hand entangled itself in her hair, pulling her head back so he could kiss down her neck, past her collar bone and towards her chest.

Hermione lay back, taking in every feeling and sensation in her body. The way her skin lit up when his lips touched it, the way his breathing sped up in time with hers, the way his eyes burned into her every time they met. She let her nails drag down his back as he kissed her, loving the feeling of passion he filled her with and hoping he was feeling even half of what she was.

She felt his lips move up from her chest and reconnect with hers. She felt his fingers slip her straps off her shoulder before sliding around back and unhooking her bra with a little more expertise than she'd like to acknowledge. Before she knew it, it was on the floor and she felt too warm again as she lay there entangled with Draco, exposed, free and blissfully lost in the moment. His hands roamed her body as she pressed herself against him tighter. She could feel his hand run over her chest and down her stomach, coming to rest on her inner thigh. She thought her heart might pound out of her chest. Surely he heard it.

He moved over to her ear, "Tell me what you want," he said, voice low.

She could barely think straight, much less eloquently tell him which of the hundred things her brain was screaming at her that she wanted in that moment. She felt him press into her and her eyes drifted open as she pulled his face back to hers, kissing him hard. She felt him smile into the kiss and she didn't even care if he felt he was winning something. She wanted to be touching every part of him. He pulled himself back to look at her again and her eyes glanced down to take him in, pausing briefly on his left arm that was holding him up. She subconsciously did a double take, trying not to let it affect her, but it was too late. He'd seen her glance and his entire demeanor changed.

His look of confidence melted away into resentment quicker than she could protest and he pushed himself to one side of her, grabbing his shirt.

"Malfoy, wait," she grabbed his arm but he wouldn't meet her gaze, "I'm sorry I stared, it just caught me off guard."

"Sometimes I try to forget it's there," he said quietly, still breathing heavily.
"We all have our scars from the war," she reminded him, wishing she could take back the last 10 seconds and hit redo.

"Mine are self-inflicted," he closed his eyes, trying to calm himself down again.

Hermione sat up, grabbing the shirt from his hands and setting it aside. She turned his forearm towards her and looked at it with determination. She felt him tense as she ran her thumb down the Dark Mark imprinted here.

"It's nothing but a tattoo," she said, shaking her head, "It doesn't define you."

"It will be there until the day I die as a constant reminder of what I was," he said, trying to pull his arm back, but she didn't let him.

"We're not going through this every time you take off your shirt, so let's get it over with," she said with her head high.

He finally looked over at her, eyes narrow, "Granger one look at this and you should run for the forest. What the fuck is wrong with you that you're still sitting here."

She narrowed her eyes right back at him, "This is not who you are and I'm not going to sit here and listen to you pretend it is. Move forward with me, Malfoy."

"How?" He asked scathingly, "Should we have dinner with your friends that saved my life from the fire we started to kill them, and act like that's normal? Shall we go on vacation to the tropics and lounge on the beach in our swimsuits, Dark Mark on my arm and Mudblood inscribed on yours? Or better yet shall we just galavant off to Australia and pretend life is wonderful? Lie to your parents and tell them what a nice boy I am? That's what it looks like for you and I to move forward." She could tell he was mad at himself and not at her, but it didn't make his words any easier to hear.

She looked at him, hurt, "You could have just told me if you thought it was too forward of me to ask you to come to Australia."

Her grip on his arm had loosened and Draco finally pulled it back to reach his hands up and rub his face, realizing he'd gone too far, trying to reel himself back in, "It really wasn't," he said in a softer tone, "I'm sorry, I am just not as decisive on all this and you know that."

Hermione grabbed the throw blanket resting at the end of the bed and pulled it up over her chest, feeling more self-conscious now that they were just sitting there, "I know it's only been a few months and it's been a bit up and down," she said, putting it lightly, "It's okay if you still don't know how you feel about me or something, I would always appreciate your honesty even if it's not what I want to hear. I just thought it would be nice for you, and for us, to get away from all this for a couple of days," she felt like she'd crossed an unspoken line somewhere insinuating that they were on the same page.

Draco looked at her with a dark, but almost amused look in his eyes and he sighed heavily, "It's certainly not a question of how I feel about you, Granger. You're one of the most stubborn, challenging and frustrating witches I've ever met," his lip curled up as she shifted awkwardly next to him, "I've never been more invigorated by another person in my life. I know exactly how I feel about you, I just wish for your sake that you didn't feel the same way back," he reached his hand over to cup her face, wanting to remember the feel of her skin on his, "You have big things ahead of you and I'll only bring you into my darkness if you stay with me."
"Well I'm not going anywhere right now, Malfoy. Maybe I'll bring a little light to your darkness,"

she covered his hand with hers and he looked at her warily.

"There's that stubbornness," he said.

She closed the gap between them and kissed him softly, pulling him back down to lay with her, the
blanket between them.

"Sorry I ruined the mood," he said, quite honestly, "This is an uphill battle for me. Probably a
constant one and it's hard to control. I already have so much resentment about my past and you
walk in here with a heart of fucking Gryffindor gold and it just highlights it all. If I see the Dark
Mark on my arm, I feel bitter. If you see it on my arm, I feel disgusted."

"I wish you could see you how I do," she looked back down at the Dark Mark glistening back at
her in the candlelight. It was repulsive, but it was a sign of how far he'd come since the war. She
looked back up at him, "I've seen it, we've acknowledged it, and now it's in the past. There may be
hurdles, but we'll jump them as they come."

Their eyes were locked on one another and Draco couldn't ignore the adoration she looked at him
with, "How in the world did we end up here," he said with a grin.

"I couldn't even begin to explain," Hermione grinned back at him, happy to see him relaxing again.
He leaned back down and kissed her, "Will you stay the night?" He asked, "We can grab a few
books and relax in bed, get straight to work tomorrow morning on that file review I promised."

Hermione looked at him skeptically, "Tempting me with books and work, this feels like a trap."
He laughed, "Not a trap, just trying to redeem myself a little so I can earn some points to rip that
shirt off of you another time."

"Ah, there's the truth," she let the blanket fall and grabbed her shirt, pulling it back over her head,
"Let's go find a good book for the evening."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Goyle's Gaffe Part II

Hermione rolled over Sunday morning with a smile on her face, peeking out from the covers. She was burrowed into Draco's plush bed, the half-naked boy beside her still asleep. She draped an arm over his body and cuddled up next to him. He readjusted slightly, an arm coming down around her shoulders and his head flopping to the other side, but he didn't wake. She closed her eyes again, not yet ready to let the night be over with. A few moments later a knock at the door startled them both and Hermione dove her head under the covers while Draco sat straight up in bed.

Lucius opened the door, "Draco, I was wondering if you could pop into town this morning," he said, before noticing the human sized bulge in Draco's blankets and a bra on the floor. He eyed it before flicking his gaze back to Draco coldly, "There's an item Madam Malkin set aside for me that I'd like to have picked up. I'll be in the main dining room when you are dressed."

Lucius shut the door and Draco pulled back the covers, where Hermione was curled in a ball, looking up at him. His look of shock broke into a wide smile as he laughed hard. Hermione sprawled herself back out, covering her head with his pillow and groaning into it.

Draco grabbed the pillow off of her and pulled her to him with a long kiss, "Wasn't expecting that wake up call."

"I'm just glad I was dressed," she said, looking down at the green silk pajamas Draco had given her. Their "visitor" pajamas they kept on hand. Everyone had that, right?

"Would you like to come into town with me?" He asked, "Grab coffee, pick up a package at Madam Malkin's? Good start for a successful work day," he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"Yes that sounds nice," she smiled, "We do have to get to that file review, but it shouldn't take overly long and I'm in no immediate rush. Let's just try to be quick, better to get the work done sooner rather than later when we get back."

They had another awkward exchange with Lucius as they entered the main dining room. His disapproval of her presence was apparent, but he didn't say anything, simply looked her over and turned to Draco with more instructions on the dress robes he was picking up, imported from Italy, woven with unicorn hair accents and tailored special by Madam Malkin. Hermione kept her head high with confidence, not wanting to let Lucius think she was uncomfortable.

Once they arrived in Diagon Alley, Hermione turned to Draco, "I don't love how your father looks at me," she said as they started down the road to their first stop.

Draco sighed, "I can't imagine he'll ever entirely let his feelings on purebloods go," he shook his head, "But he's not as bad as he used to be. At least he doesn't say anything offensive anymore."

"He doesn't have to say it," her tone was a bit brash, "It's just frustrating to know that your father will never accept me as a suitable companion for you."

"He wouldn't accept most people," Draco looked over at her, "I'm sorry if he upset you this morning, I am more than pleased that you choose to be seen with me, what my father thinks should be no matter of ours."

Hermione huffed audibly.

"Do you think your friends will ever think I'm a suitable companion for you?" he asked
conversationally, trying to get her to see the other side.

"When they get to know you," she said offhandedly.

"Not sure you even believe that," he put his hands in his pockets, "We didn't choose the easiest path, Granger, but it's still a path I'd like to walk down."

She sighed, "Well as a wise man once said, 'Soon we must all face the choice between what is right, and what is easy.'"

Draco gave a small chuckle, "Who said that?"

"Dumbledore," she smiled at him, pushing open the door of Madam Malkin's. There were a few people milling about, and she noticed some eyes following them as they entered.

They picked up Lucius' order and Madam Malkin sent well wishes to his parents, who had always kept a good bond with the Malkins over their years of purchasing fine dress robes for the family.

They left the store, heading for the local cafe, "Quite a few nosy people in there," Draco commented.

"You just have to ignore them," Hermione waved it off, "Coffee is on me today."

They ordered their drinks and a couple of pasties and Hermione made sure to leave a sizeable tip, as Draco had done. They walked back outside and sat at one of the tables on the patio. It was a cloudy day, but a warm one.

"I think I'm going to be getting myself a pair of silk pajamas," Hermione said, thinking about the ones she had borrowed the evening before, "Those were quite nice."

"Emerald green suited you well," Draco told her, "Though I'm sure no pajamas would have suited you just as well."

Hermione felt herself blush and their eyes locked as she gave him a look of feigned scolding.

He grinned, pushing the strand of hair that had fallen in front of her face back behind her ear, "I was just saying."

"Draco, is that you?!" They turned their gaze and saw Blaise walking down the street, looking back and forth between them with a broad smile on his face.

"Probably should have let you know we were popping in," Draco stood up to greet his friend, "How are you getting on?"

"Quite well, managing the store today," he said, turning to Hermione, "Good morning, Detective Granger, on the clock right now?"

Hermione glanced at Draco, "Not exactly," she said, "We'll be doing some work later."

Blaise paused, "So what, are you two on a date?" he said jokingly.

They both looked amusingly lost for a response.

"Wait, are you on a date?!" Blaise said again in shock.

"You can call it that if you'd like to," Draco said smoothly, "Best to keep it between us for now,
with the case and all."

Blaise grinned at him. "I knew you'd end up with a damn gryffindor, someone to keep your ego in line."

"I do try," Hermione told him honestly, "I wouldn't say I've been overly successful."

Blaise shook his head with a laughed, "I can't imagine you have. Takes years of practice," he turned back to Draco, "Hey, I've got to get back to the store but I wanted to come say hi when I spotted you. I'll come by the Manor soon for a Quidditch weekend, owl me some dates that work for you."

"Will do, Blaise, See you soon."

"Good to see you, Granger, good luck with him," he winked at her, waving at both of them as he left.

They finished their breakfast and apparated back to the Manor. The afternoon proved more productive than Hermione had originally anticipated as they reviewed Goyle's first interview and talked through the good points and bad and how to change the narrative for her interview on Monday. By the time she took her leave later that afternoon she felt prepared.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

"Good morning, Gregory," Hermione said, shutting the door behind her and taking her seat.

"Detective," he looked at her with what she was sure was supposed to be a menacing scowl, but he looked much more like he was just confused.

"We've been informed that you were more important to this case than we originally thought. I'm actually shocked that we overlooked it the first time," she took her seat across from him.

Goyle tilted his head ever so slightly at her.

"Another Death Eater let it slip that you were on your way to becoming higher in rank within the new Death Eater hierarchy than even you might know. You were trusted by the most powerful of them," she looked at him seriously, "When we first met I missed it. I didn't see the powerful dark wizard sitting before me that I do now."

Goyle sat up a little straighter, but still didn't say anything.

"He spoke highly of you earlier, you know," Hermione said.

"Who?" Goyle grunted.

"Your father, of course," she told him, "We interviewed him again."

Goyle's eyes lit up, "Of course he did."

"If we'd known the plans they had for you… we would have realized sooner what a staple to this whole charade you really are."

"What plans?" He couldn't help himself.

"You were to rise to one of the top spots. You were to help them carry out the big plan and take a seat next to your father," she shook her head, "I should have sensed your power earlier."
"I have ideas, you know," the words spewed from his mouth, "They pretended not to listen, but maybe they were."

"Oh they were listening," Hermione goaded him, "Your father said he believed in your ideas and was doing his best to push them through when he was caught."

"I know he was," Goyle said, his confidence rising, "They implemented one of them years ago. I... I'm not sure if they've listened to many since then, but I had one of the brightest. They'll all thank me one day."

"We know what it is," Hermione said softly, "He told us everything. I think he was bragging about you."

Goyle sneered, "Did you catch her already, then? Is that what this is about?"

"Not yet," Hermione said, trying to figure out how to keep him talking, "We're not sure where to find her right now."

"Well if she's already fled the Ministry, she's likely apparated far from here," he said.

Hermione quickly connected the dots, "I'm still in awe that it was your idea to get someone inside the Ministry," she said, her voice even.

"I tried telling them that if they wanted the plan to work, we had to play the long game. Like that traitor Snape did. We made her go to Auror training and everything. It was hard enough finding someone who would qualify for the position, but we did it right under your noses. My plan worked right under your noses."

Hermione sat a moment, taking in what that meant, "I'm incredibly impressed," she said, and part of her meant it, "But I can see you won't tell us anything new, so they'll be taking you back to Azkaban now."

She stood, walking from the room and closing the door behind her. Alden stepped out at the same time from the watching room and they looked at each other knowingly.

"Go to the Auror Department," Alden said quietly, "Find your friends that work down there and tell them you want to get lunch. Come right to my office."

"Yes, sir," Hermione breathed, walking off towards the elevators in a rush. Ron may not be very happy with her right now, but this was more important than all that. She walked into the Auror office, scanning the room for them and spotted Ron's red hair from afar. She tried to be casual, walking up to them, "Good morning!" She said brightly.

Ron and Harry both looked up at her. Ron was stone faced, and Harry looked uncomfortably at her, he surely already knew what had happened the other day, "Morning, Hermione," he said.

"I was hoping we could get lunch," her tone was still friendly as if everything was normal, but her eyes were wide, trying to alert them that it was important.

"I'm rather busy today," Ron said harshly, looking back down at the paper in his hands.

"I have some news I really wanted to share with you," Hermione said, a smile on her face still.

Harry tilted his head at her and she gave him another crazy stare, "I think we should go," he nodded, "Of course we'd love to have lunch."
She let out the breath she'd been holding, "Great! I found this wonderful little spot in London."

Ron looked at Harry, annoyed, but saw the look he was giving him and finally caught on that it wasn't lunch they needed to discuss.

"Alright," he sighed, still avoiding eye contact, "Let's go."

As they walked outside the Auror office, Hermione tried to fill the time, "How is your day going?"
She said to no one in particular.

"It's going just fine," Harry responded, "Where are we headed?"

"Oh I just need to grab my bag from my office," she smiled at him.

Ron was looking pointedly in the opposite direction and a heavy tension hung between them all as they got into the elevator.

A few minutes later she stepped through Alden's office door with Harry and Ron in tow.

"What's really going on?" Ron asked as she waved her wand to shut the door behind them.

"We've got a situation on our hands," Alden told them, hands clasped on his desk, "Someone has infiltrated the Ministry. They've been there somewhere between 2-3 years, not sure what the age range is, but they're female. Does this match many people?"

"A few," Harry nodded, "There was a decent influx in the years after the Battle of Hogwarts with everyone who wanted to stand with the Ministry."

"Too many to detain?" Alden asked.

"I think it may be better not to alert anyone yet," Harry said slowly, "If we can do some research first, look at who's joined in the last few years that matches the description and look into some backgrounds, maybe we can narrow it down first. Does anyone else know what was said in that interview?"

"Just us," Hermione said from behind them.

"Alright, give us 24 hours and then we'll move," Harry said with determination.

The door opened and Chantel popped in, "Mr. Northcott, your eleven thirty appointment is here," she said, "Would you like me to have them wait outside?"

"I can't believe you got that out of Goyle," Ron said quietly to Hermione as he and Harry stood up to take their leave, trying to focus on the development and not on his emotions, "Do you think it'll be someone our age? From Hogwarts maybe?"

"That would be my best guess but he didn't give me any more details. I was trying to sound like I already knew unfortunately."

"Who's the appointment with?" Alden asked Chantel, hands on his hips.

"It is a Ms. Lizzie Scamander," she responded, "Illegal creature case that Ms. Johnson is handling, she requested to speak with you."

"In our own department," Ron said with disbelief, looking over at Harry who was shaking his head, "Unbelievable."
"I'm just glad to have your insight on this one," Hermione told them both.

"Oh right, I keep putting her off, Yes, can you just have her wait outside for a minute while we wrap up?" Alden asked Chantel, who looked quite like she'd like to get out of the middle of their conversation.

"Of course," she smiled and hastily closed the door.

"Alright, thanks for your help with this," Alden looked at them all, "I would obviously keep it between us for now. Let's meet end of day tomorrow and discuss what you've found. If you need offices to look over files, you can use Detective Granger's."

"You should both stay up here about an hour, so it doesn't look odd that you're back from lunch already," she said, "I'll have Chantel grab us something to eat and we can pull some files from my office, I should have most of the Auror files up here."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione left the Ministry late that evening, apparating to the Manor to tell Draco about the development. She'd made a list with Harry and Ron of all of the Aurors that had started in the last 3 years. There were 12 females on the list, about 9 of which were around their age. Harry had been right that there was a noticeable influx of Aurors right after the Battle of Hogwarts.

If nothing else, the new intel had been a great way to transition back into cordial conversation with Ron, even if it was just about work. She could feel that he was still a little cold with her, but his cooperativeness told her that it should blow over once they were able to sit down and talk about it.

As she and Draco settled onto the couch in the den, she told him what they'd learned and handed over the list.

"He's an idiot," he said, listening to her story of the Goyle interview and shaking his head as he skimmed the list.

"Anyone look familiar to you?" she asked.

"Yeah a couple, actually," Draco furrowed his eyebrows, "Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass, they were Slytherins in our year, and Lisa Turpin, she was a Ravenclaw but she hung around with Blaise sixth year."

"She was friends with Blaise?" Hermione asked.

"I wouldn't say they were friends, but they certainly spent some time together," he remarked and Hermione rolled her eyes in understanding.

"Any of them in particular you'd suspect of being involved with the Death Eaters?" She grabbed the list back, putting it back in her briefcase for safekeeping.

"None of them jump out but I didn't know them well."

"I'm going to send Harry an owl with the names," Hermione said, "He was still at the Ministry when I left."

She scribbled a note to Harry, and Draco came back in with one of the Malfoy owls. She recognized it as one of the owls that adorned her windowsill a few months prior. They sent the owl off and collapsed back on the couch, Draco throwing his arm over her, pulling her back into him.
"Can't believe Goyle did something helpful for the Death Eaters," Draco commented, "Although he also ruined his own plan so I guess that's in line with expectations."

"We should be able to catch them off guard at least," Hermione said confidently.

She went home that evening and could barely sleep in anticipation for what the following day would hold. She knew once she went through what Harry and Ron had found on the three names, they would pinpoint the imposter and finally have a win for the Ministry.

However as Hermione arrived to the entrance the next morning, she was met with a large crowd of people standing in a circle, voices whispering urgently in shock, some pointing at the sky, others pointing into the middle. She looked up, hovering above the crowd was the Dark Mark. Her heart dropped as she paused for a split second before pushing through the crowd to the front. Lying on the ground was the motionless body of Tracey Davis, which she recognized from her Auror file. Her eyes were open, empty, and yet somehow still full of surprise. Hermione ran up to the body. There was a note pinned to the front of her jacket:

They will remember our mark. The Dark will rise again.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
"What in the-," came Ron's voice, breaking through the static that had overtaken Hermione's head. She looked up to see Harry and Ron pushing through to the front across the circle. They stopped and the three of them stared at each other, everyone else fading away. She unpinned the note from Tracey's jacket and stood up shakily as the boys ran over to her.

"Hermione, what happened?" Harry asked.

"I just got here a minute ago," she told them, "I saw the Dark Mark and I rushed in," she handed the note to Harry, "This was pinned to her."

Harry and Ron read the words, feeling defeated.

"They found out what we knew," Ron said quietly.

"We need to move the body and get everyone out of here," Hermione said, keeping her voice low, "Did you narrow down who you thought it was? Hopefully not Tracey?"

"Yes," Harry said.

Hermione nodded, "Let's deal with this quick and get somewhere we can talk."

They split up to find enough Aurors and Magical Law Enforcement employees to work together and diffuse the crowd. A few of the Aurors stayed behind to take care of the body and block off the area to onlookers, their quills floating across parchment as they dictated the details from the scene to document.

Harry, Ron and Hermione went directly to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement where Alden was already in his office, pacing back and forth.

"Close the door," he said as they walked in, stopping behind his desk, "A writer from the Prophet is coming up here in 10 minutes, we need to talk fast."

The three settled into the chairs across his desk and he started rattling off questions.

"Who else knew about the information we learned yesterday? Did any of you say anything to anyone else? Couldn't have been a coincidence. But does it even tell us anything or is the culprit still impersonating an Auror?" He sat down, looking exhausted, "We should have put the place on lockdown last night."

"Sir, I think we made the right call last night, or else the whole building would have been in a panic. We didn't know enough then."

"Do we know who it is now?" He asked exasperatedly.

"We do," Harry said, "Ron and I put the pieces together from a note Hermione sent late last night. Her name is Daphne Greengrass. She was our year at Hogwarts in Slytherin. Hermione gave us the names of three girls, Tracey was one, Daphne, and then another girl, Lisa Turpin. We were doing a lot of background work and we finally were able to link Daphne to Rowle. We learned recently after Rowle was brought in that he had a nickname in the Death Eaters, which is how he was able to keep a lot of his crimes hidden during the trials. They called him The Owl because he would
perch and wait for his targets to move into the perfect position for him to murder them without bringing attention to himself."

"It was also kind of a play on Rowle," Ron added.

"It sounds like a terrible joke," Alden's stress was apparent as we waited for them to continue.

Ron shrugged in acknowledgment, "Well, we broke into each of the girls' desks last night after everyone left and we found letters locked away in Daphne's desk to and from someone she referred to as 'Owl';" he pulled a stack of parchment out of his bag, "It's all written in code, but we recovered the letters. We planned to catch her in the office this morning, but she must have been tipped off."

"But by whom?" Alden shook his head, "Did any of you tell anyone else what we learned?" He looked around as everyone was silent.

"I told Malfoy," Hermione finally said, feeling like holding the information back made it weird, "But Harry and Ron knew that. We sent them a list of names based on what Malfoy knew. He's the one that pointed out Daphne."

Alden considered her for a moment, "Granger, I know I've said it a hundred times and I am even completely on your side as we stand right now, but is there any possibility that Malfoy is behind this? Do you have any shred of doubt? You tell him you've learned there's someone inside the Ministry and the next day someone ends up dead and we're the only ones who know."

"I don't have a single shred of doubt of his innocence. He's been nothing but helpful."

Ron snorted from the other side of Harry, "Not going to sell out your boyfriend, are you."

Hermione closed her eyes for a second, collecting herself, "Ronald, it has nothing to do with my personal feelings for Malfoy and everything to do with believing his innocence."

"Do those two things really stand separately?" He asked.

"They are completely separate," her answer was firm, "I believed his innocence before I fully knew him as a person or had any personal connection to him. This is not the place to be discussing anything further on that front."

Alden eyed her, "It's not not the place for it," he said, "Who else would you blame for word getting out? Your boss or your best friends?"

She stared back incredulously, "None of the above," she said, "There must be another explanation is all I'm saying. We've been doing some digging, maybe she noticed. Maybe she had wards on her desk and knew that Harry and Ron broke into it. Maybe she intercepted my owl. Maybe someone did overhear us at some point when we were talking. There's a hundred other explanations."

Alden held his hand up, "Sorry, Granger, I didn't mean to say it like that. But this is a setback. People will point the finger at Malfoy unless he's got a rock solid alibi."

"I wasn't with him this morning, if that's what you're asking," Hermione said dryly, "But I trust him completely."

She saw Ron look down into his lap out of her peripherals and she felt guilty for even having to point out that she wasn't with him in the morning. She shouldn't. She'd been honest with him, but it certainly couldn't be helping to hear it insinuated that she'd be spending the night with Malfoy.
"Alright, we need to find Daphne," Alden changed the subject, "Find her, bring her in alive."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione spent the next week working around the clock trying to find as much information on Daphne as she could and link any possible contacts to her. Daphne Greengrass was a pureblood, one of the Sacred 28 families. She'd had no previous connections to the Death Eaters, so her file looked as clean as could be from the outside. They found she had a sister, Astoria Greengrass, and once they were able to get in contact with her, they set up a meeting as soon as possible. Astoria seemed more than cooperative so their hopes were high that they'd learn some better information about where she might go and how she may have gotten roped into the Death Eaters after the war.

The Prophet had published the story of the Auror that was killed and the presence of the Dark Mark. Much to Hermione's dismay, the writer had published some of the QA he had with Alden, including, "Do you know if Draco Malfoy was involved, do we know his whereabouts at the time of the murder?" And Alden's response, "At this time we do not believe Draco Malfoy is at all involved, however we do not know his whereabouts at that time. We have another lead that we are working tirelessly to track down and will provide more information to the public when we are able."

Draco had some choice words later that evenings when Hermione had arrived, going on about how the Ministry couldn't be non-committal in their statements about him if he had any hope of the public believing his innocence. She'd calmed him down eventually, but she knew as well as he did that the outlook wasn't bright if they didn't find Daphne and get some answers.

She'd told Draco about Astoria, Daphne's sister, and asked if he knew her. He didn't, but remembered the name as another Slytherin a couple of years below them. Draco had sent notes out to both Blaise and Theo to see if they knew anything about her or Daphne that would be helpful. Perhaps his network could come in handy. Hermione had begrudgingly suggested maybe he reach out to Pansy Parkinson as well, but he had firmly declined, telling her that his history with Pansy was still difficult for her to let go of and unless they really needed her, he didn't want to drag her into the investigation out of respect. Hermione had pushed lightly for some more information but he had waived it off for another time and she dropped it, getting the feeling that there was more to their history than Blaise had mentioned.

Hermione had spent Saturday into Sunday at Malfoy Manor, heading home Sunday night. When she arrived, she found a note nailed into her door:

We know who you are. If you're not careful, there will be another Dark Mark above your door.

Hermione stumbled back, looking around her in the night. She walked quickly back down the stairs and apparated back to the Manor. Draco had barely gotten halfway back to the front door when he heard the *POP* behind him. He turned, "Granger? Did you forget something?"

"I found a note on my door," she called, "They're threatening me now."

He stood there in shock for a moment before he ran back towards the gate. He pushed it open, "Do you want me to come with you, grab some fresh robes for a few days and anything else you need and come back here? Or do you just want to stay here and wait til the Aurors have a chance to do some protections around your flat?"

"I'd like to go grab what I need, I just got spooked when I saw the note on my door," she said and he nodded, stepping out of the gate with her.
"We'll be in and out quickly, and I'll be there watching the entrance while you pack."

They apparated back together and Hermione lead them back up the steps, unlocking her flat and walking inside slowly. Draco ripped the note off the door, reading it himself.

"Homenum revelio," Hermione pointed her wand into the room, holding her breath for a moment before letting it out, "I don't think anyone is here."

"I'm going to leave the door open and I'll wait right outside," Draco said.

Hermione nodded, heart still beating fast, and she grabbed a duffle bag to start loading up with items she'd need for the week. She made especially sure to grab the few files she had on the coffee table, and turned all of the lights out, joining Draco at the door.

"I'm ready to get out of here," Hermione said, pulling the door shut and locking it with the swish of her wand.

They apparated back to the Manor and walked back through the gates.

"Did you have many wards up around your flat?" Draco asked.

"A few," Hermione nodded, "Just some basic ones to block locator spells and such, never thought I'd need anything too crazy."

"Well I think it's best if you stay here a while, at least until we find Daphne," he said, looking worried, "Hopefully it was just her who found your place."

"I don't want to intrude either," Hermione said, looking over at him seriously, "I've only spent a couple of nights here, seems like a leap to stay here indefinitely."

"Well how about this, you are welcome to stay here, you are welcome to go stay with one of your friends, and you are welcome to stay here and sleep in another guest room, we've got about 17 scattered about the manor. Whatever you're comfortable with, but I'm telling you I'd be happy with you staying here, with me, for as long as you need. No way I want you going back to your place."

"I'd be able to take care of myself just fine," Hermione said a bit stubbornly.

He looked over at her, eyebrows raised and a smirk playing at his lips.

"But yes, obviously probably not for the best for me to be a sitting duck when they know where I live. Alright, fine, I'll stay here for now, but if I become at all a burden you need to tell me and I can go stay with Harry and Ginny. I won't stay longer than a week."

"The offer will stand regardless," Draco grabbed her hand, pulling her to him with a kiss before they entered the Manor and wandered to the bedroom.

"Has the noise around my name started to die down at all from last week?" He asked as she crawled in bed next to him.

They were both propped up on their elbows, Draco's hand resting on her hip underneath her shirt. He liked to do that, she had learned. He liked to be touching her even if he wasn't trying to get anywhere with it. She quite liked it. It made her feel like he wanted her, but without the pressure of feeling like they always had to be snogging, or on top of each other. It was just a gesture of his attraction to her and the want to be close. Though it did kind of make her want to jump on top of him.
"Unfortunately it hasn't," she said, mentally reminding herself to respond. The problem with his touch was that it tended to send her brain into overdrive and she lost her focus a bit. In a good way, but it was noticeable, "The Prophet article kind of reminded everyone that you were still the main suspect. We'll find Daphne soon."

Draco shook his head, he'd known the answer before he asked, "Anything I can do to help at this point?"

"We've recovered a bunch of letters from Daphne's desk between her and Rowle that are all written in code. I'm going to have them copied for all of us working on the case using a duplicity charm I found. That's my project for tomorrow morning after my interview with Astoria. How about you meet me at the Ministry mid-day and I can give you a copy to try and decipher. You can hang out in my office and continue to show your cooperation with the department."

"Sounds like a plan," he said, leaning over and kissing her forehead. She felt his fingers stroke her back lightly and she shivered, closing her eyes.

"Are you feeling a little more relaxed now?" He asked, "Sorry you had to go home to that."

"I am, yes," she sighed, "I feel quite safe here with you."

"I'm glad," he gave her a half smile, "Now, do you want those silk pajamas?"

"You know I do," she grinned up at him. He hopped out of bed to grab them for her before they turned in for the evening. Draco draped his arm over Hermione from behind, pushing her hair to the other side of her shoulder to kiss her neck softly.

"Night, Granger," he mumbled into her.

"Goodnight, Malfoy," she smiled subconsciously, covering his hand with hers and taking a deep breath in before letting it out slowly to release the tension from earlier in the evening. For a moment, she could enjoy being exactly where she was until the sun dawned again.

O-o-o-o-o-o
Hermione walked into the Ministry Monday morning for her meeting with Astoria Greengrass. From the research she'd done, her background looked as clean as Daphne's from the outside so she was interested to talk with her.

"Good morning, Ms. Greengrass," Hermione said, shutting the door behind her.

"Good morning, detective Granger," Astoria responded, crossing one leg over the other casually. She was a beautiful girl with long dark hair and piercing blue eyes.

Hermione took her seat, "As you know, we're currently looking for your sister in connection to the murder that happened a week ago on Ministry property. We wanted to talk with you regarding her motivation, any knowledge you might have on her whereabouts or other people she may be in contact with."

"I'm happy to help detective, but you must understand that my sister and I haven't been close for some time now. We have very different views on the world."

"Were you surprised when your sister took a job as an Auror?" Hermione asked.

"Very much," Astoria looked quite serious, "But I guess I hoped she was making some changes in her life. She was never evil or anything like that when we lived at home together, or at Hogwarts, but during the Wizarding War I saw her take interest in the group that followed the Dark Lord."

"Like Mr. Malfoy?" Hermione asked.

"No, not Draco himself," she shook her head, she obviously knew who he was, "Her seventh year, I think Draco Malfoy had fled with the Death Eaters already when she started getting cozy with Vincent Crabbe. She was distraught when he died in the war. Her and I had a big fallout that year when I saw the people she was hanging around with and her interest in the Carrows and how they did things. I tried to talk to her about it and she told me to follow them with her. I told her I wouldn't and she practically disowned me as a sister. We didn't talk at all that year and after the Battle of Hogwarts she left school and we lost touch. I went back to Hogwarts for my sixth year and then another year later I heard she'd joined the Auror department. Honestly I thought Crabbe's death had knocked some sense into her and she was just too proud to make amends with me."

"Did you try reaching out at all when you heard she'd taken the job?"

"I sent her an owl congratulating her and saying I hoped she was healing from the war. It was my way of extending the olive branch, but she never responded," Astoria looked like it still bothered her.

"You say you and your sister have different views on the world, why is that?" She asked, there was something about Astoria that was welcoming, that made you want to know more about her story. Maybe if she understood the full picture, Daphne's actions would make more sense.

Astoria sighed, "Well you see, the family we come from is very proud of their pureblood descent and although our parents weren't outright supporters of The Dark Lord, they didn't disagree with his cause. So I think Daphne's interest in the dark arts wasn't horribly out of character,
unfortunately. Especially not when she got mixed up with that group of Slytherins. Her and I differ a bit because I inherited a blood curse that was put on our ancestors before I was even born. She did not inherit it. You see," she gave a small smile, "I've always known that I'll die at a young age. I think it makes you consider the world in a different light. I see no difference between muggleborns and purebloods. They're all lives. And life is precious."

Hermione was rendered a bit speechless by the confession, "Ms. Greengrass-.

"Astoria," she interjected, "You can call me Astoria."

"Astoria," Hermione corrected herself, "I'm sorry to hear that. That's devastating."

"It's just a part of my reality now," she didn't look like she wanted pity. She looked quite strong, actually, "I think it's made me who I am and allowed me to see past who I could have been. I make the best of it."

Hermione nodded, "That's a very positive outlook you've got."

"I have to, don't I?" She said, "It would be quite a depressing life to think about death all the time. I'm sure your friend Harry Potter felt the same when he learned his history as a child and what it meant for him."

"Yes, you're absolutely right," Hermione gave her a look of understanding, "So do you know who your sister may have been friends with from that seventh year class other than Crabbe?"

"The whole lot of them really. Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy, Millicent. A few others I forget the names of."

"Blaise?" Hermione asked, thinking about that group from their Hogwarts days.

"Not really. Once Draco left Hogwarts Blaise kind of distanced himself from that group. He hung around with Theo Nott and some of the quidditch team."

"Well we haven't really talked to the females in that group," Hermione furrowed her brow, "Maybe we should do that sooner rather than later."

"I would," Astoria nodded her head slowly, "I didn't know them personally, but when Draco left, they kind of took over the group. Crabbe and Goyle were never very strong personalities but those girls were. I'm not saying they are involved with whatever's going on, but I think Daphne was better off before she started hanging around with them."

"That's very helpful," Hermione told her.

"Can I ask you something," Astoria shifted across from her.

"Of course," Hermione tilted her head a little.

"You believe that Draco Malfoy is innocent, don't you? I've read that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is standing behind him. Why do you believe him?"

Hermione considered her for a moment, "Did you know him much at Hogwarts?"

"I didn't, no, just what I'd heard about him, which, honestly kind of fits the accusations. He was a Death Eater, after all."

"He's not that person anymore," Hermione said simply, "He never really was. I'm not saying he
was a good person at Hogwarts because I knew him then too. He was a smug boy with a lot to learn. But in the war he did what he felt he had to do for his family and walked away as soon as he had the opportunity to talk his parents into leaving. He's full of the kind of resentment and remorse you only see in someone who means it. He'd never go back to that life. He's a good man just trying to move forward."

"You speak highly of him," Astoria observed.

"I've spent a lot of time working on this case with him," she said evasively, "I'm just trying to help him clear his name so he can get his life back. I think we all just want to move on from the war for one reason or another."

Astoria nodded, "Good to hear that some people do change. I wish my sister had found the same enlightenment."

Hermione turned back to the conversation at hand, "I wish she had as well. Do you have any idea where she may have gone to hide?"

"Not anything concrete. She was close with our Aunt and Uncle, I can give you their address. Perhaps there, or our parents' house, if not somewhere with the Death Eaters."

Hermione handed over parchment and a quill, "Thank you for all of your help. I think you just gave me another idea as well."

Astoria finished writing down the addresses and handed it back, "I hope you find her. I really am sorry for what she's done. I wish I could have brought her back from the path she stumbled onto."

They ended their interview and Hermione walked Astoria back to the Atrium, "We'll keep in touch if there's anything else we think you might be able to help with," Hermione told her, "It was nice to meet you, Astoria."

"It was nice to meet you as well, Detective Granger," Astoria smiled at her, "I hope you're able to find what you need to take the Death Eaters down again."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione walked into her office to three interoffice memos hovering above her desk.

*Hermione, You may want to come downstairs when you get in -Harry*

*Hermione, Come to Auror department asap -Ron*

*Hermione, Ignore my first message, meet us at Malfoy Manor when you get this -Harry*

Hermione looked at the last note with concern before grabbing her bag and walking out of her office.

"Alden?" she called.

"Here, Granger!" he yelled back from his office, meeting her at his office door.

"Do you know what this is about?" she asked him, showing him the note.

"I've been waiting for you," he said, "I don't know anything about it, but I know the Aurors were on their way to the Manor. Let's go."
They left the Ministry and she apparated them outside the gates of Malfoy Manor. Just inside the gates a group of Aurors, including Harry and Ron who were standing near the back, were talking with Narcissa, who looked very ruffled.

"Harry!" Hermione called.

He did a double take before he pushed past a few of the other Aurors to Narcissa, saying something to her. The Aurors looked back at Hermione as Harry spoke and parted so he and Narcissa could get through. Narcissa lifted the wards on the gates and Hermione and Alden walked through.

"Narcissa, what's going on?" Hermione asked, worried.

"I could ask you the same thing," she looked more cross than the last time they had spoken.

"I - I have no idea," Hermione shook her head, "Is this related to Draco somehow?"

"They want to put him on house arrest like Lucius," she said fiercely.

A look of realization came over Hermione and her eyes widened, looking past Narcissa to Harry who was standing behind her looking drained. The rest of the Aurors were a few steps back, letting them talk before they got back to business, knowing their job just got a little more difficult.

"I didn't know," she said honestly to Narcissa, "I'll try to talk to them."

She walked over to the group with Narcissa in tow, "Why are you putting Draco on house arrest?" she said to the group at large. It was clear they were hoping she wouldn't be there for this, "Why wasn't I notified?"

One of the older Aurors stepped forward, "It's Politics, Detective," he said, "We can't have murders and Death Eater activity without taking some action."

"It's the wrong action," she said, "You're taking freedom away from an innocent man."

"Can you prove he's innocent?" The Auror asked, "Cold, hard, proof?"

"Of course I can't," Hermione said, "But I am telling you he's innocent. Plus Harry and Ron even know who murdered Tracey. Why on earth would you put someone who didn't commit the murder on house arrest when we're already looking for the person that did?"

"Because we need someone to take responsibility," he said simply, "And every finger has been pointed at Draco Malfoy as the leader. Which makes him the brains of the operation, which makes everything the Death Eaters do his actions."

"This simply can't be legal," Hermione spun around on Alden, "They can't do this, can they?"

Alden looked warily back and forth between Hermione and the Auror, "What are you sighting as your evidence against him?"

"The proclamation of every Death Eater that he's their leader and the lack of any evidence in his favor," the Auror said, "It's a decision made in an abundance of caution to keep another murder from happening."

"It won't keep anything from happening. All it will do is lock up an innocent man from living his life. It's cruel," Hermione didn't much like this man.

"Detective Granger, we have to do it," the Auror said, "The people are scared and we need to take
He turned from her and started walking up the stone pathway.

Hermione turned back to Alden, "Please tell me they can't do this."

Alden gave a frustrated sigh, "There's enough non-evidence and hysteria that they probably can. It doesn't make it right, but I don't think we can fight them."

Hermione looked back and saw the group following him, Narcissa running up to the front, still trying to talk sense into the Auror. Harry and Ron stood back with Hermione.

"Hermione, I'm sorry," Harry said, and he truly looked like he was, "We tried to talk them out of it, we tried to stall them, but Robert Bones, the man you were just talking to, he's the Head Auror. He lost a lot in the Wizarding War and he's been part of the hysteria around the reignited Death Eater activity. Amelia Bones was his wife, I'm not sure if you remember reading about her death in the Prophet, she was killed by Voldemort in person. Anyway, he's been pushing to make a move on Malfoy for months and we've been pushing back. After Tracey was murdered last week, he's been even more forceful on putting Malfoy in Azkaban. The best we could do was get him to lighten it to house arrest."

Ron nodded, she was sure he had helped Harry in all of this, but was also sure he wasn't about to tell her he was rooting for Malfoy.

"I need to get inside," she said, turning from all of them and making her way up the stone path at a light jog. Harry, Ron and Alden walked after her, talking amongst themselves, but she wasn't paying attention to their conversation.

As she walked in the house she could hear Draco's voice coming from the den. He was speaking a bit loudly. She walked herself in at a march, "Mr. Bones, could I please speak with you outside for a moment?" It wasn't a question.

He looked at her hard and then back at Draco, who was also staring at Hermione, his eyes still narrowed from the shouting he'd been doing a moment before.

"Granger, we are in the middle of our duties as Aurors. A decision has been made and I need you to stand down."

"I would like to speak with you. In the hall," she repeated.

He huffed, "Fine," and followed her outside.

"What if we can get you Daphne in the next 24 hours?" Hermione asked, trying to reason with him, "Would that be enough to keep Malfoy off house arrest?"

Alden, Harry and Ron turned the corner of the hallway and Hermione nudged her head to motion them inside. They followed her direction, going into the room and shutting the door so they could continue their discussion.

"No," he said flatly, "Because at the end of the day, he's the one people want to see imprisoned."

"Who cares what people want," Hermione threw her hands up in frustration, "What matters is the truth. Draco is not guilty. He's not some cunning leader of a new age of Death Eaters trying to take over the world. He's just a man trying to move on with his life."

"Well it's nice he gets that luxury, isn't it," Robert's voice was sharp, "Some people didn't come out of the war with a second chance at life."
She knew he was referring to his wife, "Everything that happened in the war was a tragedy. The people that lost their lives were deprived of their futures. I get that. Draco gets that. He has remorse for what he contributed to. He did none of it for personal gain or glory or whatever you want to say. He did what he had to do to protect his family and he's apologized to the entire wizarding world. He did not kill your wife. He did not kill Tracey Davis. You're taking your own vendetta out against him."

"If you prove he's not the leader, I'll apologize, Granger. But as of now, he's the only suspect we've got and we need to do what we can to protect the public. He may not have killed Amelia or Tracey, but he did kill Octavius Pepper, he's not some innocent bloke we pulled off the streets. I'm not backing down on this. I'm not taking the chance. I'd send him to Azkaban if I could."

"You'd be a fool to do that," Hermione retorted, "He's answered for the crimes he committed in the war. All you're doing is giving into the hysteria, or creating it, who's to say."

"I'm going back to do my job and I'd appreciate if you went back to doing yours," Robert turned on his heel and walked back into the room and Hermione walked in behind him.

Draco was standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed and still fuming. There were a few Aurors with their wands lazily pointed at him in case he tried anything. Draco glared at the two of them as they walked back in the room.

"Draco Malfoy, you are officially being put on house arrest," Robert told him in a professional voice, "Please sit down and lift your pant leg so we can place a charm on you."

Draco looked over at Hermione, waiting for her to help.

"There's nothing I can do," she said through gritted teeth, glancing over at Alden, who just shook his head sadly back at her.

Narcissa stepped next to her son and Hermione noticed for the first time that Lucius was sitting, quietly but angrily, in one of the reading chairs.

"Mrs. Malfoy, please give us some room to do what we need to do. Surely you already know the process," Robert said and Narcissa's eyes lit up.

"My. Son. Is. Innocent."

"Clint, Bard, can you please escort Mrs. Malfoy to the couch," Robert said to two of the Aurors next to him.

They pulled her, gently, away from Draco and led her to the couch, where she sat, looking like she was either about to burst into tears or burn the house down with her stare.

"Draco Malfoy," Robert turned back to him, "Please take a seat and we will begin with the charm."

Draco didn't move and Robert walked up to him, grabbing him roughly by the upper arm and pushing him towards the other reading chair.

"There shouldn't be any need to use force," to everyone's shock, it was Ron who had stepped in front of Draco's path, looking at Robert.

Robert looked like he had some words he wanted to say, but based on the present audience, decidedly took his hand off of Draco. Draco shrugged out of his reach and looked at Ron with a slight nod, walking around him to the reading chair with dignity. Ron stepped back with Harry and
Alden, looking uncomfortable, but like he'd done what he needed to.

Draco sat, pulling up the bottom of his pant leg and Robert kneeled in front of him, pulling out his wand, "Terrorem armilla," he muttered, waving his wand in a complicated fashion as a silver band emitted from the end of his wand, wrapping itself around Draco's ankle, "Palam leporem," he said as a second band wrapped around, forming an infinity circle, "Domum carceris," he stood up, spinning very slowly in a full circle as his wand scanned the perimeters of the house itself.

When he reached the starting point the haze from his wand fizzled out, "You are free to wander your house, but you are not to step outside the confines of its walls," he told him.

"I can't even go play some Quidditch?" Draco asked sardonically.

"No," Robert replied, "You cannot. You can stay inside and be thankful you're not sitting in Azkaban."

"And what exactly would I be there for?!" Draco's voice started to rise again.

"Careful, boy," Robert said, "Keep pushing me and I'll find a reason to get you there."

"I think that is quite enough," Hermione stepped in between them, "You've done what you came here to do and I think it's time you leave."

"And will you be staying, Detective?" Robert asked her.

"I will indeed," she said, "Not that it's any of your business how I conduct my investigation."

"Well I can see from all of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement files sitting around this den that you conduct quite a lot of 'investigating' here already," he raised his eyebrows at her.

"And we've brought in seven Death Eaters because of it. Draco's help has been invaluable to the department," she bit back.

"And somehow the leader is still out there," his eyes flickered to Draco and back to her.

"Good day, Mr. Bones," Hermione said with finality.

With one last look he shook his head, turning to the other Aurors, "Let's go."

"Robert, we're going to stay behind and discuss a few things with Alden and Hermione," Harry told him.

Robert nodded, leading the rest of the Aurors out of the house, holding the door open for Narcissa who looked at him with contempt as she stepped through to see them out.

Back in the den, Lucius finally stood up from his seat, "That was a production," he said, looking directly at Hermione.

O-o-o-o-o-o

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hope you're all enjoying the story so far! Can't believe how quickly I've been
writing it but I’ve had the concept in my mind for a long time, so it’s practically writing itself. Would you love hear your thoughts, please leave a review if you’ve got a minute :) xx
Hermione and Lucius looked at each other for a moment, the tension in the room still heavy from the intrusion of the Aurors.

"I did everything in my power to stop it from happening," she said, squaring up with him, "No one notified me about this. They came here when I was in an interview this morning with the murderer's sister."

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry said, "He's been working with some of the other Aurors while we've been digging into Daphne's background. We had no idea until we were told during our morning mission meeting. We tried to get ahold of you as quickly as we could."

"I know," she gave them a half smile, "Really, I appreciate what you did. That Robert Bones is a piece of work."

"I thought you were supposed to be helping Draco," Lucius kept his voice calm, but his eyes were raging, "Perhaps you should be spending less time in his bedroom and more time in your office."

"It's none of your concern where I spend my off time, Mr. Malfoy," Hermione looked at him rigidly, "I have been doing everything I can for your son. We've worked together to bring in countless Death Eaters, with your help as well. Cases like these take a lot of time. We just need to find one string to unravel what's going on and we are going to."

"It is highly of my concern who you've been spending your off time with, Ms. Granger," Lucius said heatedly.

"Father," Draco cut in, still sitting in his reading chair, staring sullenly at the ground, "Could you please drop it for now."

"Draco you need to look at the world around you. It's people like her who are always going to see you for what you were in the war. It's people like them," he gestured to the group, "Who are always going to drag you back into the dark when it's convenient for them."

"I don't see him for who he was in the war," Hermione countered, "I see him for what he overcame walking away from it and who he is outside of it all."

"Granger," Draco finally looked up, his eyes empty, "Could we please drop all of it for now."

Lucius and Hermione both stared at him, unsure what to say. Narcissa had finally walked back in the room as well, looking around trying to figure out what had happened.

"Father, I appreciate your dedication to fighting for me, and you as well, mother," he glanced over at Narcissa, "And Granger, I understand you didn't know this was going to happen and I appreciate you pushing back against the Head Auror and standing up for me like that," he turned again to Harry, Ron and Alden, "And I should also say thank you to you for alerting Granger and showing me some kind of respect today that Bones obviously wasn't going to. Now," he addressed them all
with a tired expression, "I'd really appreciate being alone for a while."

"We'll do what we can to get this fixed," Harry told him, "Hermione believes you and we're all working hard to figure this out."

With that, he, Ron and Alden took their leave from the den. Narcissa looked back at Draco sadly, "I'm going to walk them out. I'll be in my sitting room if you need anything," and she left with them.

Lucius looked back and forth between Draco and Hermione, who were currently staring at each other, and huffed, walking out of the room as well.

Silence hung in the air as Hermione searched his eyes for emotion but she couldn't find it.

"Malfoy-" she started.

"I need to be alone," he said quietly, "I'll see you when you come home from work tonight."

She closed her mouth tightly, giving him a small nod, "I'm sorry," she said, her voice shaking.

Draco moved his gaze back to the floor and Hermione turned and left, eyes burning from the tears that wanted to slip out.

Outside the door, she met Narcissa who was coming back from the gates with the last group.

"I thought you might be staying a while," she quipped, stepping aside so they could walk together back to the gates.

"He just wants to be alone," Hermione said, a stray tear fighting its way out and falling slowly down her cheek before she had the chance to wipe it away.

"You love him," Narcissa said softly, "I'm sorry if I was brash the last time we spoke. I see that you love my son very much."

Hermione didn't say anything, she hadn't confessed how she truly felt to herself yet and she didn't want to acknowledge it with Draco's mother.

"He has a lot of demons he's still fighting from the war," Narcissa told her, "He's not whole and you can't fix him. I know because I've tried."

"I don't want to fix him," Hermione looked over at her, "I just want to be there to support him. I wish he wouldn't push me away."

"It's how he deals with things. He yells and he pushes people away. I can see he cares for you, but Draco will be fighting these demons until his last day. He'll never accept the things he did in the war because they broke him. Things like what happened today, it only makes it that much more clear to him that his history will always be a part of him."

"I'm going to solve this case," Hermione looked over at her seriously, "I'm going to clear his name and give him back his freedom. We're tracking down the girl that murdered Tracey Davis today, I think we can find her and get some answers."

They had reached the gates and Narcissa grabbed her hand, cupping it with both of hers, "I admire your determination," she said with a small smile, "Thank you for everything you've done for him. Even if he pushes you away today, know he's more thankful to you than he could put into words."
for just giving him a voice." She let go and pulled out her wand to take down the wards past the gates.

"I won't stop fighting for him," Hermione returned the smile as best she could before she walked out and apparated back to the Ministry.

When she entered the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, she heard Harry, Ron and Alden in Alden's office.

"Do you think he's innocent?" Harry was asking Alden.

He paused and so did Hermione outside the door, which was cracked open.

"Granger has never steered the department wrong before, but the longer this goes on, the more worried I get that maybe we're being had. Do either of you know Draco Malfoy like Granger does?"

She heard Ron scoff and Harry give a faint laugh, "We do not," Harry said, "We knew Malfoy for who he was in Hogwarts and that would be the opposite of what you'd like to hear about to defend him."

"Her faith in him is just so strong," Alden sighed, "We'll keep backing her though, she's got great intuition. Do either of you think there's a reason to doubt her? Weasley? I know you're certainly not a fan of the Malfoy boy."

"I don't doubt her," Ron said a bit quietly, "I'm sure if she trusts him, she's got her reasons. Doesn't mean I'm going to be friendly with him after the pain in the arse he was at Hogwarts."

Alden gave a burly laugh, "We certainly do keep our school day grudges, don't we. Potter? What do you think?"

"I vouched for Malfoy at his trial. I saw it then and if Hermione sees it now, I trust her too."

Listening to the conversation made Hermione smile a little on the inside. They supported her even if they didn't entirely know why.

She finally started walking again, pushing the door open and stepping in, "I was hoping I'd find you all in here," she said as if she hadn't been listening in, "I wanted to talk about my interview with Astoria Greengrass this morning."

Harry stared at her an extra second, "I almost forgot you even had that interview today, after everything else that went on."

"Yes, me too," she said dryly.

"Did you learn anything that will help with Daphne?" Ron asked.

"I think so," she said, "You said she's been corresponding with Rowle a lot. I think we should look at his file and find his address. Maybe she ran there after she killed Tracey."

"That's a great idea," Alden said, "Good place to start. Do you think Astoria had any part of it with her sister?"

"Not at all," Hermione shook her head, "She was a nice girl. She's been through a lot and I think she wants to see this end as much as the rest of us do. She told me to look into the other Slytherin
girls though, Pansy and Millicent. She doesn't know if they're involved but felt they were the influence that turned Daphne at Hogwarts."

Alden nodded, "Alright, why don't you take Potter and Weasley and search Rowle's house first and we'll go from there."

"Mr. Northcott," came Chantel's voice from the doorway, "You received a duckie from the Auror department a little bit ago," she held it out and it spread its wings to fly over to him, "Your door was closed, so I held it for you until I saw it open again."

"Thank you, Chantel," he said, grabbing it out of the air.

She nodded, closing the door. Alden squeezed the duckie:

"Alden, it's Robert Bones. I think we should discuss the scene that was made this morning. The Auror Department is going to make decisions we feel are the best course of action given certain circumstances that arise, and while our departments may not see eye to eye on everything, we can't go around questioning each other's authority in front of the public. I'd like to hear how you plan to discuss this with your detective, Ms. Granger. I think it's important that we're all aligned against our common enemy. I didn't appreciate being yelled at in front of the Malfoys."

The rubber duckie gave a dull squeak at the end and Alden looked over at Hermione, "Guess we should have seen this one coming," he rolled his eyes.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

After reviewing Rowle's file, they found an address and apparated a little ways out from it in case there were protective spells in place to keep unwanted visitors from apparating there. There was a bit of a walk down the dirt road before their destination.

"Thank you for supporting me, back at the Manor," she said to both of them, "I know it's not inherent for either of you to stand behind Malfoy."

"What makes you believe him, Hermione?" Harry asked, "We'll always trust your judgment, but how did Malfoy gain your trust so definitively?"

She thought for a minute about how to describe it before answering, "I think I had forgiven him a long time ago for how he treated us at Hogwarts. Knowing he walked away from Voldemort helped. Seeing him at Fred's funeral helped," she glanced sideways at Ron, who's head had shot up.

"He was at Fred's funeral?" he asked. It had been such a blur to him, partially because it didn't feel real, Fred couldn't have been gone, and partially because of everything else going on after the war while the wizarding world repaired itself. He felt like he'd only half been present himself.

Hermione nodded, "He was back by the trees, I saw him as we were leaving, he was walking up to the grave. I wanted to see what he was doing, but he knelt down and it looked like he started crying and I didn't feel right intruding on that moment."

"Why on earth would he cry over Fred?" Ron sounded a little annoyed.

"When I asked him about it he told me he felt he needed to apologize to one of the fallen for the part he played in it all. He didn't give me any other details, but I imagine he broke down apologizing to all of them while he sat there with Fred. He has a lot of resentment for who he was then and what he felt he had to do," she told them, "The boy that strutted around Hogwarts calling
me a Mudblood, that's not who he is. It's just what he was raised to be. Once he grew into his own person, he was stuck and had to find a way out without putting his family in danger."

"Even if it's not the person you might know, how can you just put it all behind you like that?" Ron pushed, "He did call you a… you know… for years. He was mean to all of us. He tried to kill Harry."

"Crabbe tried to kill me," Harry corrected him, "Malfoy was really mad he started that FiendFyre."

"Regardless," Ron said, "He's done terrible things, Hermione."

"I know he has," she said quietly, "But he's answered for all of those things and he's just trying to move on from it all."

"So may as well date him and help him retain some of his image?" Ron looked away.

"Not to be rude, but what is it about him that would make you want to date him, forgiven or not?" Harry asked her.

She sighed, really not wanting to discuss this in front of Ron, but feeling she owed them some sort of explanation, "He's got a good sense of humor, under the smug comments," she started, "And he reads as much as I do, we've got that in common. Other than that I can't really explain it," she said honestly, "I just enjoy being around him and I think he's a good person overshadowed by a lot of bad circumstances. He's had a lot of time to spend around me to do something that would make me doubt him, but he hasn't. He cares about me very much."

"So much that he didn't want you to stay there with him this morning?" Ron asked.

"Ron you're being a little harsh," Hermione looked at him, eyebrows furrowed, "I know this is difficult, but I'm trying to be honest with you right now. If these are questions you both need answered, I'll answer them. He does care about me, but he's still dealing with a lot of… demons," she liked the word when Narcissa had used it, "He's trying to move forward and he keeps being brought back into it all. He's frustrated."

Ron sighed heavily, "I'm sorry, it's hard to be nice about it. I don't think I'm ever going to understand why you chose him."

Harry cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Sorry, Harry, but I don't understand it," Ron acknowledged the situation, "But you're right, that doesn't mean I need to be a git about it. Your honesty is appreciated," he said the last sentence with a bit of sarcasm.

Hermione stopped a moment, pulling Ron back. Harry looked back, "I'm going to keep walking."

"Ron, I care about you very much as well," she said, "I didn't choose him over you, I was living my own life and he got forcefully placed into it and everything else just happened organically over time. I'm sorry you're uncomfortable and I know this came out of nowhere. It hit me like a truck when I realized I had feelings for him. But I do and it's a bit complicated with all the noise of the case going on right now. Your friendship will always mean the world to me. I want us to be open with each other."

"I know," he said with a halfhearted grin, hands in his pockets, "I'll work on my snarky comments."

She pulled him into a hug and he took his hands from his pockets and wrapped them around her
waist.

She stepped back after a few seconds, "You've been snarky alright, but you also stood up for him to Bones today and I was so impressed by you putting your differences aside and doing what was right. Thank you for that."

Ron threw an arm around her shoulder in a friendly way, trying to lessen the tension, "Yeah, yeah, alright, enough with the mushy talk. Let's go get some Death Eaters."

She laughed, "Alright."

They caught up with Harry, who had stopped another hundred yards up the road.

"I think he's got wards up," he said, "I reached a point where I started feeling like I should turn around and go home and it didn't feel natural."

His wand was up and faint criss-crossing lines could be seen in a dome shape extending into the sky from the revealing spell Harry had cast.

Hermione walked around it slowly, looked at how the lines were weaved. She pulled a book out of her bag and started flipping through pages.

Ron looked at the front cover, *Awarded Wards and How to Break Them*.

"What's that going to tell you?" He asked.

"It's got a lot of protective and evasion wards in here. I've read through this a few times, there's always patterns that show what kind it is and if we can pinpoint it - aha!" She exclaimed, "Here is it. Come here, read this with me quick and if we all do the counter spell together, we should be able to break through pretty easily, it doesn't look like a very complex ward."

They read over her shoulder and the three of them stood up, pointing their wands at the dome and recited the spell, flourishing their wands appropriately. As they said the last word, they lowered their wands. Hermione put her face closer to inspect it, "They're down," she said, "We're in."

They continued their walk forward, still a few houses away. It was clear whoever put the wards up was hoping it would be enough to keep people away. As they approached the house, they saw smoke coming out of the chimney.

"Someone's here," Ron breathed. They walked up to the front door, "*Alohamora,*" he whispered.

The door creaked open and they crouched into the room. The house was small, but lavish. *Homenum revelio,* Hermione said. They waited a moment but nothing happened, "I- I don't think anyone is here," she said, standing up fully and looking around. The kitchen was to the right and there was a half eaten bowl of porridge on the table. She walked up to it, putting her hand on the bowl, "It's still warm," she said with a frown. Next to it was a piece of parchment that looked like it had been haphazardly ripped from a larger sheet. It read:

*Looks like you almost found me. This would be easier for all of us if you just joined the dark side. As they say, the grass is always greener on the other side ;).*

"*The grass is always greener*, come on, she's making her own catch phrase now?!" Ron said in disbelief.

"Someone tipped her off that we were coming," Harry said, confused, "Who even knew we were
going to check Rowle's house? Especially now? We just decided this afternoon in Alden's office."

"Maybe she had a detection charm further outside of the wards," Hermione suggested, agreeing that it was odd, "Alden's door was open, also, we could have been overhead. But I mean there was barely anyone in the office today. And that would have to mean that two Death Eaters were impersonating Ministry workers. Someone slipping into the Auror department is crazy enough, but the Auror department and an investigator for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?! That seems like a stretch."

"It does, but who knows anymore," Harry shook his head, "Let's look around while we're here."

They searched the house, finding more letters written in code in the bedroom at the back of the house. Hermione stashed them away in her bag but didn't find anything else that looked helpful.

"Let's go back. Maybe what we're looking for is in these letters. Can't believe we found her and she got away."

"Do you have any other ideas from your meeting with her sister?" Ron asked.

"Yes, she mentioned her Aunt and Uncle's house and possibly her parents, but I would guess if she came to Rowle's first, she probably went to another Death Eater's."

The three of them apparated back to the Ministry and went up to Alden's office, shutting the door tightly behind them before they relayed what happened.

Alden sat with his chin resting on his fingers, looking highly concerned, "It was just us here in my office talking about where you would go," he said, "Get straight to duplicating those letters and let's get this figured out. I don't like having them one step ahead of us."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Hermione, Ron and Harry walked into her office and she started the process of duplicating each letter. There were about 25 altogether from what they'd recovered from Daphne's desk and Rowle's house.

The charm was simple enough, but time consuming. "Habes duplicare," Hermione moved her wand in a back and forth motion, scanning the first page of the first letter, moving it in a full circle at the bottom, and bringing her wand to a blank sheet of paper, "Et scribere," she said and the writing from the letter etched itself onto the page.

"You each try one," she said to Harry and Ron. It took them a couple of tries to figure out the appropriate wand motions, but they got it. She handed each of them a stack of letters and they spent the next couple of hours making four copies of each letter.

Once they were finished, Hermione picked up her copy of all of the letters and straightened them into an organized stack, doing the same with a second copy before placing them in her bag.

"I'll be going to the Manor with these," she said, trying to normalize the conversation, "I have a few books on runes and pattern reading on the shelves, she pointed to the bookcase lining the wall, "Help yourself to any of them. If you find anything, send an owl. These looks pretty complicated so it may take a few days."

"Sounds good, Hermione, good luck," Harry said, and Ron gave a half-nod, intentionally avoiding eye contact. It would take time, but they'd come around.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione apparated to the Manor and a few minutes later, Narcissa met her at the gates, "I'm going to have to show you how to lift the wards yourself one of these days," she said, "Now that I'm the only one who can come let you in."

"Sorry for the trouble," Hermione gave her an apologetic look, "I know it's been quite a day."

"Did you find the girl you were looking for?" She asked.

"Unfortunately we didn't," Hermione sighed, "Someone tipped her off that we were coming. We've got a lot of work ahead of us to find her again. How is… Draco doing?"

"Well, he's still sitting in the den, he's barely moved all day, but his mood has improved and he's just reading now," Narcissa said optimistically, leading her into the house, "I'll let you two speak alone. If you need anything just call for Marty."

"Thank you," she gave her the best smile she could muster and walked off to the den, opening the door slowly and stepping in.

Draco looked up at her with a crooked smile.

"I'm home from work," she said uneasily.
He gave a hollow laugh, "I won't bite, come here."

She walked over to the other reading chair and turned to sit.

"No, no, come here," he motioned to his lap.

She looked at him suspiciously.

"I'm just ready to put today behind me," he said, analyzing her reaction, "There's nothing I can do about it and I'd like to kiss you now."

Hermione dropped her bag and he put his book on the side table. When she was close enough, he pulled her down into his lap, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing her softly as she draped her legs over the arm of the chair.

"I appreciate what you did for me earlier," he said, "It was probably highly out of line professionally, but I liked that you got feisty with that Auror for me."

"They were out of line," she said, "I'm sorry they did that to you."

"I won't tell you I'm pleased about it. I quite enjoy my freedom," he ran the back of his forefinger down her cheek, "But there's frankly nothing I can do to change it."

"You seem to be handling this much better than I anticipated," she told him, "Are you still angry?"

"Granger, I'm angry, I'm depressed, I'm bitter, and in some sick way I'm also a little satisfied that someone finally told me that the world is against me. But my options are to brood over it, which I did for a while today, or try to enjoy the things in life that I still can. Which is you, here, right now, looking down at me."

"Malfoy-."

"I've also decided I want you to call me Draco," he cut in with a bit of an arrogant tone.

She gave a small laugh, "You've decided that, have you?"

"Yes," he said matter-of-factly, "I heard you call me Draco when you were in your shouting match with Bones earlier and I liked it very much. I'd like to dissociate with the Malfoy you knew at Hogwarts and I'd like to be Draco now."

"First of all I have to call you Draco at work to differentiate you from your father. If I just said Malfoy, no one would know who I was talking about."

"And secondly?" Draco goaded her.

"And secondly, does this mean you're going to call me Hermione now?" Her eyes twinkled at him.

"Certainly not," he said firmly, "That wouldn't be right. I like calling you Granger. That way I can say things like you're mine now, Granger. It's a good name."

"That doesn't seem entirely fair," said pursed her lips but her eyes were still smiling.

"Well I figure if you start calling me Draco now," his voice had gotten a bit lower, "You'll feel more comfortable screaming it later, too, and I'd enjoy that," his smirk was out in full force.

Hermione's jaw dropped open at the audacity of him, "You did not just say that to me."
"I did and I mean it," his hand moved under her shirt onto her bare back, "Are you going to reprimand me for it?"

"I should," she shook her head at him, eyes still wide at his nerve, "You're too much sometimes, you know that, don't you?"

"I do know," he smiled, "But you like me anyway, don't you? I think I make you a good uncomfortable."

"I do like you anyway," she laughed, "Gods know why, but I do. You certainly make me feel some type of way."

"Come back down here and kiss me before my mood changes again," he grinned at her and she leaned back down slowly, capturing his lips in a sultry kiss before moving her lips to his cheek for a quick peck.

"We've got more work to do," she returned his grin and he threw his head back in disapproval, "But keep your good mood up and maybe you can have more of that later."

He unwrapped his arms, "I like it better when I'm teasing you."

"Well you don't always get to be in charge," she climbed off of him and grabbed her bag from the floor, pulling out the two sets of letters and placing them on the coffee table, "I thought we were going to catch Daphne today, but someone tipped her off that we figured out where she was," she said more seriously.

Draco furrowed his eyebrows, "Who knew?"

"Just myself, Harry, Ron and Alden I thought," she said uncertainly.

They looked at each other for a moment as Draco recognized the severity of her statement.

"We've got a stack of letters between Daphne and Rowle written in some kind of code. Want to come over here and help me decode them?"

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

A few hours later there were letters spread out all over the coffee table, and books on symbols, runes, hieroglyphics and languages open to different sections around the floor and the couch. Draco and Hermione lay on opposite sides of the couch, their legs intertwining somewhere in the middle. Draco lowered the book from in front of his face, ready to tell Hermione to call it a night when he saw her already asleep, a book on her chest and one hand hanging off the couch.

There was something beautiful about her that he couldn't put his finger on. Not the physical beauty that he already saw: unique, bushy-haired, bright eyed beauty, but something non-physical, as well, really drew him in. There was an air of innocence and fierceness. She was just so genuinely herself and confident about it. She believed in him so purely, with unwavering faith.

He watched as her chest moved up and down with her breath, feeling simultaneously lucky and undeserving. The best he could do at this point was give her everything he could before they chucked him in Azkaban, which felt like a given eventually. What he should be doing was letting her go so she could move on before that happened. But he couldn't, not right now when she was the only person he had by his side. When she was the brightest spot in every day and when he saw the same look staring back at him that he looked at her with. He wished the circumstances could have been different and that they could have had a chance for a future together, when the time came,
because she was the kind of challenge he could deal with every day. But even if he got through this case unscathed, he knew he'd never truly be worthy of her future.

Hermione's eyes drifted open and she turned her head towards Draco, realizing she'd fallen asleep reading. She was surprised to see him already looking at her, a smile on his face, but a subtle sadness in his eyes that made her hurt inside.

"Are you watching me sleep," she quipped in a sleepy, mumbled voice.

"Just for a moment," he said, "I was going to tell you we should call it a night, but it looks like you already did."

She stretched her arms above her head, "I don't even remember falling asleep, it's just been such a long day, it caught up to me."

"I understand," he nodded, "Let me take you to bed."

"And sleep," she yawned.

His smile turned to a grin, "This time, yes, and sleep. Tomorrow, however, I'm going to catch you before you fall asleep and romance you for a while."

She thought for a second, "Yes, that does sound nice."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

A few days passed before they made any real breakthrough on the letters. It was Thursday afternoon and Hermione was sitting in her office dictating a memo to her quill when her door burst open.

"I think we found something, Hermione," It was Ron, behind him was Harry, who closed the door so they could talk privately.

"What did you find?" She looked up in surprise, grabbing the quill mid-air and setting it down before it started writing again.

"We've found some commonalities in their names that helped us piece a few words together," he said, handing her one of the letters. Above the coded writing was some letters and words they'd deciphered. She pulled out her stack of letters, comparing it to what she and Draco had found so far. They had also figured out the general code for some of the names but the code was a combination of letters and numbers that didn't seem to have much rhyme or reason to them.

"Oh my god," Hermione said, looking at what Ron handed her, "How did we miss this?"

"I mean, we wouldn't have known to look there," Harry said, "I don't think we missed it, I think we just happened upon it."

"No, no, not that. That is incredibly helpful, but I think you figured out the code."

"Did we?" Ron asked, walking behind her desk to look at it with her.

"Yes, we've been looking at it like every character was a code, but it's not. It's just the letters. The numbers are just in here to throw us off. It's the letters that have other meaning and only the letters that matter. I see it now that you put the word 'Riddle' together."

They both looked over her shoulder. She pulled out the piece of parchment she'd been deciphering
characters onto and crossed out all the numbers, "Every letter represents a different letter and the
numbers mean nothing. Once we figure out a couple of words this is going to be easy. Do you want
to come to Malfoy Manor with me and we can tag team these letters, make sure we're not missing
anything before we make a move?"

Ron looked at her warily.

"Well I can't bring Draco here and the more help we have the better," she looked back at him with
her head high.

"Draco now?" Harry didn't miss a beat.

"He asked me to call him that," she waved him off, "It's still weird but I'm trying."

Harry looked at Ron, who begrudgingly nodded, "Fine."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Draco met them inside the entrance hall as Narcissa walked the group in.

"Well this will be a fun afternoon," he said, looking at them all.

"I think we've figured out the code," Hermione said, "We need all hands on deck to decode them
and read through and see if there's anything useful. I think we know where Daphne is."

Once in the den, they hung a piece of parchment on the wall with each letter from the alphabet
listed. They spent a few minutes writing in the ones they had already decoded and then started
going through the letters scattered about the den to fill in more words to decipher the rest. It took
about an hour working together to get them figure out, but they finally had a full code translation.

"Alright, everyone grab 6 letters and get translating," Hermione said, handing out stacks to each of
them.

As the afternoon came to a close, they sat with 25 fully translated letters to and from Daphne and
Rowle.

It took another couple of hours to read through them all. They were all written in the last year,
some were quite useless, it seemed Daphne and Rowle may have had romantic feelings for each
other, although she was 20 and Rowle was in his 30s. Other letters were decently informative. At
the end of the day, however, they learned there was a Death Eater safehouse. The old Riddle house
had been enchanted to appear as ruins to passers by, but was still a fully functioning estate that
Voldemort had left to Bellatrix, of all people. Bellatrix had only told one other person about the
Riddle house in the event of her demise, and that person was Rowle.

"What if there are a group of them there?" Ron asked, "Should we bring more people with us?"

"I don't think we can fully trust anyone else," Harry shook his head, "But I don't think there will be
a group there, the letters make it seem like it's unused and just for emergencies to keep it from
being exposed."

"I think we have to go," Hermione said, "It's our chance to get Daphne and all the instructions to
get inside are right here."

Ron nodded, "Alright, tonight, or tomorrow morning?"
"Let's go tonight," she said, "The sooner we find her, the better."

The boys nodded and they sat and discussed their plan for a little while, Draco adding what suggestions he could, but looking quite disappointed that he couldn't join.

They got themselves ready to go and Narcissa met them at the door to let them out of the gates.

Draco pulled Hermione back, "I'll catch up," she said as the rest of them started up the pathway.

"Be safe," he looked at her with concern, "I'll wait up for you."

"Everything will be fine," she smiled up at him, "There's no way they can know what we learned. She won't be ready for us this time."

He leaned down and kissed her hard, cupping her face with his hands.

"I'll be back soon," she reassured him when he pulled back, squeezing one of his hands in hers before she turned and left the manor to join her friends on their mission.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Just a fun fact, if you're ever curious where I come up with my custom spells or what they mean, you can just google translate from latin to english. Not sure if they'll all translate back the same way that they do the other way around, but you can always give it a try if you're interested! xx
In one of the letters from Rowle, he detailed how to get into the Riddle house, in case Daphne ever needed somewhere to run. She'd been telling him about working inside the Ministry and how sometimes she worried she'd get found out. She didn't want to get her family involved but knew it was the only place she could go. In response, Rowle had shared the secret of the Riddle house with her.

*Your first stop should be here, my dear Daphne. And if, for some reason, you can't get here, I'll tell you a little secret. Bellatrix left me as master of the Riddle estate in the event of her death. No one knows about it but me, I've kept it a secret for something like this, and now you will be the only other witch to know its truth. If ever we come to a point where I am no longer here and you find yourself in grave danger, find someone you can trust to tell the secret to so it lives on. If ever another Death Eater needs refuge, tell them its whereabouts. It is our safehouse.*

He went on about the prestige of the Riddle house and the honor of knowing its location, secret passages and history. Finally, he detailed how to get past the protection spells around the estate.

*It's easy enough to get in, if you know how. About a mile south of Little Hangleton, there is a wooded area. Use a locator spell to find the Gaunt Shack. It's just a pile of rubble now, but you won't be able to find it without the locator incantation 'itinere occulto perueniunt.' There is a large round stone where the middle of the house used to be. Lift it and you will find a passageway to the Riddle House that evades the protective spells above the ground.*

Harry, Ron and Hermione apparated outside of Little Hangleton, by a river in the woods. Hermione took out her wand "*Inveniet,*" she whispered as she lay her wand flat in her hand "*Itinere occulto perueniunt.*"

The wand shook slightly before turning to the left, "*This way,*" she said as she followed its direction. After a short walk, they happened upon a pile of wood and rocks that looked like almost enough to build a small shack.

"*Over there,*" Harry pointed. Ahead was a large round stone. Perhaps it would have been harder to spot, but all of the rubble that had likely covered it had been pushed off - recently it looked like - and set aside, leaving it exposed.

They walked over to the stone, "*Wingardium Leviosa,*" Hermione said, lifting the stone and casting it aside gently. Below the stone was a set of stairs leading down into the darkness. The three of them looked at each other with a deep breath before Ron took the first step down and they descended into the passageway.

They all illuminated their wands at the bottom of the stairs, "*It'll probably be a mile walk,*" Hermione said, looking ahead and seeing no defined end in sight.

They started along the corridor, surrounded by silence broken up by the sounds of their shoes against concrete.

"*How did Ginny do in her tryouts with Puddlemere United?*" Hermione asked in a whisper, trying to lessen the tension and knowing they had some time to kill on their way.

"*She made the practice team,*" Harry whispered back, "*She'll find out at the end of the summer if she's made the team full time.*"
"That's great!" she was relieved to hear some positive news.

"We wanted to go see Neville this fall at Hogwarts as well," Harry said, "You should join us."

"I'd love to," she said, hoping she could make it happen and remembering the trip she already had coming up, "I'm actually going to visit my parents this weekend."

Ron looked over at her with a grin, "You actually booked the portkey?"

"I did," she said proudly, "I'm just going for 2 days but I'm hoping we wrap up this hunt for Daphne before I go. I'd hate to leave with loose ends."

"We're going to," Harry said firmly, "We're going to get her tonight."

As they walked, a small beam of light at the end of the corridor became brighter the closer they got.

"Where do you think this comes out," Hermione asked offhandedly.

"I was hoping somewhere on the grounds," Harry said, "But I'm starting to think we're going to come out in the house."

Their pace slowed to minimize the amount of noise their footsteps were creating. The beam of light turned out to be coming in through a small crawl-through entrance at the end of the tunnel. The lights were on in the house so Harry, Ron and Hermione paused, deciding who would go first.

"I should go first," Hermione said, "I'm the lead detective on the Death Eater case."

"I should go," Harry countered, "I'm the lead Auror on the murder case."

"I mean I'd offer, but it seems like you two have already volunteered so it would just make it more difficult," Ron shrugged.

"I'm going to go," Hermione knelt down, looking ahead through the glass entrance. She didn't see any signs of movement, but that didn't mean someone wasn't in that room.

She crawled forward, sensing Harry moving behind her, and she was sure Ron behind him. A few feet ahead was the small glass door she would have to push open. She looked through when she was close enough and didn't see anything in the room. She pushed it open slowly. It creaked ever so quietly, but it sounded loud in her head, knowing she shouldn't be making any noise. With a deep breath she pushed it all the way open and climbed through with her wand raised, scrambling to her feet. The room was empty and Harry and Ron clambered in after her.

"Stick together," Harry whispered and they moved through the rooms together.

"Upstairs?" Hermione said once they'd cleared the bottom floor and Ron walked forward.

They heard the footsteps of someone casually walking across the floorboards above them moving towards the stairs.

"Have you received word back?" Came a girl's voice from the upstairs hallway.

"Not yet," came the muffled response from inside one of the bedrooms, followed by a heavy sigh and more footsteps.

"Over here!" Ron whispered urgently, pulling them both around the corner as they all tried to get
out of the line of sight from the stairway. They pressed themselves against the wall of the living room as each stair creaked in succession.

Harry was closest to the doorway and looked back at the other two with a nod as the footsteps hit the landing, jumping out from their hiding place softly, like a cat, "Petrificus Totalus!" he whispered and Ron and Hermione ran to the other side to catch the body before it hit the ground.

"Is it her?" Harry asked, walking closer, keeping his voice at a minimum to not alert whoever was still in the house.

"Yes!" Ron said, "Let's get her into the living room."

They carried her in and sat her in a reading chair, "Incarcerous," Ron pointed his wand at Daphne and ropes shot out, binding her tightly to the chair, "Just an extra precaution."

"Stay here with her," Harry said to Ron as he and Hermione walked back out of the room and up the stairs as quietly as they could. They checked each room, coming to the last room in the house, where the door was cracked open and light flooded the hallway. As Hermione took another step closer the floorboard under her creaked loudly.

"Daphne? Iz zat you?" The door opened and Hermione tried not to let her shock knock her off her game.

"Stu-stupify!" She yelled. The curse knocked the girl backwards, but she was able to get back to her feet.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry moved around Hermione, a wand flying into his hand.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Hermione said in a stronger voice and the girl across the room fell back, stiff as a board.

Hermione walked up to her, "I can't believe it was Chantel. She must have tipped Daphne off about Rowle's house."

"She was there when we were first talking about there being a Death Eater in the Auror department too," Harry thought back, "She came in and told Alden he had someone waiting for him and the three of us were still talking. I remember thinking she looked like she wanted to leave the room, but I thought maybe she was just uncomfortable."

"Yes, she popped in when we were talking about Rowle as well," Hermione nodded, "With the rubber duckie from Bones."

They entered the living room again with Chantel and Ron looked at them, confused.

"You look almost as surprised as I feel. Let's get them back to the Ministry," Hermione said, releasing the binds on Daphne, "Levicorpus.\" Daphne's stiff body rose into the air and they levitated her and Chantel in front of them all the way out of the secret passageway back to the woods before apparating to the Ministry.

Once they were all sitting in the interrogation room, Hermione raised her wand again, "Rennervate."

Daphne and Chantel regained control of their bodies and Daphne's eyes immediately narrowed. Her hands were bound to the arms of the chair and she fought against the restriction, "How did you find me!"
"We found all of the letters between you and Rowle," Hermione said, arms crossed, "You should have made your code a little harder to break. How does it feel knowing you gave away the secret of the Riddle house to the Ministry?"

Daphne cried out in frustration and Chantel looked over at her briefly, her expression worried.

"Did you kill Tracey Davis?" Harry asked.

"Yes I did, I killed her and I left her body to rot in front of the Ministry," Daphne spat, "We were working together undercover, staking out the Leaky Cauldron and when I heard you'd found out there was someone inside the Ministry, I struck before you could figure it out."

"Chantel overheard us and told you?" She asked, making sure their assumptions were right.

"Yez, I did," Chantel said, trying to sound strong like Daphne, but coming off a little squirrelly.

"Who's the leader of the Death Eaters?" Hermione shot at Daphne.

"I think you already know the answer to that," she grinned, "They've been pointing fingers at him for months and you've been ignoring them. If you don't want to believe the rumors then you only have yourself to blame."

"It's not Draco," Hermione said sternly, "I think it's impressive that you're all sticking so firmly to that story, but I know it's not him so I'll ask you again. Who is the leader of the Death Eaters?"

"Silly girl," Daphne said in a low voice, "He's been taking credit for it this whole time. But I guess we only see what we want to in the people we love, don't we?"

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it.

"I overheard this one," Daphne nudged her head towards Ron, "Talking about how you were dating Draco Malfoy. He's really got you fooled. I'd applaud him if I could. He played this game better than anyone else could have. It's why we look up to him."

Hermione put her quill down hard, "Whatever it is you're trying to do isn't going to work," she said nonchalantly, "I trust Draco and I don't trust you. It's as simple as that."

Daphne glanced over at Ron, "How about you, Weasley? Do you trust Draco Malfoy? Or do you think he's got your girlfriend hoodwinked so he can get away with it all and carry out our plan? So he can bring the power to the wizarding world that we've always deserved."

"I trust Hermione's judgment," Ron said a bit stiffly.

"I can't wait to see the looks on your faces when he shows you who he truly is," Daphne shook her head.

"I spoke with your sister," Hermione said to Daphne, trying to transition the conversation, "She said she was sad to see the way you went after Hogwarts."

"I'm sure she is, the mugglelover," Daphne bit.

"She said you only got involved with those that supported the Death Eaters in your seventh year," Hermione told her, "She said you dated Vincent Crabbe."

Her face screwed up as Hermione said the name, "Don't talk about him. Don't ever let his name come out of your filthy mouth."
"We already know Goyle was involved. Your sister said the girls in that group - Pansy and Millicent - they might be involved."

Hermione noticed Chantel glance over at Daphne again before looking back at them.

"Like I'd ever tell you who my sisters and brothers are," Daphne held her head high, looking down her nose at Hermione, "You have no idea how big this really is."

"You know Astoria, your real sister, thought you'd turned over a new leaf when you joined the Aurors, she was really proud of you."

"If she were sitting here right now she'd just be lecturing me herself," Daphne said, "The blood curse weakened her as a person. She doesn't see the bigger picture. She doesn't understand what we're fighting for."

"And what are you fighting for?" Hermione leaned in closer.

"The power that has always been ours," her eyes looked crazy in the dim lighting of the room, "Our birth right is to be ourselves in the open every day and rule over those who do not hold the powers that we do. Our rightful place is at the top, not hiding in the shadows."

"Every human's right is to live their life without fear," Hermione said, "And all you are trying to do is incite fear in them. You won't win. We'll find everyone behind this."

Daphne laughed again, "Best of luck to you, Detective. You refuse to acknowledge who's behind it, so I have no doubt the plan will be carried out in full. And when it is, I'm coming back for you."

"You realize we beat Voldemort?" Hermione asked, quite over Daphne's power trip. "If we can take down Voldemort, whatever leader you have will be nothing compared to that."

Daphne winced at Voldemort's name, "The Dark Lord's downfall was a fluke. Harry Potter should have been killed that night. It's pure luck that he killed the Dark Lord."

"I actually lived through him killing me twice," Harry pointed out, "As a baby, and as a seventeen year old."

"You have no idea what's coming for you all," Daphne said, ignoring Harry.

"I'm going to find someone to take them to Azkaban," Hermione said, pushing her chair back and leaving the room. It was late and there weren't many people left at the Ministry. Hermione walked into the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and saw Alden's light on. Everyone else was gone. She popped her head in, "Alden, we got Daphne. Sorry I didn't come grab you, I didn't think anyone would be here this late."

Alden's eyes lit up at her words, "You got her?! That's great!"

"We've already interrogated her," Hermione told him, pausing, "We... got someone else with her."

Alden looked shocked, "Who?!

"Chantel," she watched as the name sunk in.

"What? Did she capture Chantel?"

"No, sir, Chantel has been the leak tipping Daphne off."
He stared back at her, dumbfounded, "No..." he said quietly, "No, how could that be? Chantel's been here for years..."

"Just 2 years," Hermione corrected him, "I'm still in shock too, Alden. We can talk to her together tomorrow. For now I'm sending an owl for some Dementors to come take them to Azkaban. We'll wait in the interrogation room with them til they get here."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

It was a long night at the Ministry before Daphne and Chantel were officially off to Azkaban.

"Do you want to just come stay with us for the night, Hermione?" Harry asked as they walked outside, "I'm sure Narcissa won't be overly excited to come out to the gates at 3 in the morning."

"I'm sure she won't either," Hermione gave a half smile, "But Draco said he was going to wait up for me to come back, so I don't want to worry him."

"Hermione," Ron paused, looking like he was thinking hard about something, "Are you really sure he's not just playing a really good game right now?"

"I'm positive, Ron," she said without hesitation, "Daphne was just trying to get in our heads."

He nodded uncertainly but let it drop.

"Have a good night," she waved at them, "We'll send a memo tomorrow before we talk to Chantel alone."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione pushed open the door of Draco's bedroom fifteen minutes later. Draco had been pacing back and forth across the room, stopping in the middle when Hermione walked in.

He rushed over to her picking her up and kissing her.

"Did you miss me?" she joked.

"It's 3:15 in the morning, Granger," he said, probably trying to sound annoyed but looking too relieved to pull it off, "I wasn't sure what had happened to you and then I hear the gate censor alarms going off at 3AM."

"We found Daphne," she said with a smile, "My secretary, Chantel, was with her."

"That's not reassuring," he looked concerned, setting her back on her feet.

"It's not," she agreed, "But we had a feeling there must be someone in the department so at least we have an answer to that now, too."

"Did you get anything else out of Daphne?" he asked.

"No, she tried some reverse psychology to try and get us to think it's been you all along, but I shut that down pretty quick."

"Girls will do that, won't they," he smirked, "They try to get in your head til you go crazy."

"Excuse me, have I done that?" she raised her eyebrows.
"No," he laughed, "No, you haven't. You're something different."

As they got into bed, Hermione felt she still had a question she had to ask, "Draco, can you tell me more about Pansy Parkinson?" she asked, "Astoria mentioned that Pansy and Millicent Bulstrode were the influences that turned Daphne at Hogwarts."

"I don't remember them being friends," he frowned.

"Apparently they became friends seventh year when you were gone," she said.

"Look, Granger. I don't really want to talk about Pansy right now," he sighed, "I don't think she's involved. She loved me more than she loved the dark arts."

"But her father was involved," Hermione pushed.

He shook his head, "She told Blaise she'd given it up when I walked away."

"Did you date her?" she asked.

Draco lay back, "Yes, you could say that. Can we talk about this tomorrow? I'd really like to just hold you close right now and get some sleep."

"Alright," Hermione conceded, "But we're going to talk about it tomorrow. I don't care if you dated. Your past is your past, I just feel like if Daphne was involved, I need to know more about Pansy."

Draco mumbled some kind of reluctant acknowledgement and pulled her body to his, kissing her cheek and wrapping his arm around her protectively, happy to have her back in his bed, even if neither of them would get much sleep that night.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
After a few hours of restless sleep, Hermione pushed herself out of bed the next day, it was Friday and she was already thinking about work even though she also knew she'd have to pack that evening for her portkey to Australia, which left at the crack of dawn on Saturday. Draco rolled over onto his other side groaning.

"You don't have to get up," Hermione laughed as she yawned.

"No, no, I will," he replied groggily, "I'll make you some tea."

Hermione started getting ready as Draco dragged himself downstairs. She met him down in the kitchens a little while later as he flicked his wand to kill the fire on the stove and grabbed the tea kettle to pour out. Marty was standing close by looking stressed that she wasn't helping.

"I'm a bit early still," Hermione grabbed the cup from him, "I'd like to sit and talk about Pansy since you're up."

Draco raised his eyes to her as he blew on his tea to cool it down, "I really should have stayed in bed."

"It was going to happen sooner or later, may as well be now," Hermione said as they walked over to the small wooden table in the corner of the kitchen, Draco dismissing Marty.

"What would you like to know?" he asked, sitting down.

"I know you don't think she's a threat, but she was mentioned by name when I spoke with Astoria and I need to understand why you don't think she's involved. Tell me about your history with her."

"It's complicated," he gave her a forced smile.

"Don't make this difficult, Draco," she eyed him.

"Fine, fine," he sat back, coddling his teacup between his hands, "Pansy and I just had a very messy, dramatic, on and off relationship for years."

"Why are you so against bringing her into this?"

"Because I did enough emotional damage to her at Hogwarts," he finally met her gaze and he looked apologetic, but ready to explain, "It goes back a long way. Our parents knew each other our whole lives. They used to joke about us growing up and getting married. She was my best friend, her, as well as Blaise at Hogwarts. But somewhere along the way she fell head over heels in love with me and I just never fully reciprocated. I cared about her but I was young and arrogant and I used her feelings to my advantage. If I wanted something, she'd do anything to make it happen. When I wanted to have a girlfriend, I'd pull her in, and when I was over it, I'd push her away. When we grew up a little, fifth into sixth year or so, we used to joke about how our parents were probably right and we probably would end up getting married. I think it put a lot of false hopes into her mind. Sixth year I was assigned the task of killing Dumbledore from the Dark Lord and as the year went on, and I started to grasp the weight of what I had to do, I pushed her far away from me. I pushed everyone away and she would try to wiggle her way back in and we'd get in these blowout
fights. I was just in over my head," he took a long sip of his tea.

"She supported what I was doing for the Death Eaters, I'm not saying she's completely innocent either, but I took a lot of my frustration and aggression towards my situation out on her verbally and I used her when I needed someone. She never gave up on me even when I was cruel to her. When I ran with the Death Eaters after sixth year she wrote me and told me she'd find me when she could and hoped I was safe. I saw her at the Battle of Hogwarts briefly, she lit up when I walked in and I walked right by her to Crabbe and Goyle and told them I needed them to come with me to find the Diadem my father had told me about. My parents and I walked out of the Battle of Hogwarts and I tried to distance myself from the whole lot of them so they didn't get dragged into the trials.

"She tried reaching out several times. She came to the Manor once and we spoke very briefly. She came to see how I was and asked me if I was really done or if we'd ran for our safety and I told her I had walked away from the dark arts for the last time and that I needed to restart my life and I needed space to do that. She talked with my mother for a while before she left and I never saw her again. I went to Durmstrang, trying to work on myself and rebuild. Blaise said he ran into her some time after the Battle and she told him she walked away from the dark arts because I did. She supported me through every terrible thing I ever did. If she says she walked away, I believe her."

"You don't think she has any vengeance against you for how you treated her?" Hermione asked, thinking of how she might feel in that situation.

"I don't," he shook his head, "Maybe that's naive of me, but I'm sure she's still hoping I'll come around one of these days."

"I hope you understand we will probably at least have to question her at some point," Hermione said, "I wanted to hear from you what you thought of her involvement, but I don't think we can ignore her name being brought up."

"I figured," he said, "But at least I've given my two sickles on the matter."

"While we're on the subject of your ex-girlfriend," Hermione started, looking down at the cup in her hands, "Did you ever sleep with her?"

Draco considered her for a moment, "Do you need that information for her file?"

"Not at all," Hermione looked back up, knowing she'd have to own her decision to ask, "I'm wondering for me. It doesn't matter, just for some reason I have to know."

He clearly didn't want to answer but finally said, "Yes."

Hermione nodded slowly, not sure how to follow that up.

He sighed, "Look, Granger if you'd like to know about that kind of history, you're probably not going to learn anything that will make you sleep better at night."

"I just think it's something we should talk about," she said back, not loving his last statement.

"Have you slept with Weasley?" he asked, a bit rhetorically.

"No," she answered and he tilted his head, not expecting that response, "It was right after the war and a lot had happened. It wasn't really the right time."

"So have you ever... been with anyone?" he asked.
"Not yet," she responded with a very deliberate shrug, "I haven't really dated besides Ron."

"And me," he said with a grin, grabbing her hand that was resting on the table.

"So we're dating then?" She said cheekily, "Are you my boyfriend?"

Draco thought for a moment, "Yes, I'll accept that title."

She gave a small laugh and squeezed his hand, "Well the timing hasn't quite worked out yet with us either," she didn't feel necessarily uncomfortable talking about this with him, she had just always been a little flustered talking about it at all since she didn't have any experience with it.

"No, it hasn't," he set his cup down, curious where the conversation was going to go.

"Have there been others besides Pansy?" She asked.

"Granger there's really no reason for us to go into detail here."

"Have there been many others?" she asked, surmising the answer to her first question.

"No one is going to win this game," he warned her, leaning back in his chair again.

"Alright, that seems like enough for me to probably not want to know."

"I tried telling you not to ask, but you wanted to be stubborn" he said, "Do you feel better now?"

"Not really," she said dryly, "But we should be open with each other. We should be able to talk about things."

"Well we are certainly airing it all out there," he looked like he wished his answers could have been different for her, "And we can always talk about this stuff, I just think if you try to dig into my past you're always going to find things you'd rather not. If it's something you need to know then we can have that fully transparent conversation."

"I don't think I really care," she said thoughtfully, "I just feel compelled to ask because I haven't and it makes me curious about other people's experience. Does it bother you that I haven't before?"

"No," he gave her a half smile, "I thought maybe Weasley, but I'm definitely not sad to know I'll be the first. If you'd like me to be."

"I'd like that to be the case when the right time does present itself," she felt a blush creep up her neck, but didn't look away, "Does it bother you that we haven't yet?"

"No," he said again with a laugh, "As much as I would very much enjoy it, it's certainly been a volatile few months. Hard to find the right mood, especially for your first time. I'm glad I know that now."

"Thank you for understanding," she gave him a small smile, "I wasn't sure how to broach the subject so I'm kind of relieved we had to talk about Pansy anyway."

"Of course I would understand. Granger it's you I'm interested in and anything that comes with that is just a bonus," he said, his tone genuine with a dash of unabashed flattery.

"Stop," she rolled her eyes playfully.
He grinned at her, "For my own knowledge, did you want to a couple of weeks ago? Before you saw my arm and I freaked out?"

"I was ready for it to go there," she nodded with an embarrassed smile.

"I really do have shit timing on my moods then," he said, draining the last drops of his tea.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione and Alden walked into the interrogation room later that morning with Ron and Harry behind the watching glass. They took their seats, waiting for the dementors to bring Chantel in.

"Do you think she'll be more helpful than Daphne?" Alden asked.

"She looked scared last night," Hermione said, "I'm not sure how she got involved, but I don't think she's as far in as the rest of them."

The door opened and a very pale Chantel walked in, taking the seat across from them and looking pointedly down into her lap.

"Good morning, Chantel," Hermione said stiffly. She heard a sniffle from her, but she didn't look up.

"Chantel, we're just here to have a conversation," Alden said, leaning on the table in front of them, "We'd like to understand how you got wrapped up in all of this."

Chantel finally looked up, her eyes were red, but hard, "This is the life I chose. The Death Eaters are my family."

"I wanted to think this was a mistake," Alden told her, "I've enjoyed having you around the office. I didn't think you were capable of being a part of this group."

"Chantel, how did you end up at the Riddle house last night?" Hermione started out the questioning.

"I had told Daphne that you were going to look for her at Rowle's," Chantel said, "She fled before you arrived and sent me an owl that there was a safehouse and she wanted me to come to her for instructions after a few days laying low."

"What instructions did she give you?" Hermione asked.

"She did not get to, you showed up an hour after I had found the place."

"How did you get mixed up with the Death Eaters?" Alden cut in, looking like a disappointed father.

"I will not tell you that," Chantel said defiantly.

"Chantel, we've worked together for two years, we don't have to be enemies. If you were in over your head, maybe we can work something out," Alden told her.

"I will not divulge the secrets."

"Who is the leader, Chantel?" Hermione tried again.

Chantel stared at her with her chin in the air and, if Hermione wasn't mistaken, tears in her eyes.
"What is the big plan the Death Eaters are trying to carry out?"

"It is bigger than you know," Chantel blurted, sounding a little scared.

"Do you know the names Pansy or Millicent?" She asked, looking for a reaction.
Chantel blinked abnormally quickly a couple of times, "I have never heard these names."
"Do you know Millicent?" She bated her for a reaction again.

Chantel's eyes narrowed.

"Millicent Bulstrode," Hermione said again.

"Do not talk about my Millie," she burst out, "She is a good person."

Hermione tilted her head slightly, "Is she a Death Eater?"

"She is a good person," the tears finally broke the barrier and started rolling down Chantel's face.

"Where is Millicent now?"

"I would never give her away to you," she shook her head, crying.

"How did you meet her?"

"We met in Paris through mutual friends when she was on holiday," Chantel wiped her cheek on her shoulder, "And we fell in love. Millie is a good person, Detective Granger."

"Perhaps a good person that got involved with the wrong people?" Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"She didn't have another choice! Leave her be. She has done nothing wrong yet."

"Chantel you must realize that everyone involved in the Death Eaters must be brought in. Whether she is just a pawn or not, if she is associating with them, she is a part of the movement."

Chantel burst into another fit of tears, "I'm sorry, Millie," she cried over and over again.

"Do you know Pansy Parkinson?" Hermione asked.

Chantel shook her head sadly, "I do not know this name."

"What does the plan involve?" Alden could tell their time was limited with Chantel's cooperation.

"I don't know," she looked at him finally, "I just know if it happens, you will not stand a chance. I'm sorry."

She looked back down in her lap and continued to let the tears fall, inconsolable.

"Have them take her back to Azkaban and start the hunt for Millicent," Alden said to Hermione, turning and leaving the room.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione started a few different groups on background and contact searches, making sure the team had the tools to do what they could until she was back Monday morning. When she left the Ministry that evening she apparated back to the Manor to tell Draco about the day.
"So now you think Millicent is involved?" Draco asked as he propped himself up on the bed, pushing the tray of half-eaten food onto the bedside table, "This just seems crazy to me. They were my friends and I know I was wrapped up in the Death Eaters, they all just always focused on much more school-related drama like who was dating whom and which house was leading for the house cup."

"And now they're out of school and someone is rallying them into the dark arts," Hermione shrugged, leaning on her side, her hair falling heavily over her shoulders, "Are you sure you don't have any other ideas of who else might be involved?"

"Trust me, if I did I would have given you them by now," he said flatly.

She sighed, "Maybe you are a criminal mastermind and I'm just blinded by your good looks."

"That would almost make this whole ordeal a lot easier. Then I could just be enjoying freedom before my inevitable downfall," he put his hand on her waist, rubbing his thumb over the exposed skin between her shirt and the top of her pajama pants.

She shook her head with a laugh, moving a little closer to him and resting her hand on his chest, "I might actually miss you this weekend," she said.

"I would much rather be in Australia than cooped up in the manor," he grinned down at her.

"Would you have come? If you could have?" she asked.

He sighed, "You probably would have talked me into it, but I think you deserve the Draco-free weekend with your parents to reconnect and put the case in the back of your mind."

She ignored him, "I would have liked you to be there."

"I know," he conceded, "But I will be here, and I believe Blaise is going to stop in this weekend so we'll just be enjoying the Quidditch simulation room and catching up."

"I'm sure it'll be a nice weekend having Blaise here," she said, happy to hear he wouldn't be moping around the manor by himself. She leaned up and kissed him, staying for a few more as his lips drew her back in.

She pulled back and their eyes locked in a blissfully easy moment.

"You are beautiful, you know," he said, pushing her hair back over her shoulder.

"You're just trying to get my shirt off again," she said.

"You're not wrong, but I thought you should know what I was thinking as I was looking at you."

"Would you like to know what I was thinking?" she asked quietly.

"What were you thinking?" his voice was low and his hand was lazily moving up and down on her back.

"I was thinking there's something I'd like to tell you before I leave for the weekend, how I've been feeling about you," she smiled, ready to get it off her mind, feeling that maybe the moment was here.

The soft look in his eyes faltered as he caught on, "Granger, I'm not sure if you should tell me how you're feeling. I think if you just let me pretend that we are living life one day at a time, it'll make
things a lot more simple."

She furrowed her eyebrows, a bit hurt, "Since when has anything worthwhile ever been simple?"

He looked conflicted, moving his hand to cup her cheek, "Nothing I can give you could ever be considered worthwhile. I was a Death Eater. I'm on house arrest. The world looks at me like I'm a monster, and so do I. There is something worthwhile in life for you, I am just unfortunately the one that caught your attention until you find it."

"I hate that you see yourself that way," she said sadly, realizing the time had passed to share her feelings.

"I'm going to enjoy every second I can with you, and I will play the part of boyfriend as adequately as I'm able," he grinned halfheartedly, "But I can never give you the life you deserve."

"Can you just let the Wizengamot be out on that decision for now?" she asked, not ready to take that as the final word, hoping that with time maybe he could move past those thoughts.

He saw the resilience in her eyes and gave in, "Sure. The Wizengamot is still out on what the future holds. For now, I get to hold you and then you get to go have a relaxing weekend exploring the Australian seaside with your parents." He gave her a smile and pulled her in close, feeling her relax a little and resting his head on top of hers. His expression dropped as he stared at the wall but he knew she'd understand one day. He squeezed her a little tighter to him, closing his eyes.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry for the delay with this chapter! Last week was my birthday filled with too many events and celebrations and not enough down time! Love seeing the reviews and guesses you’re all coming up with :) xx
Hermione left early the next morning for Australia, apparating to a rural field outside of London where an older man was standing by a large arrow shaped rock.

"Good morning, are you Donald?" she asked.

"I am indeed," the man nodded, "Wand, please."

She handed over her wand and he scanned it with his own, nodding and handing it back to her, along with a bike tire he picked up off the ground, "Should just be a few minutes here."

They waited in an awkward silence until he gave her the three second countdown and she felt a pull behind her bellybutton. She landed on her feet a minute later and her shoes sunk down into sand.

"Not ideal placement," she said to herself, pulling her feet out and dropping the bike tire before it shook again a few seconds later and disappeared. Her parents lived on the strand close by so she headed off towards the boardwalk.

After a teary reunion, she spent the day with her parents sightseeing and catching up. That evening at dinner, her mother asked her the questions she knew would come, "So how is Ron doing?" She smiled at her, "He was such a nice boy."

"Ron is doing well," she cleared her throat, "However we're still not back together."

"I mean I know you haven't been, but I feel like he's always around," her mother said airily.

"Actually, I'm seeing someone new. I have been for a few months now," she told her, taking a bite of her food while her mother processed the information.

"But I thought you and Ron were just taking a break until you got settled and such at work," her mother looked confused.

"It's been a three year break, mum," she gave a little laugh, "Sometimes other things come up during that time. We broke up at the end of that summer because we needed to grow as people. It was always possible that we wouldn't end up back together."

"Of course it was," her mother waved her hand, "I'm sorry, I was just surprised! When we saw you last summer I still thought you and Ron were spending time together and hoping things would work out in the end."

"This all happened out of nowhere, honestly," Hermione said, "I did think things would work out with Ron, but then this other thing came along and I knew I had to give it a shot. There's a real connection with him."

"And there wasn't with Ron anymore?" her mother asked passing the salt across the table to her father.

"They're just… different connections, but it feels special. Of course Ron will always be important to me, but so is this," Hermione tried to explain.

"So this new boy, do you think there's a future with him?" her father piped in.

She considered them for a moment, "It's complicated," she finally said, "He's got a tough past. Plus
"Well, go on," her father goaded her, "Tell us about the new boy."

"His name is Draco," she glanced up to check for recognition but they obviously didn't remember, "He went to Hogwarts with us, he was in our year in a different house."

"And what does he do now that he's out of school?" her mother sat back with her glass of wine, ready to hear the details.

"Well, right now he's just focusing on his independent studies while he decides what to do. But he wants to be a Healer - a wizarding doctor."

"A doctor would be a great job, but why hasn't he gone for it yet? I'm sure it'll take time to finish schooling for that as well," her father perked up at the impressive job prospect.

She set her silverware down, she needed to tell them the full truth, Draco wouldn't want her painting him as something he wasn't, "He's just got other things he needs to deal with personally first. You see, he got mixed up with the Death Eaters during the wizarding war - the supporters of Voldemort. His family had been wrapped up in it long before he was born and they couldn't walk away without being killed. He did it for them and he's done some really… not great things. But he's a good person and he's trying to start over. There are just some hurdles he's got to jump in the process."

Her parents were wide-eyed and silent, trying to come up with something productive to say.

"I know it doesn't sound great," Hermione conceded, "But it's not who he is. He walked away before the end of the war. He was just caught up in it all."

"Is he in prison?" her father finally asked.

"Not exactly," she said, grimacing at her choice of words, "I mean, no. He's not. He's been free ever since the trials when he was exonerated. Honestly if it wasn't for him the Death Eaters could have identified Harry, Ron and myself quick enough to have changed the outcome of the war when we were captured. And his mother lied to Voldemort as well and probably saved Harry's life. The Malfoys actually played big parts in the events that happened the night of the battle that helped us win."

"Wait, Malfoy? That name sounds familiar," her mother looked at her with concern, "Isn't that the boy that was always mean to you at school?"

She sighed, "Yes, that same boy. But I'm trying to tell you he's changed and matured, like everyone does eventually. He's not the same person he was raised to be."

"But he's not in prison?" Her father asked again, "Your 'not exactly' still hasn't been completely elaborated on."

"Right," she tried to get back to her train of thought, "So he was exonerated in the original trials after the war. Unfortunately his name is being dragged back into this new Death Eater resurgence that's happening in the Wizarding World. He's completely innocent, but they put him on house arrest last week in 'an abundance of caution'."

Her parents looked at each other before her mother reached her hand out and grabbed Hermione's, "Sweetheart you know we will always support you, but do you think being involved with a former um, what did you call them? Death Eater? Is a good idea? You've worked so hard to get where you
are."
"We reconnected when I was put on his case," Hermione told her, "He's a good person and he deserves a normal life. He didn't have a choice in the life he had to live when Voldemort was in power."

Her parents both nodded, their daughter's faith in him was blindingly obvious.

"I guess the most important question is, does he make you happy?" Her mother asked her seriously.

"Yes," she said simply, her lip curling up automatically, "Yes, when I'm with him, away from everything else, we make each other very happy."

"Sometimes the heart pulls us in funny directions, doesn't it," her father quipped, taking a sip of his wine.

"It really does," she grinned, hoping the conversation would lighten a bit now that the tough part was out of the way.

"So what is it that drew you to him as a boyfriend?" her father asked, trying to act normal given the information he'd just learned.

"He's very smart and witty," she picked up her fork again, "He was second in the class at Hogwarts, behind me. I wouldn't say we're very similar outside of that, but we compliment each other well. He challenges and stimulates me mentally and he just brings something to my life that I realized I was missing."

"A bit of danger, perhaps," her mother said a little cheekily, with a side glance.

"A bit of excitement," Hermione allowed, "If you met him, you'd understand. I wish I could have brought him with me."

"Maybe better that you were able to tell us his back story without him being here," her father said, "We can let it all settle in before we meet him so we'll be able to judge his character separately from hearing about his not-so-pristine past."

Hermione nodded, "I know it's a lot to take in, but he wouldn't want me telling you only the good stories about him, he'd want you to know the whole truth."

"And does he think you have a future together?" her father asked.

"He thinks I deserve better, honestly," she said, "He doesn't see the progression and strength in himself that I do, he gets stuck on his past."

"Sounds humble, at least."

She almost laughed, "About some things, yes. He still has a strong personality. I hope you do get to meet him one day."

"I hope we do as well," her mother smiled at her.

In that moment she was so thankful for the understanding, supportive parents she had in her life, "While we're on the subject, I could use some advice."

"Of course, anything," her mother said, turning back to her own food.
"I've been wanting to tell Draco how I feel about him, you know, that little three word phrase we're all so scared of," she said with a bit of an awkward smile, still not wanting to say it out loud until she was looking into his eyes and feeling what he made her feel, "But I'm not sure how he'll respond."

"Oh I see," her mother nodded slowly, "You're not sure if he feels the same way? You deserve someone who's going to care for you as much as you care for them."

"No it's not that, I think he does feel the same way, it's just with the whole him not feeling like he deserves me part, I'm not sure what he'll say out loud if I tell him," she realized how complicated it all sounded, but she needed someone to talk to and she was sure Harry and Ron didn't want to hear about it.

"Well sweetheart, something I told myself after learning that you'd wiped our memories and erased yourself from our lives was that if there was anything I ever felt like I needed you to know, I'd tell you without hesitation," she gave her a small smile and Hermione looked apologetically back at her, "So if you never had the chance to tell him again, would you regret not saying it?"

"I think I'd regret it very much if he didn't have the chance to hear it from me," Hermione said thoughtfully.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione made the best of her time in Australia, staying up late into the night talking with her parents about the public pieces of the case she was working on and the intricacies of the evidence against Draco. She told them about the Malfoy library, and the dinner Draco had prepared her. She told her mother about the gardens, which she would have loved, and her father about the Quidditch practice room, since he was a big sports fanatic. He still couldn't fully grasp the concept of riding brooms feet up in the air, but he enjoyed the athletic parts she could explain to him, dodging bludgers, catching quaffles and shooting through hoops. The next day they strolled the beach, her parents taking her to their favorite spots and introducing her to the neighbors. She forgot how quiet muggle life was, away from news of the Death Eater searches and office chattering about the Quidditch playoffs.

By Sunday evening she was sad to leave her parents, but ready to get back to Draco and the casework. She felt guilty for spending a weekend away from it all, but was happy she made the trip happen and was able to tell her parents about Draco in person.

They stood in the sand and she hugged them both tightly.

"We'd love to see you sooner than a year from now," her mother smiled at her, "There's so much going on in your life and we want to be as much a part of it as we can be."

"Yes, I agree," Hermione nodded, "Let me know when you're back in London and we can find a good time for you to meet Draco."

"That sounds lovely, dear."

Hermione searched the ground, spotting an old bike tire submerged under the sand a few feet away. She grabbed it, waving to her parents who had very confused looks on their faces, "I love you!" she said, feeling the tire start to shake, and with a *POP* she was whisked back to London.

"Welcome in, wand please," Donald greeted her. She handed her wand over to him and he scanned it again, "Ms. Granger, all looks in order. Have a wonderful day," he handed her wand back with a
gruff smile and Hermione handed him the bike tire before apparating to the Manor.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Draco, Blaise and Lucius were talking in the dining room when Hermione walked in with Narcissa. Draco stood up, excusing himself, and walked over to greet her with a kiss as Narcissa walked past him into the dining room to sit back down at the table.

"How was your trip?" he asked, smiling down at her.

"It was nice, but I'm glad to be back. So much to do here, it was starting to weigh on me."

"Well, relax for a little while longer, the work week isn't until tomorrow," he said, grabbing her hand and leading her into the dining room with the others.

She sat, feeling a bit uncomfortable with Lucius and Narcissa across the table. Lucius was eying her as he answered something Blaise must have asked him. The table went silent for a moment before Blaise cleared his throat, "Granger, I heard you were in Australia."

"I was," she said with a forced smile at him, "My parents are there on holiday for the summer."

"Sounds expensive," Lucius noted.

"They own a small house in London and a small house in Australia," Hermione said, feeling like she shouldn't have to explain how they were able to be there.

"And what is it your parents do?" Narcissa asked, trying to bring some warmth into the atmosphere.

"They're dentists," she said a bit stiffly, knowing she'd have to explain, "They fix people's teeth. Without magic it takes quite a bit of work and schooling."

"Ah yes, muggles," Lucius gave her a cold smile, "I almost forgot."

Narcissa gave him a quick glare before turning back to Hermione, "That's nice they're able to travel like that. What is it they like about Australia?"

Hermione looked over at Draco, who nodded, before turning back to them, "Well, to be honest I feared for them during the wizarding war, so I obliviated them to remove every memory of myself from their lives and sent them to Australia so they would be safe and far away from where anyone might look for them."

Narcissa furrowed her brows, "You were able to obliviate them to remove yourself completely? That's some strong magic."

"Yes, it was quite difficult to learn. And to do, for multiple reasons of course."

"That must have been heart wrenching for you," Narcissa responded as the weight of the act settled in.

Hermione noticed Lucius still staring down his nose at her, "It was, but I found them after the war and restored their memories so all is well now. They just still feel at home in Australia."

"I don't know how I'd function if someone erased Draco from my memories," Narcissa said, looking over at him fondly.
"You wouldn't even know I was gone," he said with a sarcastic smile.

"Well it's lovely that you were able to spend some time with your parents this weekend, then," Narcissa told her, ignoring his comment.

"Did you tell them about Draco?" Blaise asked with a grin.

"I did," she said, both to Blaise and Draco.

"Did you tell them about his past?" Lucius asked, eyebrows raised.

"I did," she said, enunciating the words a little more this time, "I figured he'd want me to be honest with them, so I told them the general overview of his past and then told them about him, as I know him."

Draco tried to laugh it off, "So I suppose we'll be breaking up any day now."

She looked at him incredulously, "They said they look forward to meeting you when they're back in London."

The room was silent for a moment before Blaise leaned over from the other side of Draco, "Too bad he's not as great in person as he is on paper," he joked.

Draco rolled his eyes, "That was nice of your parents to say," he said to Hermione, not acknowledging if it would ever happen.

"How is your family's store, Blaise?" Hermione asked, changing the subject.

"Oh it's going just fine," he sat back, "Sales will be ramping up for the school season soon I expect."

"Especially with the new Nimbus 2005 out," Lucius spectated.

Blaise gave a laugh, "That won't be a large part of our sales, given the price tag. We've only got a couple in stock."

"I suppose you've got a point," Lucius allowed, "I guess not everyone can afford them."

"Were you able to enjoy the Quidditch practice room this weekend?" Hermione asked the boys.

"Oh yeah," Blaise nodded, "Theo actually came over on Saturday to join us. It was a good time."

"That sounds very nice," she smiled at him.

"Yes, Draco and Theo were talking about his job at Gringotts," Lucius added, "I think it sounds like a great option for your future," he said to Draco.

"Finance?" Hermione looked over at him, "I was hoping you were still considering being a Healer."

"I am," he said, "I haven't decided what I'm going to do yet, Theo was just talking about it. Besides, first course of action is getting this charm off of my leg. Until then, I'm just an avid reader."

"They will realize their mistake soon enough, Draco, you will get your future back," his father said confidently and Hermione couldn't help but nod in agreement.
"You will," she squeezed his hand, "I feel like we're so close."

Blaise took off shortly after and Draco and Hermione bid goodnight to his parents, Hermione trying her best to be civil to Lucius, and they wandered off to the library.

"I had Blaise pick up a little something for you on his way over," Draco said, leading her down one of the rows in the middle of the room. The ladder followed them as they walked until he came to a stop.

"You didn't have to get me anything," she told him with a laugh, "I'm the one that went somewhere new. Your souvenirs are in my bag still."

"Well, Blaise happened to be my connection to the outside world this weekend and I'm not very well going to have you pick up something for yourself," he said, shaking his head, "Hop on, we're going up."

He climbed on the ladder and she followed him until they got closer to the top of the upper bookcase. He pulled a book off the shelf and handed it to her, "It's something I've picked up a few times when I've been at Flourish and Blotts, grimaced at, and put back," he said with a little laugh.

She looked at the title, *The Aftermath of the War: The Psychological Impact on Both Sides.*

She looked back up at him with questioning eyes, "Have you read this?"

"I've skimmed through it in the store," he said, "I think it would be too difficult for me to read because I've seen enough of it that resonated with me. There's a large section with some interviews they did with people who had been under the Imperius Curse, and some people who followed The Dark Lord for fear, rather than loyalty. It talks a lot about how they reflect on their actions and roles. I know it's hard for me to put into words sometimes and I know you may not understand why I react the way I do to certain circumstances. For example, having you see the Dark Mark on my arm, or when you talk about what it was like for you to be on the other side, so I thought if you gave this a read, it might help you understand what goes on in my head when I can't explain."

She looked at him sweetly, "This was very thoughtful."

"It's also got a lot of stuff in there about how other people are coping with what they saw, friends they lost, things they had to do to protect others, people on your side. So there's more than just the parts that I think might help you understand me better."

Hermione took his hand, "It's your side too," she said softly, "You're on the right side now."

He gave her a half smile, "I also asked him to pick up this neat little gadget that's always caught my interest," he reached back into the space the book was in and grabbed a box, opening it and pulling something out. He pointed his wand at it, "*Volitant.*"

It was an L-shaped piece of ornate metal that hovered in place when Draco said the incantation, "It's a charmed book holder." He grabbed another book from the shelf and opened it to the middle, placing it within the holder. It snapped into place like a magnet, open to the same page and staying perfectly still. Draco turned it upside down and the back the other way, "It'll stay in reading position no matter which way you turn it. It thought it'd be nice for reading in bed since you like to lay down when you read."

Hermione smiled at him, "This is really fun," she reached up and turned the page of the book, which flipped over and held in place without wavering like it had become glued to the page behind it.
"Also, not that it matters, but the holder is solid 24 karat gold. It should last you a good amount of time. Didn't want to get you something that would fall apart."

Her head whipped over to look at him, "24 Karat gold?! That's unnecessary, Draco."

"It's an investment and I can't take it back to the store anyway," he said smugly to her.

She shook her head and laughed, "It's very nice. I'm excited to try it out."

He grabbed it from the air, flicking his wand at it again, "Averte," and handed it to her.

She took it, "It's so light for being solid gold," she commented.

"It's got a lightening charm on it, or else you wouldn't even be able to hold it," he grinned.

She climbed up another rung to stand parallel to him and kissed him, "You didn't have to do any of this."

"I wanted to," he ran his hand through her hair, "The holder I just thought you would enjoy, the book I thought might help you understand my mood swings better than I can explain and I always feel a bit guilty that I can't convey where it comes from."

"You know this is quite close to where we had our first kiss," Hermione said, looking around.

"Is it?" he asked, wrapping his arm around her and waving his wand as the ladder took off down the row, around the corner and halfway down the next row before coming to a stop, "Technically this is where he had our first kiss."

Hermione looked at the shelf, reading the spines of the books on different areas of Healing and smiling broadly, "Yes, this is it."

He pulled her back in, kissing her more deeply this time, one hand on the small of her back, the other lost somewhere in her hair.

She sighed into the kiss contentedly as she felt his tongue move almost too gently against hers. She wrapped her arms around the back of his neck and felt herself relax completely into him.

She pulled back after a minute and their eyes locked on each other. His eyes shined silver in the lighting of the library. She loved when they were light and warm in his moments of calm. She felt like she could see through them, into who he really was, not just who everyone else saw.

"I love you, Draco," she said in a whisper, her smile radiating in her eyes.

She watched as his smile fell and time slowed. He pushed the hair out of her face and behind her ear, running his finger down her cheek as his eyes clouded over again with a subtle pain, and no response came.

"I'd regret it if you never had the chance to hear me tell you how I feel about you," her voice was soft, but she couldn't totally hide the disappointment.

He leaned down and kissed her again and she felt his answer, felt his passion, felt his affection. His eyes were still closed when he pulled away, and he let out a heavy sigh.

"For you, I wish you didn't," he finally said.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
"That's all you have to say back?" she asked quietly.

"It's all I can say," he clarified with a note of soft finality, "I think you should get some sleep so you're ready to jump back into work tomorrow."

She nodded stiffly, tuning back into her surroundings and remembering that they were 20 feet in the air on a ladder. She pulled her gaze from him and made her way down.

When they walked into the bedroom, Hermione dropped her bag on a chair opening it, "I just brought back some little things for you while we were exploring," she tried to make her voice sound as normal as possible, but she felt incredibly disconnected in that moment, "This is a camphor laurel cutting board, handmade in Sydney and it reminded me of your cooking expeditions," she set it on the nightstand, "This is emu oil. It has a lot of healing properties, even for muggles, but it's used in a lot of more complex healing potions by wizards as well," she set it on top of the cutting board, "And this is just a boomerang, it's a muggle toy but it was something special to me as a child because they always seemed magical and it felt familiar even though I didn't know why. You throw it forward and it comes back to you on its own. Just a knick knack, but it's a nice solid wood one."

He could sense her tension, but took the boomerang from her, inspecting it in his hands, "It's quite beautiful," he said, admiring the etchings in the wood, "These are all very thoughtful souvenirs."

"Yes, I tried to pick things you'd find interesting," she said, starting to walk around the room to grab some of her things laying around and packing them into her bag.

"Just cleaning up a bit?" he asked.

"Well, now that we've caught Daphne, I'm going to go back to my flat after work tomorrow," she said nonchalantly, "I told you I'd get out of your hair when I was able to."

"I've liked having you here," he said, "I hope you don't feel like you have to leave, you never know who else may know where you live now. She may have told others."

"I think the immediate threat is gone, so I'm going to just put some extra protections up and it should be fine," she said with a forced smile, "I'll just stay the night so I don't have to make your mother walk me out this late."

"How about you come over here and sit with me and we can talk about what's really bothering you?" Draco suggested, tilting his head at her.

Hermione stood where she was, crossing her arms in front of her, "You already know what's bothering me," she responded briskly, "I told you I loved you and you told me I shouldn't. That doesn't exactly make me feel butterflies."

Draco sat back on the bed against the wall, pulling his knees up in front of him, "I told you before you left not to tell me," he said, "I can't say it back, no matter how I feel. It would never be fair to you for me to tell you that knowing that we can't have a future."

"You said we didn't have to decide that yet, so why can't we be open with each other," she could feel her eyes watering and willed them to stop.
"I'm sorry Granger, but I think you already know how I feel and I would just prefer if we could leave it at that. I want to make you happy for as long as I can but if you make me try and put this into words, my words will likely betray us both eventually."

"Your outlook is always so dark," she stared at him, trying to decide if she was angry or sad or understanding. He'd told her before that he couldn't say what she wanted to hear and she'd told him anyway because of her mother's advice, and she knew that.

"You are the bright spot in an otherwise very dark life, Granger."

Of anything he'd said so far, this one resonated the loudest with her. He wasn't being negative or condescending, it was truly how he felt and she could see that. He'd just given her a whole book to try and put into words what he couldn't. Until she read that, it probably wasn't fair of her to have this conversation.

"I just wish I could hear you tell me how you feel," she said a bit softer, letting her arms drop, "But I said what I wanted to say and I don't take it back."

Draco nodded, thinking, "I'll tell you how you make me feel. How's that?" He held out his hand, motioning for her to come join him and she sighed, walking over, "You make me feel... good even when I'm not well," she could see him trying to find a way to pick the right things to express, "I feel thankful that you reappeared in my life and gave me a second chance and a voice," she took his hand, climbing on the bed and sitting with him against the wall, leaning her head on his shoulder as he wrapped his arm around her, "You give me hope that there's something more out there for me in my future when this is all over. Something more than hiding in Malfoy Manor thinking about everything I wish I had done," he ran his hand through her hair, twirling the ends around his finger as he thought, "You bring something pure into my life. You give with no expectations for anything in return," she felt her body relax, knowing that behind all of the things he was saying was the phrase she wanted to hear, even if he didn't say it explicitly, "You make me feel very lucky and simultaneously undeserving of your attention," he paused again, "You make me feel like the best version of myself that I've known."

"Well now I don't know what to say," Hermione smiled, shuffling slightly to drape her arm across his chest.

He tilted her head to look up at him, an inconspicuous smirk creeping into his expression, "You also make me feel a lot of other things," his voice was lower now, more husky and she felt chills run down her arms.

"How about you tell me about those things too," she said quietly, quite content to continue listening.

"It would be much more fun to show you," he gave her a lingering kiss.

"Yes but you just left me hanging on some very sensitive words," Hermione reminded him in fairness, "So now I'd like to hear how else I make you feel."

His hand traced it's way across her collarbone and over her shoulder, as he watched her eyes drift closed, "You drive my senses crazy by doing nothing at all, Granger."

Hermione pressed her lips against his softly, "I do feel much better now," she grinned up at him.

"I bet you do," he scooped her up and stretched out on the bed with her, pulling her body as close as it could get. They lay there for a while kissing, lips and hands wandering each other, enjoying
the ease of the moment together now that the tension had passed.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione had returned to her apartment the next day, true to her word, but still spent a good part of the weeks at the Manor. The month of July whipped by as the Department of Magical Law Enforcement deployed their teams on the hunt for Millicent Bulstrode, who was nowhere to be found. It took some undercover Auror groups and cooperation with the French Ministry to locate her in Nice at the end of the month. There was a struggle during her extraction and another Auror was seriously injured and taken to St. Mungo's, but three other Death Eaters were brought in with Millicent, all believed to be linked to the Death Eater activity directly through her.

When Hermione finally walked in to see Millicent sitting in the interrogation room, she felt triumphant, if not a bit frustrated with the time and resource use she'd caused.

"Millicent, you've been brought in on accusations of your involvement with the Death Eaters," Hermione took her seat across from a very sulky looking girl with an overly round face.

"Whose accusations?" she shot back, "Seems like you're just rounding up all the old Slytherin class for fun to me, Detective Granger."

"Whatever excuses you've concocted while you've been in hiding won't help you," Hermione ignored her statement, "You were accused by Chantel Dubois."

Millicent looked incredulously back at her, "What game are you playing?"

She'd obviously caught her off guard, "We apprehended Chantel with Daphne Greengrass and when I asked if she knew your name, she burst into tears trying to protect you but she'd already accidentally given you up."

Millicent looked dumbstruck, "Well, I… no, I don't believe you."

"It doesn't really matter what you believe," Hermione waved her hand, "We know you're a part of the Death Eater resurgence and if you cooperate, we can discuss what kind of role you played and what our options are. It didn't seem like Chantel much wanted to be a part of it if it hadn't been for your involvement."

"There's nothing I will tell you," she said with her head high, realizing she probably couldn't talk herself out of being involved.

"Who is the leader," Hermione asked for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Draco Malfoy," she responded on cue.

"So you won't tell us anything, but you'll tell us that."

"That's not a secret," Millicent shrugged, "He wants the credit for it and everyone has been giving it to him except for you."

"Where are your meetings held?"

"I won't tell you that."

"Where are the plans for whatever attack the Death Eaters are planning?"

Millicent looked mildly surprised, but didn't falter, "I won't tell you anything."
Hermione sighed, "Is Pansy Parkinson involved?" She watched for a reaction but none came.

"I haven't talked to her in years," Millicent said, "Pansy disappeared after the Battle of Hogwarts."

"Why were you hiding in France? Is there another network there?"

"There are networks everywhere," Millicent's mouth split into a grin.

"Are there more people from our class at Hogwarts?"

"No."

"When are they going through with the plans?"

"I won't tell you that."

Hermione looked at her hard, debating how useful she was going to be at this point before standing up, "You'll be going off to Azkaban now," she said as she walked out of the room, leaving it open for the dementors.

Alden met her in the hallway, "What do you think? She wasn't much of a talker."

"I think she thought there was a chance she could talk herself out of it for a second and then gave up on that and went back to whatever narrative it is they're trying to sell," Hermione said with a huff.

"Where do we go from here without any more names?" He looked over at her, "I was hoping she'd lead us somewhere after all the trouble we went through to find her."

"I know, me too," Hermione gave him an apologetic look, "We're going to try and get in contact with Pansy. We sent an owl to her house a couple of weeks ago but it came back yesterday with the message still attached. I think we need to question her. If nothing else comes out of it, she might have some more suggestions."

"Yes, I agree, why haven't we talked with her yet?"

"She's been on a list for a little bit because of my interview with Astoria where she said Daphne had been friends with her and Millicent at Hogwarts, but her name hasn't come up anywhere else and after talking with Millicent I'm starting to think she did what Draco said and dropped the Dark Arts and went off the grid after the Battle."

"Draco doesn't think she's involved?"

"No, he said they have a bit of a history and he thinks she gave it up when he did."

"Well that's promising, but do what you can to get her in here as soon as possible so we can check it off the list."

"I will, I need to go back to some of my old notes and see if there's anything else we're missing as well."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Hermione and Draco sat in the den surrounded by stacks of old notes and files when Hermione whipped her head around to him with a thought, "Draco, did you ever hear back from your friend Adrien? Wasn't he supposed to be back in June from his trip?"
"Oh yeah," he furrowed his brow, "I never heard back, I'll send him another owl."

"Yes, please do, I think we should talk to him as soon as we can."

Draco scribbled a note on a piece of parchment and rolled it up, walking out of the room to find an owl. When he came back in, Hermione was making some notes for herself.

She looked up, "Also, I had sent an owl to Pansy Parkinson because we'll need a statement from her, but the owl couldn't find her."

"That's strange," Draco said, "I wonder if she left the house when her father was brought in. I'm not sure I'd want to be at the Manor if my parents were both gone. Her mother passed away when we were much younger."

"Any chance you could send an owl to try and find her?" Hermione asked.

"I'd really rather not," Draco said reluctantly.

"Fine, I'll try one more tomorrow, but if we can't reach her, I'll need you to try and help."

"Alright," he nodded, looking like he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"I'll be going over to Harry and Ginny's tomorrow night for Harry's birthday dinner," Hermione mentioned, "Just wanted to let you know I wouldn't be over tomorrow."

"Potter's birthday is tomorrow?" He asked.

"Yes, July 31st."

"Hm," he said, getting up and leaving the room before coming back a few minutes later, "Give him this from me, for his help on my case. Call it an olive branch."

He handed her a small box, "Aerodynamic Dragonfire Polish," she read, "What's this for?"

"It's a broom polish infused with dragonfire. It's quite rare, it not only shines the broom, but puts a coat of this film over it that makes it fly smoother against the wind. I certainly don't have much use for it right now, someone may as well enjoy it."

"That's very generous of you," she said with a wry smile, "I got him tickets for a Canons game in August. Ron bought himself a ticket for Harry's birthday and I bought Harry a ticket, so they'll go together, Harry just doesn't know yet."

"You said his girlfriend is trying out for Puddlemere?" Draco asked.

"Yes, she's made the practice team so she'll find out in the fall if she's a full time team member."

"Now there's a dream job," he nodded, clearly impressed.

Hermione attended dinner at Harry's the next night, along with Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna and Hagrid.

They spent the evening enjoying some bottles of mead provided by Hagrid and recanting stories from Hogwarts. Neville told them all about the preparations he was doing to take over for Sprout in the fall, which was followed by a tangent Luna went on about a mythical plant she wanted him to
research in the greenhouses.

Hermione breached the subject of Draco with the group, knowing if it would ever be accepted, she'd have to make it a normal conversation. Neville looked shocked, Hagrid concerned and Luna as airy as ever.

"That must have been why he always picked on you at school," Luna quipped, "He just had a crush."

Hermione chuckled, "I don't think he did, Luna. It's just something that fell together from our new circumstances."

"They're saying he's the new Dark Lord, you know," Luna said conversationally, "I don't believe it though, I think they're just using his name to hide behind."

"He's not involved," Hermione assured her, "We're working hard to clear his name."

"I jus' hope he treats ya righ'," Hagrid said gruffly, "You deserve a gentleman," he glanced over at Ron who gave him a crooked smile back.

"He has been a gentleman," she said with emphasis.

"I remember he didn't want to go back to the other side… at the Battle," Neville said quietly, "V-Voldemort called him back over and he hesitated. You could tell he wanted to stay."

Hermione felt a wave of admiration for Neville in that moment knowing his own history with Malfoy and hearing him stick up for him now, "He did want to stay. I know he was never the nicest to any of us, but he's made a lot of changes for the better."

"Once he's off house arrest, you'll have to bring him around," Ginny said with a supportive smile, "We'll all just pretend we've never met him."

"Probably for the best," Harry winked at her and Hermione sighed with a bit of amusement, shaking her head.

"We're all willing to give him another chance," Ron said, forcing a grin.

She gave him an appreciative smile back and turned to Ginny, "So what do you think of the other prospects for Puddlemere?"

"There are a handful of great prospects for the open Beater position," she said, "Probably only one other person that's really competition to me for the Chaser position, though. I just can't wait 'til trials are all done. It's been exhausting."

Ginny brought out a large treacle tart for dessert and the group sang Happy Birthday to Harry as he rang in 21 years with his best friends.

"Alright mate, Hermione and I sort of went in on a gift for you," Ron patted him on the back, pulling a ticket out of his back pocket and flashing it in front of Harry.

"You got yourself a ticket to a Quidditch match!" Harry joked.

Hermione laughed, "And I got this one for you!" She pulled it out of her bag and handed it to him, "The match is on the 14th of August, it'll be the Canons against the Wimbourne Wasps."

"Lovely! Thank you both, Ron I look forward to enjoying the match with you."
They went around the table showering Harry with gifts until he was through each of them, "Really, this was too much, none of you had to get me a thing."

"Oh!" Hermione remembered the box in her purse, "I have one more thing for you," she pulled it out and handed it to him, "It's actually from Draco."

The room went a little quiet and Harry tilted his head at her as he took the box from her hand, "Malfoy got me a birthday present?"

"Something he said he'd bought right before they put him on house arrest, and he wants someone to put it to good use," she said, trying to downplay her own appreciation for the gesture.

He opened the box, pulling out the bottle of dragonfire polish and reading the insert on the origin and benefits, "Wow," he said, eyebrows raised and nodding, "This is really cool. Tell him thank you."

"I will," she smiled.

Hermione left for home soon after, heart and stomach both refreshingly full from the evening. She really did hope that eventually she'd be able to bring Draco with her to spend time with her friends, even if she had to drag him at first. If they accepted him, maybe he'd start to accept himself more too.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Another week later, Draco received a letter back from Adrien. When Hermione arrived at the Manor that evening, he handed it to her, looking unsure.

Draco,

I am back home, sorry I did not reach out. If I am being honest, I was hoping you would find what you were looking for without me. Yes, I will meet, but only with you and your detective. Please keep this extremely quiet.

Adrien

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
A Compromise

Draco had written back to Adrien the next day explaining that he was on house arrest and that Hermione could come meet him, if he gave her a date and location.

"He must know something," Hermione said, "Did he still have connections to the Death Eaters at Durmstrang?"

"Not that I knew of," Draco shook his head, "I have no idea how he got the information that he is obviously hoping not to share."

A couple of days later Draco received another letter:

Dear Draco,

I would rather not meet without you there so I know I am talking to the right people. I fear I'm being watched and do not want to take chances.

Adrien

"What didn't he understand about I'm on house arrest,'" Draco said incredulously.

They exchanged a few more letters but Adrien was steadfast about not speaking without Draco present and not meeting outside of his house.

"Do you think it's a trap?" Hermione asked him finally, not understanding why he would be so stubborn.

"No, I think he's terrified of something," Draco shook his head.

"Let me talk to Alden and see if there's anything we can do to bring you along. Two wizards were killed yesterday that had been under the imperius curse during the Wizarding War. We think it's linked to the Death Eater activity and maybe if there's some hope of learning something new the Auror department will be more lenient."

"Adrien said to keep it quiet," Draco looked at her with concern.

"I'll make sure it doesn't go any further than it needs to and I'll try to keep his name out of it completely," Hermione told him, "Have you heard back from Pansy at all?"

"Not a word," Draco looked apologetically at her, "It's been a week now and my owl still hasn't come back. I wonder if she's in hiding like Adrien is. I'm sure anyone who's got ties to the old Death Eaters that isn't fighting with the new ones is at risk. Honestly I just hope she's alright."

Hermione nodded, "Well, we've got two teams out looking for her as well. They can't get past the protections into her estate, but I know you said she likely left there when her father was brought in so we're following all of the other leads we can find."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

"Alden, I need to speak with you and Robert Bones," Hermione walked into his office and closed the door the next morning.

"You want to be in a room with Bones again?" he said, looking over his glasses at her skeptically.
"I think we've found someone with real information… but they won't talk without Draco there and they won't leave their house."

Alden sat back, "I don't think Bones is going to take Draco off house arrest on the possibility of getting information from someone."

"I have some friendly suggestions he might give in to," Hermione said offhandedly, "I'm going to send a duckie to Bones and hopefully we can all meet soon."

An hour later, Robert Bones was sitting in Alden's office in the chair next to Hermione. She explained the situation, describing the letters to and from Adrien and Draco without giving up his identity.

"I'm not taking a Death Eater off house arrest when he should be in Azkaban," Bones said harshly.

"He's not a Death Eater," Hermione responded crossly, "And I know you're not going to fully go back on your decision so I come to you with a compromise."

Bones sat back, clasping his hands in his lap and listening. If she had to describe it, she would say his demeanor was a bit patronizing, and she didn't much appreciate it.

"Take the ankle charm off and put a temporary trace on him so you can see where he goes. Do it for one week, him and I can have our meeting with my informant and do any follow up that we need to and you can decide at the end of the week if you put the ankle charm back on him."

"Midnight on day 5 or you're off the case for collusion and he gets a life house arrest sentence like his father," Bones suggested with a bit of a smile on his face.

Hermione looked over at Alden, her eyes blazing.

"Alright, I don't think that's necessary either," Alden said calmly, addressing Bones, "How about we just say he's got a trace on him for 5 days and at the end of day 4 Granger gets him back to the Manor and if he's not there, we'll discuss why and what course of action makes sense."

Bones mulled it over, "There needs to be some consequence if he gets away."

"He's not going anywhere without me," Hermione whipped her head back around to him.

"If he's not back at the manor by midnight on day 5, I want you off this case," Bones said firmly, "And I'm going to be tracking his every move. I'll want a full report on any movements outside the Manor."

"And if we go grab a coffee, are you going to chuck him in Azkaban?" Hermione gave him an icy stare.

"I think I'd have the right to," Bones shot back.
"Robert," Alden said, his voice authoritative, "If the Malfoy boy goes to grab a coffee when he is technically off house arrest for five gods forsaken days, I think you can let it slide if he's going to get us information on the Death Eaters. Granger will make sure he doesn't go anywhere without her."

"And what if this is part of their plan?!!" Bones leaned forward, "What if they've been waiting for him to work a deal before they make their attack?"

"Then I'll be off the case and you'll get to do things your way, I presume," Hermione said shortly, "But any talk of Azkaban without proof of his undeniable guilt is off the table."

Robert sat back again, looking frustratedly at Alden, "It's too bad our departments couldn't have worked cohesively on this."

"You've been too quick to judge before having all the facts, Mr. Bones. I don't think we ever had the chance to see eye to eye," Hermione said, also turning back to Alden, "Now, if we've come to a compromise, I'll be getting back to work," she looked between the two and they both nodded, Bones a bit begrudgingly, "Wonderful. When I have a meeting date with my informant we'll set up a time for you to come to the Manor to take the charm off."

"Looking forward to it," Bones said sarcastically, getting up and leaving without a backwards glance.

"It's a good thing you didn't want to be an Auror," Alden looked at her exasperatedly, "I feel like a referee."

"I'm sorry, sir, he just really gets under my skin." Alden sighed, "Yes, I know. So are you going to tell me who your meeting is with that's causing all this ruckus?"

"I can't, sir. He sounds worried that he's being watched and doesn't want to take any chances. I don't want to do anything that would make him scare and not meet with us."

Alden nodded, "Alright, Granger, let me know when you've got that date solidified."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

It took a few more back and forth letters with Adrien, who continued to try and push off a meeting until he finally agreed to a date two weeks later. He asked that they stop sending owls until then to try and throw anyone who may be watching off the scent.

"You're sure he's not setting up a trap for us, Draco?" Hermione asked, reading his last letter again.

"I really don't think so," Draco shook his head, "He was a good bloke at Durmstrang, I think he's just freaked right now. I'll try to get him to come stay at the Manor while we're there. If he's at his estate alone, he's probably just freaking himself out more."

"Alright, I guess we've got to trust it'll all work out either way, don't we," Hermione looked at him with a half-smile, "At least you'll get some fresh air for a few days."

"I'm still in shock that you were able to get Bones to agree to take it off for five days."

"I think he understands the importance of information at this point in the game," Hermione still hadn't told him what the compromise was because she didn't want to worry him.
They set up the date for Bones to come out to the Manor the morning of the meeting with Adrien, which finally rolled around at the beginning of September. He walked into the den accompanied by Harry, Ron and Alden, looking frustrated.

Draco was sitting in his armchair, Hermione standing next to him with her hand on his shoulder.

"Good morning, Robert," Hermione greeted him with a stiff nod.

"Detective," he muttered, walking up to Draco, who bent down to lift his pant leg. The interlocking blue bracelets glowing on his ankle, "Draco Malfoy, you are to be back here by midnight on September 7th, day 5 of your grace period. Detective Granger will be delivering a report on any movements outside of the Manor and I will be monitoring your every move."

"I understand," Draco said coldly.

"And if he is not back here," Bones turned to Hermione, "You know the consequences."

She nodded, noticing Draco looking at her curiously in her peripherals, but she didn't meet his gaze.

Bones performed the spell to remove the ankle charm and replaced it with a monitoring charm before standing up.

"Thank you, Robert," Hermione said, "Narcissa will meet you at the door to walk you back out."

"Good luck on your mission," he forced himself to say before turning back to the group, "Potter, Weasley, you will stay close to where they are going in Russia, correct?"

"Yes, sir," Harry nodded, "We won't be joining for their meeting, but we will be in the area if we're needed."

"And do you know where it is they're going? Or are you in the dark like I am?" He asked.

"We just know we're going to a small town in Russia that's nearby their informant," Ron shrugged.

Bones glanced back at Draco and Hermione again before turning to Alden, "If there are any developments, I'd like to be kept in the loop."

"Of course," Alden nodded, "I'll be coming with you in a moment."

Alden walked up to Hermione, "Is there anything else you need for your mission?" He asked.

"No, sir," Hermione said confidently, "We're going to come back to the Ministry in about an hour with Harry and Ron and we'll take the floo network in my office to our destination. Harry and Ron will take it after us to a separate destination close by. We have a way to alert them with an address if we need backup but we don't anticipate that being the case."

"Alright, then. I'll meet you in the office." With that, Alden and Bones took their leave from the Manor.

"Alright, let's talk logistics," Hermione said when it was just the four of them left.

"Can we do it on the back patio?" Draco asked, "I'm more than ready for some of that fresh air I was promised."

Hermione gave him an understanding smile, "Sure," she said and she let him lead them through the
hallways of the manor and onto the back patio. The clouds were thin today and the sunshine was almost breaking through.

"Alright, so Harry and Ron, you both have the coins I gave you?" Hermione asked, leaning on the railing of the balcony.

"Yes," they both responded, holding them up.

"Great, if anything goes awry I have the address programmed into your coins. All I'll have to do is tap mine and it will appear on yours. Assuming everything goes smoothly, we'll have our meeting and meet you at the rendezvous 1 hour later. If you haven't heard from us in 3 hours, you can tap the coins and use the incantation I gave you earlier and the address will appear that way. Please don't use it unless you have to. I want to try and keep my word to our informant if possible."

"Understood," Harry nodded.

"Draco, if you think anything seems amiss when we're talking to our informant based on your personal interactions, just use our code phrase 'garden fairies'."

"Garden fairies?" Ron laughed, "How is he going to slip that one into conversation?"

"I think she just thought it was funny at first," Draco looked at him with a bit of a grin, "But we actually have garden fairies down in the gardens so I can certainly work it in if I need to."

"We've just got bloody gnomes at the Burrow," Ron rolled his eyes.

"Does anyone have any questions on the plan?" Hermione broke through their side conversation.

The boys shook their heads, looking around at each other and Hermione took a deep breath, "Alright, then let's head back to the Ministry and regroup in my office at 4pm. Our floo network will be open at exactly 4:07 for one minute."

The group left the Manor, Draco more than happy to saunter down the stone path towards the gates and see everyone through. They apparated to the Ministry and Harry and Ron took off to the Auror Department to gather their things while Hermione took Draco through security and up to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Alden did a quick debrief with Draco on protocol before he joined Hermione in her office to wait for Harry and Ron.

"How does it feel to be out and about?" she asked, already knowing the answer from the grin that had been plastered on his face for the last hour.

"Wonderful," he said, "I could get used to this."

"Enjoy it, day 5 you're back at the manor," she winked.

"About that," he tilted his head at her, "What compromise did you strike with Bones?"

"Ah," she faltered a bit, "Well, if you're not back at the manor, I'm off the case."

His grin finally fell, "You're what?!"

"Well he was trying to threaten you with Azkaban and I wasn't having it so I settled on putting my name on the line instead of yours," she tried to explain, "I didn't want it noted anywhere that I'd agreed to anything that considered Azkaban for you."
"That's very... valient of you, but Granger, this is your job and it's too important to risk for me," he looked at her seriously.

"Well then... don't run," she shrugged.

"What if something happens and I can't get back to the Manor? Something out of our control?"

"Well obviously if it's something like that then they clearly would take that into consideration."

"I wouldn't count on it," he shook his head, "Bones will take any reason to get you off the case so he can build evidence against me."

"I'm not losing my job, they'd just put someone else as lead on the case but I'd still be here keeping an eye on things. And even if I'm technically off the case, all of my notes and the work we've put into it will still be there. My name next to something that sends you to Azkaban, even with the slightest possibility, would have been the worst thing for your case."

He looked like he had a lot more to say but just nodded, "We'll get back to the Manor obviously, I just would never want you impacted by something that concerns me."

"Everything will be fine," she said reassuringly, "Let's get what we can from Adrien and go from there. Maybe it's as easy as that and he can point us where we need to go to finish this whole thing."

Harry and Ron knocked on the door, opening it and poking their heads in, "We'll be outside," Harry said, "At 4:08 we'll come in and take the floo network where we need to go and be ready for you there if you need us."

"Sounds good, Harry, we'll talk soon," Hermione smiled at him and they backed out and closed the door. She looked at the clock on the wall, "Just about time," she said, standing up and grabbing a handful of Floo powder.

Draco went first, when the clock hit 4:07 he threw the Floo powder into the fire and stepped into the green flames, "Karkaroff Estate," he said clearly, being whisked away in front of her.

Hermione walked in a moment later, "Karkaroff Estate," she repeated, feeling her body being pulled through the Floo network after him.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Hermione shot out after Draco into a large sitting room. She brushed off her robes and they walked forward as the fire behind them turned from green to red.

"Adrien, good to see you," Draco shook the hand of a tall, pale, dark haired boy.

"Draco, it is very good to see you as well. I only wish the circumstances were better," he responded in a faint russian accent.

"Adrien, this is Detective Granger," he stepped aside for Hermione to take his place.

"It's nice to meet you, Adrien, I really appreciate you taking the time to sit down with us today," she smiled at him, shaking his hand and noticing his tension right off the bat.

"It is nice to meet you as well, Detective," he nodded at her with a determined look, "I hope the information I have with allow you to finish what has been started. Please do not think less of me for not sharing with you sooner."

"Of course we won't. How have you been?" Draco asked him as they walked towards the sitting area.

"Getting by for now, my friend, and you?" Adrien responded, taking a seat in an oversized armchair in the middle of the room and motioning for them to sit in the two across from him.

"The past few months have been a challenge," Draco said before looking over at Hermione and then back at Adrien with a telling smile, "But Detective Granger has made things a little brighter."

Hermione felt a slight blush creep up her neck as Adrien gave them both an attempt at a grin, realizing the implication, "I am glad to hear you have found something worthwhile in these times. I've read what they're saying about you and of course I do not believe it or we would not be having this meeting. My trust is with you and I hope you know that."

"That means a lot," Draco nodded as Hermione grabbed his hand next to him in support.

Addressing Adrien again, Hermione knew it was time to talk business, "Whenever you're ready to tell us what you can, we'll try to make this as quick as possible for you."

Adrien pressed his fingers together in front of his chest with a nod, staring into the fireplace and gathering his thoughts while Hermione took out a piece of parchment and quill. After a moment, he turned to them, moving his hands into his lap and then speaking quickly, like he wanted to get it out before he lost the courage, "What you seek is at a place they call the Veiled Estate."

"Could you be more specific on what you're directing us to?" Hermione asked softly, unsure if he meant the leader or if he knew about more than that.

He hesitated for a moment, "The plans the Death Eaters are working to carry out. I assume that is the main item that you are seeking."

"Yes, it certainly is," she said with a bit of shocked excitement, "Do you know where this Veiled Estate is?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, here is the address," he handed her a piece of paper off the side table with an address in
Switzerland. His eyes lingered on it as it left his hand, but he sat back again.

Hermione shared the paper with Draco, "Looks like it's somewhere near the base of the Alp's."

Draco flicked his eyes up to Adrien questioningly as he read the address.

"You'll need to be very careful," Adrien said seriously, "It is a Death Eater owned property. This is where the meetings take place. You must never share where you received this address from."

"Adrien, there's no need to worry, the Ministry can protect you," Hermione said, "They can have Aurors here standing guard if you need."

"I'm just trying to give you the information you need to defeat them," he said again with a bit of a pleading tone, "Now to get into the estate you need to break a Gordian Complex protective spell. Once you've found the counter spell, you'll just need the pass phrase 'Ostium' at the end of the incantation to get through."

Hermione wrote down the instructions clearly, almost unbelieving of what she was hearing.

"Adrien, how did you learn about this location?" Draco asked him slowly as they shared a look.

"It was given to me by my connection to the Death Eaters," he said, "I should not share the name out loud."

"Have you been there?" Hermione asked, "Do you have any idea where we should look in the house to find them?"

"They are in a hidden room through the main library. Look for a book called 'Time of Shadows,' and pull it forward. It will allow the bookcase to open," he told them, "I never saw the plans, but I have seen the room and was told they are kept there now."

"Do you want to come stay at the Manor?" Draco asked, unnerved by Adrien's demeanor, like what he was telling them would be his last words.

"No, I will stay here. This is my home," Adrien said with resilience, "But I've said what I needed to say and I need to ask you to leave now. The less time you are here, the less chance someone will find out what I've told you."

"Can we ask you just a few questions?" Hermione asked, feeling like this was the informant they'd been waiting for and not wanting to lose the opportunity.

Adrien looked fidgety, "Quickly, yes."

"How are you involved with this all?" she asked, "How are you connected?"

"I dated one of them," he said, shooting a side-eye at Draco, "I did not know what she was until we'd been together for some time. She brought me to the Veiled Estate when she explained to me what they were doing and told me it's where they hold their meetings. She tried to get me to join them and I told her I would not. She did not push me and I tried to put it to the back of my mind, but once the Death Eater activity began, it was too much for me and we broke up at the beginning of the year. She let me go without consequence but swore me to secrecy. You see, she had already told me what was hidden at the Veiled Estate and I naively hoped they would never use it. Though I do not know what the plans are, just that they were left by the Dark Lord to overthrow the Ministry and take control of the muggles. I have been too scared to tell anyone. I have been weak when I needed to be strong. For this, I apologize deeply."
"You're giving us what you know now and we see the value in that," Hermione said gently, "Do you know who the leader is?" Hermione asked.

Adrien looked between them, looking more worried by the second, "I'm sorry but I have already said too much. I've told you what I can. If there is any hope for me, I cannot say more. I was not involved in any of the activity. I have told you everything you need to find the plans and stop the Death Eaters."

Hermione looked over at Draco, wanting to push back, he clearly knew more. He shook his head ever so slightly at her glance and looked back at Adrien, "Thank you for speaking with us," he nodded at him, standing up and holding his hand out for Hermione to do the same, "I hope the next time we see each other times will be lighter and we can have a bit of firewhiskey and share our stories."

Hermione took his hand and stood up, realizing they would have to accept what they were given for today. If they needed Adrien in the future, they knew where to find him now, "Yes, thank you, Adrien. Your help may be the missing key we've been needing."

Adrien nodded, "I do hope we meet again, please continue to keep my name out of this if you're able," he said with a forced smile, shaking each of their hands firmly again, casting a quick spell at the fireplace to open the Floo Network again, and then sitting back down in his chair, "There is Floo powder in the container on the mantle," he pointed, turning his gaze back to the wall opposite him.

They left the Karkaroff estate, taking the Floo Network to the inn nearby where Harry and Ron were waiting.

"That was quick," Harry said as they walked over to their table.

"He didn't want us there at all," Hermione told him, casting an anxious glance over at Draco, "Let's get back to the Ministry and we'll fill you in and plan our next move."

"But we just ordered dinner," Ron pointed at the drinks in front of them.

"I really think we should get going-," Hermione started.

"You'll need dinner either way, Granger," Draco put a hand on the small of her back, "We may as well grab something to eat quick. I have a feeling everything will move quite fast from here."

She looked torn, but finally sat down in the chair next to Harry, "Yes, I suppose that's true. Alright let's grab a quick bite and then we have a lot of planning to do."

Ron gave her a grateful smile, "Wonderful, we've probably ordered too much food anyway, you can just share what we've gotten."

"Did you learn anything you can share here?" Harry asked.

"No, much better to have that conversation in my office," Hermione said quietly, "How was the Canons game?"

"It was good fun," Ron said, "And I think we'll be attending a fair few more games in the future," he grinned at Harry.

Hermione looked at Harry with wide eyes and his lips broke into a grin as well, "Ginny made Puddlemere."
"No way!" Hermione momentarily let the excitement of her friend's accomplishment wipe everything else from her thoughts, "That's wonderful. When is her first match?"

"Should be next weekend," Harry said, "She doesn't seem very nervous, she's just trying to decide what trick to do when they call her name for the first time."

"She took a chaser position, right? Didn't she play seeker for you when you were off the team at Hogwarts?" Draco asked.

"She did," Harry nodded, "I think she enjoys seeker more but she's great at both and Puddlemere had the chaser position open. Much harder to find an open seeker position."

"She might be more famous than you one day," Draco said with a bit of a smirk.

"I sure hope so," Harry said honestly.

They were kept busy discussing the Quidditch standings, Hermione tuning out the conversation to do some thinking on their meeting with Adrien, until food was delivered. Ron and Harry had indeed ordered way too much food so there was plenty for the four of them to split. When they finished up, Hermione ushered them all back through the inn's Floo Network to the Ministry atrium and up to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, where they met Alden to debrief.

"Did we learn anything worthwhile?" Alden asked as they piled in and shut the door.

"Yes," Hermione said, taking one of the seats, Ron sitting next to her, Harry and Draco standing behind the chairs, "We learned where the instructions to the Death Eaters' big plan are."

Alden set down his quill, his full attention on Hermione, and Ron turned at looked at her in surprise as well.

"They're at a place called the Veiled Estate. He gave us the address and everything we need to get in."

"Does this implicate anyone in particular?" Alden asked, scratching his chin, "Do we know who owns the Veiled Estate?"

"Our informant didn't say," Draco said, "He only told us what he felt he could."

"Do we anticipate other Death Eaters will be there?" Alden asked.

"It's very possible," Hermione said slowly, "Apparently it's where they hold their meetings."

"Do we have any idea what's in the plans?" Ron asked.

"No, we still don't," Hermione sighed, "Our informant really did not want to share anything he knew, but felt he was doing a disservice to keep the location of the plans to himself when he had the means to give them to us."

"When do you want to send a team to the Veiled Estate?" Alden switching gears, ready to start planning their offense.

"Tomorrow evening," she said, "I think we need to send a team for surveillance tonight, have them monitor the estate for 24 hours while we prep a team for anything that might be in there. I can't imagine they wouldn't have people guarding it."

"Yes I think that's a good idea," Alden nodded, "You four will be the extraction team for the plans."
Potter, Weasley, can you put together a surveillance team of Aurors for tonight and another group for backup tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said, "We'll pull a team back from the field and redistribute them to this mission."

"Any leader name?" Alden already knew the answer, but had to ask.

"No, that's kind of where he kicked us out," Hermione told him.

"Is your informant a Death Eater that's trying to get immunity?" he tilted his head at her, "How did they know where the plans were?"

"He had a connection to the Death Eaters and heard secondhand. Like I said, he really didn't want to share. He was visibly nervous, but also may have been trying to protect his connection, if I had to guess," Hermione looked back at Draco, who nodded in agreement.

"Alright, get on with the strategy and I'll send a message to Bones and fill him in," Alden dismissed them, standing up and grabbing a duckie from the bin behind him.

Hermione, Draco, Harry and Ron spent the next hour putting together teams and roles before Harry and Ron left to join Bones in the Auror department to start preparing everyone. Hermione and Draco spent the remainder of the evening going over strategy for the four of them, what they would be looking for and how to tackle finding the library as quickly as possible once they were inside.

They arrived back at the Manor late that evening, crawling into bed exhausted.

"Have you ever seen Adrien like that before?" Hermione asked Draco.

"No," he sighed, "He was always a bit more serious, but never affected much by anything. Definitely never one to show fear like that either."

"It was very disconcerting," Hermione said, "Do you think we should send someone to check on him tomorrow?"

"He said to keep his name out of it," Draco shook his head, "And neither of us would know how to get in anyway, he only opened the Floo network for that quick period today for us to come in and leave."

"I know you're right, he just really worried me."

"Just have to hope he's got himself taken care of," Draco told her, "We've got a big day tomorrow, better to get some sleep. The sooner this is over, the sooner he can live a normal life again too, I'm sure."

The next day they arrived at the Ministry, joining Alden, Bones, Harry and Ron with a team of Aurors. The first team of Aurors had been deployed late the previous evening to keep watch on the Veiled Estate for anyone going in or out. Halfway through the day they received a message from that team noting they had seen 2 people that had left and one person that had entered the Estate so far.

"So we can expect there are people stationed there," Alden said to the group, "Potter, we'll have your team entering first, clearing the rooms for Granger and Draco to make their way to the library.
to search for the plans."

"Yes, sir," Harry nodded.

"Malfoy, you know what you're looking for?" Alden asked.

"I saw them sitting in the Manor once so I generally know what I'm looking for," he told him.

"Good, hopefully we'll outnumber them and be able to clear the property for you to have plenty of time to search."

As evening rolled around, each group was fully briefed for the start of the mission. As everyone was standing around discussing their roles, the door opened and a very anxious looking Auror walked in, tapping Bones on the shoulder and whispering something to him. Bones' eyes widened and he nodded to the Auror, scanning the room, "Granger, you'll want to come over here," he called urgently.

She walked over with Draco, Harry and Ron and Bones addressed them all a bit heavily, "The Dark Mark was just spotted above an estate," he said in a low voice, "In Russia. The victim has been identified as Adrien Karkaroff."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
The Veiled Estate

Hermione looked over at Draco in shock, "How did they get in?"

Draco just shook his head as Bones' words sunk in and the voices around him started feeling distant, "I- I think I need a minute," he said to the group, stepping back and walking over to the corner of the room, placing his hands on the wall and letting his eyes close to block out everything around him. Adrien had been there for Draco when he started to rebuild his life. He had understood the stigma Draco carried with him because he carried it from his father. He'd been the friend he needed when he attended Durmstrang. Adrien was dead because of the information he gave to them yesterday, Draco just knew it had to have been that. He felt himself getting angry at the unfairness of it all. Adrien had done the right thing and had been punished for it. It was just another example of how people like him and Adrien didn't make it back to the light side. They would never be capable of a normal life.

He felt a hand on his back, "Are you alright?" he turned his head to the side and registered Hermione standing there.

He pushed himself off the wall and tried to clear his head a little, she wasn't the one to be mad at, "He knew they were going to come for him," Draco said, his voice sharp but quiet, "After he told us where to find the plans, he knew they'd kill him for it."

"We offered him protection and he didn't take it," Hermione said sadly, "I'm sorry, Draco, I had no idea how closely they were watching him."

"He was a good friend," Draco told her, "You would have liked him. He thought I'd be able to disconnect myself from my past one day too."

Hermione grabbed his hand and turned him towards her, "He died a hero," she said, "Because of him we might be able to end this whole thing. Losing him is a tragedy. Everyone that's been lost for this cause all year, it's a tragedy that didn't have to happen but we're going to find them and stop them. Because of him, a lot of other lives are going to be saved."

"They're going to know we're coming," Draco said, he could still feel the anger inside him, but he was standing in a room full of Aurors, most of which wanted him in Azkaban, so he couldn't let his temper get out, "Maybe they don't know we're coming right now, but they've got to know that he gave us the location."

"I think we'll still outnumber them," Hermione said confidently, "We've planned as well as we could have and we'll go in there and do our jobs." She could see the fire behind his eyes and wished she could do something to take the pain of losing a friend and the frustration at the injustice of it away from him.

Bones walked over a bit awkwardly, "Sorry to have to give you that news right before the mission," he said in his best attempt to be civil, "I'm guessing that was your informant."

"And friend," Draco said shortly, "He risked his life to give us this information. We've got to be ready for whatever we're about to step into. He's not going to die in vain."

Bones looked him over, clearly taken aback by his intensity, "Well let's get out there then."

Draco nodded, "I think we just need to regroup again with a small change to the plan since they know we're coming now."
A group of 12 Aurors, lead by Hermione and Draco, apparated about a quarter mile outside the area of the Veiled Estate. They quietly made their way through a trail of trees to the back of the property.

Hermione held up her arm to the group, inspecting something in front of her, "The protective spell starts here," she said to Draco, dropping her bag and pulling out a book. She flipped through the pages until she got to the one marked 'Gordian Complex.' She and Draco performed the counter spell together to throw as much power towards it as they could, using the spellbreaker phrase Adrien had given them. A ten yard span of the bubble around the estate sparked and fizzled in front of them and they ushered the group through, following from behind. There were no signs of movement on the outside grounds, but they knew they must be waiting for them somewhere.

They approached the main house, the Aurors leading to clear the way. The door was already unlocked as they walked in through one of the back doors. It was silent in the house albeit the sound of their footsteps pattering against the wood floor. They walked in a group down the hallway, one of the Aurors pushing open the first door they came to while a group of two swept the room, coming back out, "Clear," they whispered.

They continued through the bottom floor of the house, clearing each room they passed but not finding a soul waiting for them.

"Do you think they took the plans and ran?" Hermione asked Draco.

"Maybe," he said, "I'm not sure if they would know where else to take them. They may have thought it would be safer to try and protect them here."

"Hope so. The library must be upstairs, we must've cleared the whole first floor at this point," she looked over at him.

"It is," he nodded, adding, "I would assume, anyway."

They rounded the corner, the room opening up into a large foyer with a wide staircase in the middle. The Auror in the front turned to the group, "We'll send the first two up the stairs and then-"

"STUPIFY!" "EXPPELLIARMUS!" "BOMBARDA!" She was cut off by a horde of red flashes hurling at the group as everyone jumped in different directions and furniture exploded around them.

Draco landed against the wall, grabbing Hermione's hand and pulling her over to him as another blast landed where she had just been.

"Thanks," she breathed as they crawled around another corner and scrambled back to their feet, "Should have expected an ambush I guess." She peeked her head around the wall to see what was going on. Wizards in masks were running out from the other side of the foyer, throwing curses at the Aurors who were regaining their footing and fighting back. "I can't get an exact headcount, but it looks pretty even," she said, "If we can make a run for it maybe we can get upstairs while they're distracted."

Draco nodded, squeezing her hand as they shared a determined look, "I'll follow your lead."

Hermione took a deep breath and ran out through the exchange of spells, dodging a few and firing back when she could before she hit the stairs, Draco coming up behind her. They ducked down below the banister and started climbing.
"They're going up!" one of the Death Eaters shouted.

Hermione locked eyes with one of the Aurors that looked over, "Hold the room!" She yelled and the Auror nodded, rushing over to the staircase. Draco pointed his wand behind him, yelling out a few different spells at the Death Eaters giving chase behind them. They heard someone a few stairs below tumble down and another cry out as they continued to make their way up the stairs. At the top, Hermione turned right and Draco grabbed her hand, "This way," he said, pulling her to the left.

She looked at him questioningly but followed. He passed by a few doorways without consideration before stopping in front of one. He turned the knob but it didn't budge, "Alohamora," he said quietly. They heard a click and he pushed the door open, shutting it behind them to drown out the yells coming from below.

"Lumos," Hermione said as her wand brightened in front of her. They were in the library. It was large but nothing like the Malfoy library. "Draco," she said slowly, "How did you know this was the library?"

He looked over at her but didn't say anything. She could see the indecision in his eyes; could tell he wasn't sure if he should answer, "Good instinct," he finally said.

"Seems like this was more than instinct," she said uncertainly, hoping he could just explain.

Draco turned away from her, illuminating his wand as well and raising it above his head to scan the room, "It must be on the side wall. It's the only one that could adjoin to another room."

He walked over and she followed hesitantly. They still had a job to do and she had to focus, but she couldn't help the uneasy feeling settling in her stomach. They read through the titles on the shelves, "Aha!" Draco said, motioning for Hermione to join him, "Time of Shadows!"

She walked quickly over to him from the other end of the bookcase as he pulled the book forward. The wall shook a little before it swung open, revealing another room.

There was a large desk in the middle that held a few neatly organized piles of paper, along with a clock that was ticking a bit loudly, and a crystal jar that housed a pack of quills. The walls of the room were an extension of the bookcases in the library, but at a closer glance, they could see these books told secrets of dark magic.

"Check all the drawers of the desk, I'll check the bookshelves," Hermione said. She had to trust him. She had for so long now. There must be a logical reason for all of this but for now, she had to keep her mind on the goal. Find the plans. They could still hear the muffled sounds of the battle raging beneath them and knew time was of the essence as they split up to search the room.

She read through book titles, looking for anything that might hint at a hiding place, emptying out the contents of the cupboards under the shelves. Draco had described the plans as a small stack of parchment that would be about 18" long, longer than a normal piece of parchment you'd take notes on or something like that. The pages had been discolored and worn when he'd seen them sitting in his father's study and the ends of the pages had curled up. He had told her he remembered thinking they looked ancient and they gave him the chills just seeing them there. She stood back, looking for anything out of place, tilting her head as she landed on an item up closer to the top. There was a photograph, the frame covered in enough dust that she couldn't make out the picture.

"That could be another lead," Hermione said out loud, "Accio photograph!"

Draco looked up from the papers he was sifting through on the desk, seeing the photograph fly
through the air as he started to object, "It's probably nothing," he said, walking around the back of her to look over her shoulder. His voice sounded a bit more strained than it should.

She wiped the dust off of the frame, her breath catching as a picture of Draco grinning at the camera, throwing a quaffle up in the air and catching it again looked back at her. She stumbled forward and whirled around on him, "Why is there a picture of you on the shelf in the Veiled Estate?"

He looked back at her with his mouth open, but no words coming out, "I can explain-," he finally said in a hurried voice before they heard the door open behind them. The creak of the door made them both jump and he turned quickly on his feet.

"Fancy seeing you here again, Draco," came a silky voice from the hallway.

Draco and Hermione both started to shout different spells, but the intruder beat them to it, "Incarcerous." They were both thrown back against the bookcase as ropes engulfed their bodies and the picture of Draco crashed onto the floor. Hermione's wand was knocked out of her hand as well, landing next to her as they dropped to their knees, arms behind their backs and fully bound. Draco's wand had somehow gotten entangled in the ropes and was somewhere halfway up his back. He could just reach the end of it, but not enough to try and free it from the bind.

The shadow from the doorway walked into the light, "Did you miss me?" The dark eyes of Pansy Parkinson locked with Draco's.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Pansy took in the sight of them both tied up and smiled, her eyes drifting to the picture of Draco on the ground, "Reminiscing on old times?" she asked, "I forgot I even still had that up there."

"Why?" He said quietly, ignoring her small talk, "How did you get wrapped up in this," Draco looked honestly shocked and Hermione tried hard to hide her confusion.

"Let us go, there are plenty of Aurors on their way behind us," Hermione said strongly.

"Quiescis," Pansy flicked her wand at her and Hermione opened her mouth again but no sound came out. Her mouth moved in several syllables as her eyes narrowed and Pansy grinned, "This is a private conversation." She turned back to Draco, "You always thought I would just be your sideline girl, didn't you?" Hermione could hear the vengeance in her voice as she pushed her arms uselessly against the ropes, her wand out of reach on the floor, "The Dark Lord told me I couldn't trust you. He told me after you didn't kill Dumbledore to keep an eye on you and try to keep you turned towards the dark, but he wasn't sure if you were still loyal to him."

"What do you mean he told you that?" Draco asked slowly.

"You never realized how close my father was to the Dark Lord," she was circling around until she came to a stop in front of him, "He played the unsuspecting background character for a long time, but he was always there, listening, watching, waiting. When the Malfoys started to fall, he stepped up. I always hoped you would step up with me instead of down with your parents, Draco," her eyes looked like she meant it, like she'd been waiting years to say it.

"When did you meet with the Dark Lord?" He asked her pointedly, trying to shake himself out of his shock and think of a way out of this situation, knowing he had to keep her talking in the meantime.

"Right before seventh year," she said, "I met him with the Carrows and my father. He wanted me to recruit more people our age to keep the Death Eaters going. He said we would win the wizarding war, but he needed a new era of Death Eaters to rise up with him and carry on our legacy. He wanted you and I at his side in command, if I could prove you were fully committed to our cause."

"But the Death Eaters didn't win, Pansy, you're not fighting on the winning side," he tried to get her to see reason. Hermione could tell he still thought he could change her mind.

"There was always another plan, Draco, for after he killed Harry Potter. I did as he instructed and I formed the next generation of Death Eaters using my network. Once I did, the Dark Lord went over the plan with Bellatrix, my father and myself before he fell. He told us they would be the next steps after the Battle of Hogwarts, the steps to taking control of the muggle world. It took us some time to prepare after the Battle, without him and Bellatrix, but it's all happening. I did my part, I cultivated new followers and without the Dark Lord to follow, I took my rightful place as the Dark Heiress. I think it's where he would have wanted me to be."

They were both silent for a moment as the weight of it hit him, "You're the leader then?" He asked quietly, "This was all at your direction? All of it?"

Her lips split into a wide smile and her eyes twinkled at him, "Yes. The Pansy you knew is gone. None of my followers would dare call me by that name anymore. I've transformed and evolved and the Heiress has risen."
"Why didn't you ever tell me about this?" He asked, his hands working behind his back to slip his wand out of the ropes.

"I tried to," She said a bit defensively, "I wrote you, trying to get in contact, and you never responded. I came to the Manor hoping to find you ready to take your rightful place next to me, but you told me so definitively that you were done and I couldn't risk you ruining everything if you weren't entwined with the dark arts. But it's no matter, I needed to come to the Manor anyway. I needed to find the plans and I took them from right under your nose. I was hoping you'd get it for me and come freely, but when you didn't I had to put your poor mother under the Imperius Curse to find them and hand them over. I always liked her, that wasn't an easy thing for me to do."

"You what?" he asked angrily.

"What? You thought I just came to check on your well-being?" she said, "I needed those plans and I was going to get them one way or another."

"I wouldn't have joined you, but maybe I could have talked sense into you. This is crazy, Pansy, a group of burnout old Death Eaters and a handful of younger ones doesn't constitute a new generation of Death Eaters. You are fighting another losing battle. I never would have wanted this life for you," he could feel the ropes loosening ever so slightly and his wand was able to twist in place.

"You don't own me and it's not your decision, this is the destiny I chose for myself," her head was high and her voice determined, "And our range is so much bigger than a few Death Eaters, Draco. The whole plan is already in motion and the Ministry's time is dwindling. I wish you could have joined me. But this isn't about trying to bring you over to the dark anymore, you chose your side and you'll die here tonight for it."

"How did you know Adrien?" Draco asked her, trying to get as much answered as he could, "Why did he have this address?"

"Oh I dated him for a while," she looked very proud of herself, "I heard you'd made friends with him at Durmstrang and if I'm being honest, I thought he would prove useful to me, so I found a way for us to cross paths. He had no idea who I was or that you and I had... a history together. I told him eventually because I wanted information on you. I thought maybe he'd know the real you, know if there was still a chance to redeem you. I told him I wanted to know because I cared that you were happy," she rolled her eyes, "Once I realized there wasn't a chance to bring you back, I decided I still found him quite fun to keep around. He fell in love with me very quickly and I thought that was cute. I knew who his father was of course and thought perhaps he would join us. After a year together I showed him the estate, I told him of the plans, I tried to give him everything he needed to join the right side, but in the end he was too weak for our cause and he walked away."

"But you let him go..." Draco said, "Why?"

"I made him perform a sort of unbreakable vow. Not the real thing," she gave a small laugh, "If he told our secrets, I wanted to be the one to kill him myself. So I put a charm on him that would alert me if he ever shared this location with anyone. It seems he thought his only chance was writing the address down instead of saying it out loud, but it didn't override the charm which he had also considered. He didn't beg for his life, you know, he went out with his head held high like a real martyr."

Draco felt his chest tighten as she talked about killing his friend, "How did you get into his estate?"

"All of his protective wards fell the moment he shared the location with you. So not only did I have
to kill him, but I also had to prepare for you to come here," she paused, walking closer to Draco and kneeling down in front of him looking smug, "I have to admit," she said in a quieter voice, truly making it an intimate conversation between them as Hermione could barely make out what she was saying, "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't just a little excited for you to come here so we could have this moment together. This beautiful moment where you get to hear about my triumph and become my next victory. It has been fun dragging your name through the mud one last time these last few months, for all the times you cast me aside, but it's time I get the recognition I deserve. I hope you understand."

"You told them all to give my name?" He asked.

"Mmhmm," Pansy was close enough that her eyes were glancing down at his lips and he could feel her breath faintly as she talked.

Hermione looked on as their eyes met again and for a brief moment, she thought they were about to share a passionate kiss.

"Petrificus Totalus," Draco said in a similarly low voice, his wand finally freed from the binds and peeking around his side. He watched as Pansy's eyes widened in shock and she fell back, stiff as a board.

"Relashio!" Draco turned his hand ever so slightly and pointed his wand at the binds around Hermione, which ripped and dropped to the ground. She fell forward, catching herself with her hands and reaching for her wand. She pointed it at Draco and moved her mouth, still unable to speak, watching the ropes fall off of him, before pointing it at her own mouth and silently casting another spell.

"Finally," she said with a huff, "Could you bind her, please?" her voice was full of frustration and she wasn't fully making eye contact with him.

"Granger, if you'll just let me explain," he said again.

"We don't really have time for explanations right now, Draco, could you please just bind Ms. Parkinson and we'll keep searching the room?" She set her wand down on the desk, picking up the shattered picture frame from the ground and walking to the bookcase to set it back on the shelf.

Draco stood up slowly, walking over to Pansy who's eyes were closed. She seemed almost relaxed as he looked down at her sadly. He raised his wand, but before he could get anything out her eyes shot open and she broke free of his spell, a scream emitting somewhere from her throat as she forced her limbs to obey her and she rolled to the side and back onto her feet.

"Crucio!" she yelled, wand pointed at Draco who had been too shocked to react yet, unbelieving that Pansy could be powerful enough to break out of the curse.

He yelled out as he fell to the ground and Hermione whirled around, taking in the scene. She'd never seen anyone look quite as vindicated as Pansy torturing Draco and watching his body writhe on the ground.

She ran over to the desk to grab her wand, fumbling it a little before she got a handle on it, "Stupify!" she shouted once she’d gotten her wand pointed at Pansy, Draco's cries filling her head as he tried his hardest to stifle them.

Pansy ducked out of the way of the spell, not releasing the curse on Draco for as long as she could before having to turn her wand on Hermione, "You want to play too?" she asked coyly as Draco
turned onto his side, breathing heavily and trying to shake his head clear to push himself up, "I heard you've been dating Draco. Can't believe he would have lowered himself to the likes of a Mudblood."

Hermione threw another curse at her angrily and Pansy deflected it, "I remember you of course. Always annoyingly raising your hand in the air like a frizzy haired know-it-all."

"We're not in school anymore, Pansy. This is the real world with real consequences," Hermione said, sending another curse her way.

She deflected it again, "Dark Heiress," she corrected, noticing Draco pushing himself up on all fours and turning her wand on him, "Cruciō!" It was quick, but effective after the first round. He yelled out again, falling back to the ground, eyes closing.

"Incarcerous!" Hermione yelled and Pansy jumped out of the way just in time to avoid it.

"He's not worth trying to save," Pansy glanced over at Draco, "And you may think you know him, but you don't know half of who he is."

"I know everything I need to," she responded, "He was sorry for the way he treated you. He's a changed man."

"And a weak one," Pansy said, throwing her own curse at Hermione, who deflected it.

Draco had finally made it back onto his hands and knees with labored breath while Pansy had been focused on Hermione, the girls sizing each other up as they calculated when to strike again.

"Expelliarmus!" he said from behind her, the spell itself taking even more from him as he fell back against the bookshelf. She heard him in time to grab her wand before it hit the ground and she flicked it back at Hermione, "Stupify!"

Hermione was caught by surprise, knocked back off her feet as Pansy turned on Draco.

"I'm growing quite tired of this battle. I've been preparing myself for this moment too long. *Fuck* you, Draco. *Avada K-""

"Bombarda!" Hermione yelled, still on the ground, wand pointed at Pansy's feet. The floor underneath her exploded with the force of Hermione's spell and she was thrown to the side, her wand flying out of her hand.

Pansy hit the ground hard before she lunged at her wand with a yell, grabbing it, standing and turning on her heel quicker than anyone could react. Draco and Hermione both aimed curses at her, which exploded mid-air as she disapparated.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Hermione exclaimed. She heard footsteps coming down the hallway and whipped her head back around, wand pointed into the darkness.

"Hermione?" Ron's voice called from the doorway, "Is that you back there?"

"Yes," she called back, relieved and lowering her wand, heart still racing in her chest while she tried to bring herself back into the bigger picture, "Were you able to round them all up downstairs?"

"Yeah, we got in a few minutes ago with the cleanup team, as planned and we heavily outnumbered them, that was a good call, Malfoy. A few ran and disapparated before we could
catch them, but we got the majority and cleared the rest of the bottom floor. The teams are sweeping the last rooms on this floor now," he had joined them in the hidden room, looking around at the disaster that had resulted from their battle with Pansy, Harry at his side, "What happened here?"

"Pansy happened," Hermione said shortly.

"So Pansy was involved?" Harry asked.

"She isn't just involved, she is the leader and this is her house," Hermione said, still not quite able to hide the annoyance in her voice. She felt a bit like Draco had been protecting her this whole time.

"I didn't know she was involved," Draco said in a defeated voice, getting shakily to his feet and rubbing his side that was still throbbing from the Cruciatuus curse.

"Well you certainly knew enough," she shot back.

Harry cleared his throat, "Did she get away?"

"Yes," Hermione sighed, "We almost had her in the end and she disapparated a second ago."

"Sorry we were too late to help," Ron said.

"It's alright, she just caught us off our guard. We had her in a body bind and she broke out of it and we never quite regained our footing. I've never seen anything like it before. She's powerful."

"Harry fought off the Imperius curse once," Ron reminded her, "I've never seen anyone break out of a body bind either, but it can't be harder than that. I'm sure she's been practicing battle spells and counter curses for a long time. We know what she's capable of now so next time we find her, we won't let her get away."

Hermione nodded, she could feel Draco looking at her but still wasn't ready to acknowledge him.

"We're going to get the others back to the Ministry, do you need help with your search?"

"No, if there's no one else here we can just finish up. Maybe leave a few Aurors on guard outside until we're done," she said.

"We'll keep a few here by the library door and the main entrances," Harry nodded as he and Ron headed towards the hallway, "We'll see you back at the Ministry."

When they were alone again, Draco took her hand from beside her, "Perhaps we should talk before we keep looking," he suggested.

"The plans come first," Hermione pulled her hand from him, still trying to slow her heart rate again and focus, "We can talk later."

They turned the room upside down, finally finding a magically concealed safe stashed in the back of one of the cupboards. Draco cracked it on his third try - Pansy's mother's birthday. They opened the safe to find the plans laying there, discolored and worn as described.

Hermione sat down, scanning the words and flipping through the pages, "She said this was already in motion?" she asked with urgency in her voice.

"That's what they've all said, but I'm not sure how far. What does it say?" he walked around the
side of the desk to read with her. Hermione stacked the pages all back together before he had a chance to see them, opening her bag and putting them into an enchanted compartment she'd created.

"We can look at them at the Ministry," she said, avoiding his gaze, "I just wanted to get an idea of what we're up against."

"Are you not going to share them with me?" he asked, eyeing her.

She finally looked at him, "I haven't decided yet," she said, "Technically you don't need to be a part of this investigation so it depends on what kinds of reasons you've got for withholding information."

"I had no ill intent," he enunciated the words, "We just need to sit down and talk. It doesn't make me guilty of anything, I just didn't know what to make of it yet and I didn't want anyone jumping to conclusions."

"You were protecting Pansy," Hermione said coldly.

"Yes, I was," he said with a frustrated sigh, "I thought I was protecting her because she was innocent and I didn't want her name wrongly dragged into it like mine was. I thought her father would be the reason we came to this address."

"Either way you withheld information that could have helped us. You know the whole layout of this house. You knew exactly where the library was," she had hoped this conversation could wait until they were back home, but he'd opened the floodgates.

"I did, this is the Parkinson's summer home," he admitted, "But I knew I would get us here. I wasn't obstructing anything. Adrien provided the means to get in and where to go and whether I voiced what I knew or not, we already had what we needed to get here."

"It doesn't change the fact that I feel lied to," she stood up, gathering her things.

"I'm sorry," he walked closer to her, "I was wrong about Pansy and I was wrong not to tell you. But we still found the plans, finally found out who the leader is and brought in a whole group of Death Eaters. The mission was a success."

"Did you know she was involved the whole time," Hermione asked him, unable to stop herself.

"No," he said firmly, "I had no idea and I wanted to believe she was innocent. At the end of the day, I hope you remember it didn't keep me from fighting against her. I accept that she's guilty. I just didn't want to believe it."

"I'm aware of what you did," Hermione said, "I just need some time to think about all of this. Let's get back to the Ministry, this isn't over."

"You realize she almost killed me, right?" he said incredulously, "You're acting like I'm one of them."

"Hard to forget listening to someone start to cast the Killing curse. But you really threw me for a loop today and I felt uncomfortable trusting you and it didn't feel good," she responded, adding at the last moment, "And you're welcome for saving your life."

She walked around him, slinging her bag over her shoulder. Draco let his head drop, throwing his hands on his hips and shaking his head to restrain his temper. He took a moment to collect himself
before he turned slowly and followed her out of the estate, wincing at the pain still shooting up his side. Beyond the protective spells they apparated back to the Ministry, meeting the team of Aurors in one of the large open rooms to talk next steps.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Hermione walked up to Harry who was standing with a group of Aurors recanting their stories, "What are the final numbers? Did we lose anyone in the extraction?"

"No, we've got four injured but nothing serious," he said, "We rounded up 10 of them. Maybe 3 got away, but they weren't expecting our second team to come in after the battle began so we had an element of surprise."

As Draco walked up behind Hermione, Harry held his hand out, "Thanks for your help, Malfoy."

Draco shook it halfheartedly, really hoping he could get Hermione alone again soon so they could work things out, "Glad we were able to get everyone back safely with the plans."

Hermione tuned out their conversation, scanning the room and walking over to speak with Alden as Draco stood back with the others.

"She didn't seem very pleased with you as we were leaving," Harry said conversationally.

"I knew it was Pansy's summer house," Draco said heavily, "I just didn't want her implicated and I didn't think it was a big deal not to mention that I'd been there before. Obviously I was wrong on a lot of accounts."

"Ah," Harry nodded in understanding, "I see why she's upset, but the job still got done," he looked over at Draco, "I've known her a long time and if I had to give you any single piece of advice I'd tell you she values honesty above everything else. She's very accepting and forgiving, but best you can do is always be honest with her and she'll do whatever she can in return."

"I know," Draco gave a frustrated sigh, not needing a lecture from Potter, but feeling it was coming from a genuine place, "I just made a bad judgment call. Kind of in my nature."

Harry paused, considering him, "She's happy with you, you know. Don't be too hard on yourself, you'll just be stepping on your own foot."

"I'm always going to be hard on myself," Draco responded in a low voice, "She deserves the kind of happy that doesn't come with caveats."

Harry furrowed his brows, feeling like there was a lot he'd like to delve into from Draco's comments, "We should grab a drink some time, Malfoy, assuming you'll be off house arrest after all this."

Draco just nodded, knowing accepting the offer would be the right thing to do and he'd already been cynical enough for one conversation, "I could always go for a good glass of firewhiskey."

"Harry!" Ron called, "Come over here."

Harry gestured that he'd be over before he looked back at Draco for another moment and gave him a half smile, "I'll take you up on that. Good luck straightening things out."

Harry walked over to Ron, who was talking with the Auror that had lead the first group into the Veiled Estate and Draco was left on his own.

Robert Bones walked over to him, his demeanor awkward, but deliberate, "Thank you for your
participation tonight, Malfoy," he gave him a stiff nod, "I think I was wrong about you and owe you an apology. Granger's told Alden and myself that Pansy Parkinson took credit as the leader of the Death Eaters."

Draco wasn't sure what to say but finally got out, "Thank you for that."

"We'll make a note in your file that we won't be putting the house arrest charm back on you," Bones told him, "We'll be in contact with your final trial date so we can square this all away. There's more work to be done and I'm sure Detective Granger will want your help in stopping their plans and closing the case."

"I'll look forward to your official message," Draco said as Bones held his hand out and he shook it before he turned and left him alone again.

Draco put his hands in his pockets and looked around the room, still feeling like an outsider, as Hermione took a step up onto a small platform.

"Everyone!" she called, waving a hand in the air as the room quieted down, "We've gotten the plans from the Death Eaters," she started and an outpouring of whooping and whistling emitted from the group, "Alright, alright, I know, it's a great step. The plans, however, are a bit troublesome at first glance. We're going to take the evening to read through them and regroup first thing tomorrow. We're in the process of making copies for everyone and they'll be passed out. For those of you that haven't heard, Pansy Parkinson, who they've been calling the Dark Heiress, took full credit tonight as the leader of the Death Eaters. She got away with a few of the others, but just knowing who's in charge of it all is going to be an asset to us. Thanks again to each of you for your hard work tonight. The mission was a success and it's because of the teamwork you all put in." Her eyes moved across the room and landed on Draco, making him feel included in her appreciation of the team and his lip curled up at her acknowledgement.

She stepped down from the platform and grabbed a couple of copies of the plans that had already been made, walking back to Draco as the room started buzzing again, "Let's go back to the Manor. We can talk and then we can read through these." Her voice was less cold than it had been earlier, giving him some more hope as he nodded and followed her out of the room. Once outside the Ministry, they apparated back to the Manor and settled onto opposite sides of the couch in the den.

"I want to start by saying I'm sorry for not being completely honest with you when I realized where we were going," Draco said, ready to get the ball rolling, "I made a mistake."

Hermione nodded, thinking about what she needed to say, "I just want you to understand that I'm upset because I didn't appreciate feeling like I had to question you at such a pinnacle moment of this case. I've put my unwavering trust in you and defended you at every turn. For you to keep information from me in a situation like that felt like some kind of betrayal. Like you were on their side or something."

"I'm not and I never have been," Draco said, his defensive instincts trying to fight their way out, "I understand that you're upset and I deserve that, but at no point was my allegiance in question in my own mind. The only reason I didn't tell you was because the second it would have come out that it was the Parkinson's house everyone would have pointed fingers at Pansy and I truly thought she had nothing to do with it."

"Would it have been the end of the world to let us consider that she might be involved, even if she wasn't?" Hermione asked, "As opposed to assuming she's innocent and then finding out she's the leader?"
"I don't think that's fair at all," Draco shook his head, he'd done his best to see things from her point of view, but this one hit too personally, "That's the exact same thing as saying that everyone pointing fingers at me the last year has been warranted on the off chance that maybe I was what the Death Eaters were saying, when you believed that I wasn't. Your belief in me made all the difference in the world. I believed Pansy and if I could make that difference for her, had she been innocent, it was a sacrifice I was willing to make."

"You sacrificed my trust for that," Hermione said.

"You sacrificed the trust of the Head Auror to believe me," Draco pointed out, "I understand fully why you feel like you do, but you have to see where I'm coming from. I would never want anyone I care about to go through the unwarranted ridicule I've received this last year. And I'm not saying I'm some poor innocent bystander because I know I've done horrible things, but even knowing that you've protected me and for the same reason, I protected Pansy. Trust and justice for someone you believe is undeserving of assumed guilt."

Hermione nodded slowly, "I do understand that. And I appreciate you explaining. I just wish you had told me because I wouldn't have jumped to conclusions if you still believed her but at least we could have been on the same page with the same knowledge."

"It's a lesson learned, Granger," he said with a tired look.

"Do you love her?" Hermione asked after a minute, "Because that's a part of why I trust you and want to protect you."

"As a close friend I've loved her for most of my life. Not romantically, but she was very important to me for a long time. It's like how you'll always love Weasley... and Potter. But as I've told you, I felt she took a lot of unfair cruelty from me in our school days and I just wanted to try and right one wrong I've done by having her back now."

They sat in silence as Hermione thought on their conversation. After enough time had gone by, Draco moved over closer to her on the couch a little hesitantly. When she didn't move away from him, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into him, "I can say I'm sorry as many times as you need, but I've told you all of my motivations at this point. I hope you can forgive me."

Hermione sighed, leaning her head on his shoulder, "I do forgive you. And I'm sorry I got a bit short with you, tensions have been very high tonight and I knew we needed to talk about things, but we had to focus on the case first."

"I know, I didn't mean to complicate it all," he said, feeling angry at himself again.

She tilted her head up to look at him, seeing the darkness taking over his features and reaching her hand up to pull his face to hers. She kissed him firmly on the lips, wanting him to know they'd be okay, before pulling back, "We'll work through it, that's what a relationship is. I see your side of it now."

He tried to smile at her but it turned into more of a grimace, "I can't imagine that dating me will ever get easier for you. Sometimes I'm not great at communicating and I don't always make the right decision."

"You're better at communicating than you think. Plus, it will get easier when we figure each other out. I know we're not always going to see eye to eye on everything, but so far we've always able to talk about it when we need to," she said confidently, looking over at her work bag on the ground with a sigh, "Ready to read through the plans and start brainstorming?"
"Of course," he nodded, moving over a seat to give her room to get up and grab the copies. She handed him one, repositioning herself on the couch and zoning in on the writing.

Draco leaned back on the other side, throwing his legs up next to hers. He watched her for a moment, it seemed so normal to be there reading through files, sprawled out together on the couch. Sometimes it made him feel like he was living someone else's life for a while. One where he got to be this successful, respected detective working hard with his partner to make a difference in the world while they fell for each other along the way. Like a romance novel that you knew had to end eventually. Only romance novels usually had happy endings.

Hermione looked up to see his gaze on her and she smiled, "What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said, "Just glad we could talk. I hope you know I'm thankful to be here with you and to be a part of the investigation. I know you don't have to include me."

She gave an embarrassed laugh, "Sorry I said that earlier. I was angry. I know you want to be here, we just need to be on the same page."

"I know," he reached down and rested his hand on her ankle, which was perched next to him, and turned his head towards his copy of the plans, refocusing on the task for the evening.

Half an hour later Hermione put her papers down, looking expectantly at Draco. He looked up over his copy at her, "Not done yet," he said, flicking his eyes back down with a frown on his face.

She waited patiently for another five minutes until he set his copy down and their eyes met again.

"How far along do you think they are?" she asked him.

"I have no idea," he shook his head, "Can't be too far since we haven't heard about any incidents in the news."

"We'll have to check in with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to see if they've gotten any more reports of missing dragon eggs recently," Hermione said, making a note for herself.

"Once we get all of the action items ironed out at the meeting tomorrow, I think our next mission should start with the giants. It seems like they're the key," Draco re-read the first section of his copy.

Hermione nodded, looking back down at her own, still not believing the words on the page, "So my overall takeaways that I think we need to highlight in our meeting tomorrow are that we need to make contact with the giants, the dragonologists and someone with a connection to the black market - maybe I can find Mundungus Fletcher and make a deal for him to help us.

"Making contact with the giants is no easy feat," Draco said, "I remember the Dark Lord talking with my father about trying to parley with them for the wizarding war. He gained the majority of their support eventually, so I'm sure it would have been easier for the Death Eaters this time around. But it'll make it that much more difficult for us."

"Yes, I agree with that, I think that's the first thing we should brainstorm. Makes a lot of sense now why he wanted them to side with him during the war. It wasn't just for the Battle of Hogwarts."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

"Alright everyone, let's get started!" Hermione called over the group of Aurors all talking
animatedly amongst themselves. There was a palpable tension in the room as the day began, with everyone well read on the plans, “I want to start with a quick summary to make sure no one missed anything and then we’ll go into strategy. Highlights and agenda will be passed around,” Hermione handed a stack of parchment to the closest person to her to grab and pass on.

Draco sat in the back of the room next to Harry and Ron, setting out his quills and trying to fit in.

"Can you believe how much detail these plans go into?" Ron whispered to both of them as the papers got passed around the room.

"They've literally been sitting on a world destruction plan for years and we had no idea," Harry shook his head with wide eyes.

"Did you have any idea what was in these, Malfoy? You said you'd seen them at your place, right?" Ron asked, not in an accusatory way, just blatantly curious.

"I never knew what was in them," Draco said honestly, "I'd just seen the papers sitting around and knew they were some overarching plan he had that he wasn't ready to implement yet. Just assumed they were more plans to try and kill Potter," Harry's head spun towards him, "Sorry, I just assumed that's what it was. You got him in the end anyway."

Harry couldn't help but laugh, "Such a casual thing to say, Malfoy," he took an agenda that had been passed to him and handed the last one to Draco.

"Alright, looks like everyone's got their materials for the morning," Hermione said, standing back up in front of the group, "So we can summarize the Death Eaters' plans in three steps. The first step was for the Death Eaters to make contact with the giants, presenting them with the gifts listed to gain their support. You can read over those yourselves. The second was to hide an undercover Death Eater within the Dragonologists to steal dragon eggs, which would be transported to different networks of Death Eaters through the black magic market. The third step was to unite the giant network with the homes housing the dragons," she paused and there was a murmur through the room, "This is troublesome because, as we all know, giants are the true masters of the dragons. For almost a thousand years laws have forbid giants to own or raise dragons for this reason even before the Dragon Reform Act of 1692 that outlawed dragons as pets to the wider wizarding community. It would not only risk the International Secrecy Act to have giants riding around on dragons all over the world, but the risks that come with the combined power and unpredictable actions when a giant and its dragon are united can be consequently catastrophic."

"Not that Hagrid ever considered that," Ron whispered slyly to Harry.

"He wasn't a full giant anyway," Harry whispered back.

A hand went up and Hermione glanced up, "Yes?"

"Does this link back to the dragon eggs we recovered when this whole case first started?"

"I'm sure it does," Hermione nodded, "With any luck we at least set them back to square one with that raid in terms of having an army of dragons ready when the giants are."

Another hand raised and Hermione motioned to them.

"We've all been told that giants are the masters of dragons in our studies in school, but what exactly does that mean?"

"Well," Hermione tried to think of the best way to word it, "Giants and dragons have a sort of bond
when they're united. The dragon will take to its giant when they first meet and become a sort of protector and soldier for them. They are unquestioningly obedient to giants and if told to fly, they'll fly, if told to fight, they'll fight, and if told to destroy, they'll unleash their fire."

"Are there any records of what's happened in the past when giants were allowed to own dragons?" an older female Auror asked with a worried look on her face.

"There are partial records that date back to 600 AD, yes," Hermione answered, sounding a bit uneasy, "The stories describe the destruction of entire towns, fires that burned for months and general panic among wizards as well as muggles for their complete lack of control. I think a concerning aspect would be that this group of Death Eaters wants to incite terror. I believe they would not only instruct the giants to specifically carry out their plans to destroy the Ministry and the muggle governments as they detail, but I'm afraid they would also let them loose on the world without limits."

The room was silent as the thought of hundreds of dragons wreaking havoc on the world consumed them all. Another hand raised in the air.

"Yes?" she pointed at a large man in the front.

"How would we fight that?" he asked quietly.

"Well, I think at this point our strategy needs to start not by planning how to fight it, but how to keep it from happening altogether."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Another hand rose into the air, "Detective Granger, how do we keep the Death Eaters from uniting the giants and dragons?"

"So with that as our summary, it sounds like we're all ready to move on to strategy," she looked around the room for any objection before continuing, "I think our first offensive will be connecting with the giants. It will be dangerous, knowing they're already in contact with the Death Eaters, but we can discuss what we have to offer them versus what the Death Eaters are offering. They want to give them power and strength," she paused, drawing a deep breath and knowing her next few statements were likely to cause a bit of controversy, "I think we combat that with offering them more freedom and a voice. For a long time they've been forced to the caves and I think a lot of the animosity they have towards wizards is due to their lack of comparative freedom and respect."

Another hand shot up, "Detective, they're an aggressive culture, how do we give them freedom when they themselves are unpredictable?"

"I was thinking we could set up towns for them, protected by magical barriers and zones, of course, but it would free them from the confines of the caves and life in the mountains, reintroducing them to life within civilization, even if they're still partitioned to their own lands. I think the ability to call land their own and live freely in those areas would be freedoms they would welcome. As for a voice, I think if we gave them a representative in the Ministry, someone who listened to their concerns and worked to find compromises between our species, they would feel more respected by the wizarding community."

"Aren't they... you know, less intelligent, though? Will they understand freedoms? Will they even care to have a voice in wizarding government?"

"I wouldn't say they're less intelligent, they're just a different species with a different way of life. They form their tribes and govern their people and have their own society. They would absolutely understand our message and what more freedoms would mean for them. They'll know they have a choice as to whether they follow the Death Eaters or they team up with us," Hermione responded, "They were friendly with Dumbledore when he was alive. But they understand our culture and they know they live out their days in the mountains because the wizarding community sent them away. I truly believe they would see the value in our offer and that our species could coexist happily in this world if we gave them the chance."

Another hand raised, "You're talking total law reform," the Auror said with concern, "This is more than gifts to the giants."

"I think it has to be," she said strongly, "I don't think we can sway them with fancy magical gifts. I think we need to form a lasting partnership with them, or they could always be tempted again by stronger magic from the other side in the future."

"I think it's a great idea," Harry said from the back of the room, "And I think Detective Granger couldn't be more accurate in thinking we need a long-term fix as opposed to a competition with the Death Eaters of whose gift is cooler. We've met a giant before," he grinned, thinking about Grawp, "They're not all aggressive. And she's right that they would see value in the freedom to bring their tribes out of the mountains and into a town of their own."

"You came up with this whole plan yourself?" another Auror asked Hermione.
"The land and freedoms, yes, a voice in the Ministry was Draco's idea," she nodded at him in the back of the room, "Sometimes having someone hear your side of things can make all the difference," he gave her an appreciative smile, avoiding the stares from the rest of the room, "Besides, how can we expect them to trust our offer if we don't show them that it's not a one time thing. We need to give them faith that we'll hear them out in the future if there are improvements we can make."

"How do we get in contact with the giants?" Another Auror asked.

"Well," Hermione glanced back over at Harry, "During the Wizarding War, Dumbledore sent our friend Hagrid to share his message. I think Hagrid's help would be an asset to us, but I think we need more than that to show we mean it. I think Draco and I should go with Hagrid so that we can come to them with a half-giant they can relate to and trust, someone from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that can detail what we have to offer, and someone who understands the other side and can try to explain why they shouldn't side with the Death Eaters."

Another Auror's hand raised slowly in the air, "I'm sorry, but I just have to say it, are we all just going to trust Draco Malfoy now because he helped out on the last mission? Couldn't it have been a ploy to have him look like he's on our side? Wasn't he on house arrest for being involved a week ago?"

Hermione opened her mouth, trying to decide where to start before she was cut off by Robert Bones, who stood up from the front row and addressed the room, "Yes," he said simply, "We put Mr. Malfoy on house arrest in an abundance of caution a few months ago and I'll be the first to say I was wrong," he looked over at Hermione, "Mr. Malfoy was tortured and almost killed by Ms. Parkinson at the Veiled Estate—" murmurs started to break out in the crowd at this, "We didn't feel it necessary to tell everyone about that, but if his allegiance is in question, I think perhaps you should all understand why he's sitting with us today. I see having him on our side as the same asset that Detective Granger sees it as. He understands them, he knows how they work and he can help us bring them down."

Hermione couldn't help but feel grateful for Bones' words, knowing his support of Draco was what they needed right now.

The Auror that had voiced his opinion nodded, turning in his chair to find Draco, "Sorry, Mr. Malfoy, I just had to ask."

Draco nodded in acknowledgement, feeling a bit awkward.

When the attention turned back to Hermione, Harry leaned over with a grin and whispered, "Guessing she didn't tell Bones that you knew about the estate."

"No chance he would have stood up for me like that if she had," he gave him a half smile back.

"Probably a good sign you two are back on good terms then."

"So in regards to what freedoms we can offer them and how we choose a Giant representative, I think we should set up some meetings with the Minister for Magic and a few of us from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," Hermione said to the room.

"I'll take care of setting that up," Alden said from beside Bones, "I've got access to Kingsley's calendar."

"Wonderful. On the other side of things I think we'll need to get started on tracking those dragon
eggs and figuring out who they've got working within the dragonologists. Harry and Ron, I was hoping you could head that up, I think Charlie would be the perfect contact."

"Absolutely," Ron said, "I'll send him an owl that we're coming for a visit and we'll talk in person."

"Great. As a reference for everyone, we returned the plans to the Veiled Estate last night after we made our copies and had Aurors standing guard until they were back in place so for all the Death Eaters know, we never found the plans and we'd like to go forward with that as our official statement," Hermione looked around at the heads nodding around the room before she continued, "Next, I'd like a few of the Aurors working with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement team during the search for Pansy Parkinson, as well as the Death Eater interviews that we'll be conducting over the next few weeks. Bones, could you coordinate some teams with Alden for that? We've got ten new Death Eaters we brought in from the mission so I think we should do a few rounds of questioning and see if there's anything else we can get from them."

"We'll put together some teams," Bones didn't look up, but jotted down some notes.

"Alright, well I think those are going to be our next steps, we'll be contacting Hagrid to formulate a plan and once we've had the meeting to go over what our offer will be, we'll set a date for that mission to begin. Let's plan on weekly meetings on Monday mornings to debrief on the prior week progress and current week goals."

There was a general murmur of agreement and Hermione dismissed the group to start with their tasks.

That afternoon, Hermione hosted an array of meetings in her office, starting with Harry and Ron. Draco sat on Hermione's side of the desk feeling like a schoolboy again with his parchment and quill as they talked.

"I think you should make it seem like a family visit," Hermione said to Ron, "Don't raise any alarms that we know what's going on."

"I'm sure Charlie will be happy to host us," Ron sat back casually, "We'll see if he's noticed anyone he'd be suspicious of."

"Great, I'd like you to request logs of their dragon care," she said, checking off a box on her sheet of activities to delegate, "We're looking for a listing of dragons that have laid eggs and everyone that's had access to those eggs in the last, let's say, 3 years. The caretakers in the last year will be the ones we focus on since we know they had to re-stock after our raid in January," Hermione looked back up at Ron and Harry, who were nodding, "One of you should write that down," she suggested.

"Right!" Ron said, looking over at Harry, who looked back at him for a moment before conceding and grabbing a piece of parchment and a quill from Hermione's desk.

"Alright," Hermione glanced over at Draco, who was smirking next to her, and then back at her sheet, "And then we'll need to do a quick background check on that list when you have it. Anyone of interest we'll need references for and if we start leaning towards a suspect, you'll need to get possible contacts we can trust."

Harry wrote down notes, "Okay, got it."

"That's all I've got so far," she said, "Just… be careful."

"We always are, aren't we Harry?" Ron slapped him on the back.
"You know I never go looking for trouble," Harry said innocently.

"Always finds you anyway, doesn't it, Potter?" Draco grinned at him.

"Keep me updated when you can, I suspect we won't head to the mountains for another couple of weeks. We'll have to do some serious work finding a compromise on the giant laws before we head out," Hermione stood up, walking around the desk to give them each a hug.

"We'll keep you updated once we've arrived," Harry nodded, embracing her.

She moved over and hugged Ron as Draco shook Harry's hand, "Good luck over there."

Hermione stood back and Draco held out his hand for Ron, who hesitated only briefly before shaking it with his own, "Good luck on your trip as well," Ron told him with sincerity.

Ron and Harry left with a wave and Draco and Hermione were left on their own, "That was a nice gesture," she commented.

"I offered Potter my friendship the first day of Hogwarts," Draco said, sounding overly self-righteous.

Hermione rolled her eyes, "Offered him your friendship while simultaneously insulting Ron, if I remember correctly."

"I don't remember that part," he shrugged, "I'm more than willing to be friendly. Potter actually invited me out to drinks some time," he mentioned, "I'm sure Weasley will not be quite so inviting, but I think we're both trying to be cordial, for you."

"It's appreciated," she smiled at him, "I enjoy seeing you all interact. You actually fit in quite well."

"Don't let my father hear you say that."

Hermione gave him a look before walking closer to him and standing on her tip toes to kiss his cheek, "I'll make sure not to mention it the next time we sit down for tea."

They spent the afternoon outlining their requests for giant law improvements before sitting in with Alden to discuss them. Once they had refined the requests, he sent an interoffice memo off to the assistant for Kingsley Shackelbolt to set up a meeting. They received a message back that the Minister for Magic would be available at the end of the week. An appointment was set up Friday at 9am and they returned to their list of activity delegations to continue preparing each department for what was to come.

After an exhausting day at the Ministry, Hermione and Draco returned to Malfoy Manor. Draco sat down on one end of the couch, throwing one foot up on his other leg and leaning back with a glass of wine. Hermione grabbed the book she was reading from the side table and lay down across the couch, resting her head in Draco's lap. She snapped her book into her golden book holder and sighed, setting her glass of wine on the coffee table for later, crossing her arms over her chest, and focusing on the words flowing across the page. Draco closed his eyes, more than happy to have a few minutes of silence after a hectic day, and moved his other hand down to comb his fingers absentely through her hair.

At some point his hand stopped moving, though it wasn't until much later that Hermione noticed as she pulled her book from the holder and glanced up at Draco, whose head was leaning on the back of the couch, eyes closed and wine glass teetering precariously in his other hand draped over the
arm.

She sat up slowly, a smile on her face as she looked at him, his features relaxed, hair in whisps across his forehead, chest moving slowly up and down. She grabbed the glass from his hand and placed it on the table, climbing fully onto his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck as he stirred, stretching his arms out to the sides, one of his eyes peeking open at her briefly, "Did I fall asleep?" he mumbled.

"Mmhmm," she replied, burying her face into his neck.

"We should get up to bed," his eyes were still closed and his arm came down around her body, clearly with no intention of moving in the near future.

"Yes, we should," she didn't move either. The week had already taken so much out of her and it was only going to move faster from here. There was something beautiful about a quiet moment on the couch before they had to move again.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her, glad she wasn't ready to get up yet.

"Like there's so much going through my mind that my whole brain is just one continuous garble of words I can't quite make out, if that makes sense."

Draco gave an understanding laugh, "It makes all the sense in the world."

His hand rubbed slowly up and down her arm and she felt herself shiver at the warmth his touch spread over her, "Being here with you, though," she lifted her head and his eyes opened to meet hers, "It makes all that noise go away sometimes."

Draco's lip curled up, "I understand that, too," he leaned down to kiss her softly, his hand cupping her face as he rested his forehead against hers.

"We should just stay here," Hermione said quietly, "If we never go upstairs, we never go to sleep, tomorrow never comes and we can just be here in our artificial serenity."

"But tomorrow is inevitable, Granger, If we just stay here, tomorrow will come whether we want it to or not, we'll just need a hell of a lot more coffee to get through it."

"You're not much of a hopeless romantic, are you," she quipped, moving her hand up to rest over his.

"I think I always qualify as hopeless," he offered in jest, "Does that count?"

Hermione sighed, pulling her head back and looking at him again, her eyes laughing for her, "I'll take what I can get I guess. Off to bed then, so we don't have to rely on coffee tomorrow."

Draco grinned at her, leaning in for one more kiss before releasing her from his arms and following her to his bedroom.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
The week flew by as each department prepared for their roles in the steps to come. By Friday, Harry and Ron had taken off to Romania to see Charlie, the Aurors had deployed teams on the search for Pansy, and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had begun their interrogations of the Death Eaters.

Hermione and Alden had spent the majority of their day on Friday with Kingsley Shackelbolt, who had attended their meeting with his own proposed list of law reform. The Minister for Magic had been more than willing to work with them to accommodate their mission. He had even praised Hermione for thinking outside the box when it came to considering how to one-up the Death Eaters with progressive ideas and long-lasting solutions.

They talked through each of their lists and discussed what made sense and where they needed to draw the line. They talked through compromises and concessions and considered how their offers compared to what the giants already had. At the end of the day, they all retreated with some follow up for the upcoming week.

The most difficult aspect of what they were trying to do was that it would impact so many departments in different countries to pass the laws and obtain licenses for the life they wanted to give the giants around the world. The second most difficult aspect was the extreme time crunch to get it all passed in so they could stay a step ahead of the Death Eaters.

They would need to hold a meeting with the entire Wizengamot, and the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, who would speak for the surrounding nations, to pass a few of the laws. They scheduled that meeting for the following Friday. With any hope, that would be the last obstacle before their mission would begin. Hagrid had immediately agreed to accompany them, sharing his experiences to help them plan their angles and timing.

Bones came into the department that evening, knocking on Hermione's door.

"Mr. Bones, how are you," she greeted him.

"Doing fine, thanks," he said, "I've got something for you," he handed over an envelope addressed to Draco, "Figured you could deliver this one in person, it's his trial date. They set it for next Friday before your meeting with the Wizengamot to clear him before the mission starts. Just a formality since we had him on house arrest, obviously."

"Wonderful, thank you," she took the envelope from him, "He'll be very happy to have this all behind him."

"He's lucky to have you on his side," Bones told her, "I think you've got a bright future here, Granger. Sorry again for the push back early on."

"I know you've got a lot of personal feelings about these Death Eater cases. I'm just glad it got sorted out."

Bones gave her a nod of acknowledgment and took his leave.
Hermione returned back to the Manor that evening and presented Draco with his trial date notification from Bones.

He gave her a broad smile, "Finally. I think this means I'll have to take you out for a nice evening next Friday before we take off on our mission."

"I certainly won't complain about that," she said, leaning up for a kiss, "But we could go this weekend if you wanted, there's nothing stopping you from leaving the house anymore."

"I'd honestly rather just wait until my name is fully cleared and it's in the Prophet so maybe I won't get the look from people. Also, you're still my detective, might look scandalous," he grinned down at her.

"Like everyone doesn't know already," she laughed, "Good thing we made a great team to keep anyone from saying too much about it. If you had been guilty I'd never hear the end of it."

"Well I'm not cleared yet, Granger," he said coolly.

She gave him a look, "That would really be a setback to all the progress we've made in this relationship if you were the leader of the Death Eaters after all this."

"It would certainly add a lot of excitement though, wouldn't it?" he watched as she rolled her eyes, "Alright, alright, just joking, calm down," he read over the official letter in his hands again before looking back over at her, "Now, don't get me wrong, this is lovely, but isn't the fact that they didn't put me back on house arrest enough documentation? What's the trial even for?"

"Just formality to close the case I guess," Hermione shrugged, "I asked Harry a few days ago and he said it was normal protocol just to have the Wizengamot sign off on your official pardon, since it's concerning the Death Eaters. Certain levels of charges require Wizengamot approval."

"Well I don't love sitting in front of a large group of people silently judging me, but I guess the ends will justify the means."

"They will," she said reassuringly, "And don't worry, I'm sure they'll judge you out loud as well as silently."

He turned his head slowly towards her with a wry look before dropping the letter on the table and picking her up off the ground. She yelped in surprise, "Put me down!"

"I don't think I will," he said smugly, carrying her over to the couch, dropping her there and climbing on top of her, "You're being cheeky with me tonight."

"You started it," she challenged.

"I think I might like it," he leaned down and captured her lips and she wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer to her. He kissed down her neck before returning to her lips, hands slipping under the fabric of her shirt.

She sighed contentedly into the kiss, loving the way he made her feel. Not that she and Ron had ever truly dated but she had never quite imagined the level of comfort she could feel having another person touch her bare skin in such an intimate way. At this point she knew it was a matter of time before things went all the way there.

The last few months it had been difficult to find much time for undisrupted romance with all of the different external factors like Draco brooding around on house arrest, late nights in the den.
planning for missions, the death of Adrien, and now the stress building with the weight of what was at stake if the Death Eaters succeeded.

Nevertheless, it had almost happened on a few different occasions, and they had spent a good amount of time exploring each other in... other ways. She could tell Draco wanted her first time to be special and light, and as much as she appreciated that, she'd learned enough from him already to want to know more. With the weight of the allegations against him lifted, maybe the timing would feel right soon.

She registered him kissing a very sensitive area of her neck and slyly unbuttoning her pants and she smiled, moving her hands into his hair and leaning her head back as his fingers brushed lightly across her stomach at the line of her pants.

There was a knock on the door and Draco groaned, pushing himself off of her to lean a bit awkwardly on the arm of the couch while she sat up quickly, buttoning her pants and straightening her shirt, "Yeah?" he called.

The door opened and Narcissa popped her head in, "Sorry to bother you, darling, but your father's just told me they sent your trial date to clear your name and I wanted to see if you'd like me to be there."

"You're welcome to come, mother, but don't feel obligated. Granger will be there and it sounds like it's just a formality."

"Okay, I think I'd like to come along anyway, I think it would look good for us both to be present. Family unity and all."

"Of course," he nodded, "Not a problem."

"Alright," she turned to Hermione, "Nice to see you," she smiled as she backed out of the doorway, pulling it closed behind her.

Draco looked between himself and Hermione, who was sitting a little too properly in the middle of the couch, "I'm sure this looked natural."

Hermione burst out into embarrassed laughter, covering her face with her hands, "why does this keep happening!" She melted back into the cushions.

"The joys of living with my parents," he sighed, joining her back on the couch and throwing his arm around her lazily.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

The next week was a whirlwind of back and forth meetings on giant law improvements between the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and a plethora of other departments. They'd gotten word from Kingsley early on in the week that the Supreme Mugwump was on board with the mission and being updated on the progress of law development. They'd brainstormed and wordsmithed, honed and refined, and by the following Friday had a full set of new giant law proposals to take in front of the Wizengamot.

Friday morning, Hermione, Draco and Narcissa took off to the Ministry together, prepared for Draco's trial which was set for 8am; enough time to get through the necessary procedures and reset for the giant law presentation.

As they walked into the atrium of the Ministry, four different photographers for the Prophet and a
few other magazines were there, waiting in the atrium, along with a horde of reporters and a small
crowd of onlookers.

"Mr. Malfoy! A comment if you could?" one reporter asked.

"No press until after the trial, please," Hermione stepped in front of Draco, leading him past the
crowd.

They got off the elevators at level two and made their way to the courtroom, "I'm going to head in
to sit with Alden on your defense side," Hermione said, stopping outside the doors to the main
floor, "Bones will be on the prosecution side, but he just has to be since he's the one that put you on
house arrest. We're all here to support you," she squeezed his hand and smiled at Narcissa, before
turning to walk into the room.

Draco and Narcissa waited outside until the doors were opened at precisely 8am for them to enter.
The seats were full of Wizengamot members on one side, and a decent amount of spectators on the
other, including the reporters. Hermione and Alden sat on the floor level behind the chair he would
take, and behind him on his other side was Robert Bones, who nodded at him cordially as he
walked past them and took his seat, cameras flashing from the stands and his mother joining
Hermione and Alden.

The room quieted as Kingsley Shackelbolt stood from the chair of the Chief Warlock and the room
quieted, "Mr. Draco Malfoy, we are here to dispute the allegations of your involvement in the
Death Eater Activity. You were officially accused and sentenced to house arrest by Mr. Robert
Bones, Head Auror, and you will be represented by Mr. Alden Northcott, Head of the Department
of Magical Law Enforcement, as counseled by Hermione Granger, Lead Detective. Mr. Malfoy,
how do you plead?"

Draco stood from his chair and said calmly and clearly, "Not guilty, Minister."

"You may be seated for the prosecution and defense statements."

Draco took his seat and Kingsley motioned towards Robert Bones, "Robert, you have the ears of
the Wizengamot."

"Thank you, Minister," Robert stood and walked in front of Draco, addressing the group, "Good
morning, witches and wizards of the Wizengamot. The accusations brought against Draco Malfoy
will be presented along with the evidence to support them. As you know, Death Eater activity has
plagued the wizarding world since the beginning of this year, in January 2001. The accusations
against Draco Malfoy included his involvement, and potentially his leadership, in planning and
executing the Death Eater's actions. In June 2001, after the death of a fellow Auror, Tracey Davis,
we determined that, in an abundance of caution, Draco Malfoy should be put on house arrest. This
decision was supported by the verbal statements provided by each Death Eater the Ministry had
brought in, to date, as well as the knowledge of his prior involvement with the Death Eaters during
the Wizarding War where he sided with Voldemort, walking away from the dark arts only minutes
before his downfall."

Robert finished his statement, walking back past Draco and to his seat. Draco turned around in his
chair and gave Hermione a questioning look, feeling as though Bones had said nothing to help his
case in that statement. Hermione looked back at him with a reassuring smile, which confused him
even more and he turned back towards the front of the room.

"Alden, the floor is yours," Kingsley nodded at him.
Alden stood and walked to the front of the room, "Thank you, Minister. In defense of Draco Malfoy, we have obtained confessions from the Death Eaters we brought in from the Veiled Estate that the true leader of the Death Eaters is Pansy Parkinson, who was ready to take credit after the raid. She was responsible for all activity that has transpired. Further, we had an eye witness that watched her torture Mr. Malfoy, corroborated by healer records noting curses performed on Mr. Malfoy the evening of our raid. Throughout this investigation Mr. Malfoy has been more than cooperative, giving us Rowle's name in the beginning and persuading his father to pass us the invaluable information that directed us to five others. In response to Bones' statements, the file will note that Mr. Malfoy was exonerated in the trials after the war for walking away on his own free will and aiding in the support of the light side during pivotal moments leading up to the Battle of Hogwarts."

Alden walked back to his seat and Kingsley stood back up, "All evidence has been provided to and reviewed by the Wizengamot and, if there is no one else that wishes to speak on either side of the case, we can take any other closing statements from both of you."

Bones stood up, "Minister, the only other thing the prosecution wishes to say is that we side with the defense."

Alden stood, "No further comments, Minister."

They both sat and the Wizengamot whispered amongst themselves for a few moments before falling silent again, one wizard walking a piece of paper up to Kingsley, who turned to the group, "Mr Malfoy, if you could please stand," he said and Draco stood clasping his hands behind him, "On behalf of the Wizengamot, Draco Malfoy, you are found not guilty and cleared of all charges."

Draco felt himself relax a little, even knowing the outcome ahead of time, there had still been some degree of worry that someone might come forward and try to speak against him, "Thank you," he nodded to Kingsley and the Wizengamot.

The room started to buzz again and Hermione walked up to Draco, pulling him into a tight hug. She moved back and Narcissa did the same. Alden and Bones were both right behind them to shake his hand.

"Sorry I had to say all the negatives," Bones told him quietly, "It's my job just to present the facts as they are. Closing statements is where you can add your own opinion and judgments."

"I understand," Draco said, "And I appreciated the closing statement."

They left the courtroom and were met with the crowd that had sat in on the trial, as well as the group of reporters.

"You're free to talk, if you'd like to," Hermione said in his ear as they got closer.

"Mr. Malfoy, can we get a statement now?" one of the reports in the front called out.

Draco nodded briefly and stopped in front of the reporters, his mother standing behind him with a hand on his shoulder, Hermione on the other side with her hands professionally interlaced in front of her, "I just want to say thank you again to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for their diligent work throughout this case to find the facts and let me help prove my innocence. I understand the severity of the allegations and the steps that had to be taken out of precaution for the safety of the wizarding world and am grateful that the department worked as quickly as they could to clear my name. Detective Granger, especially, has handled a very sensitive case without ever losing sight of her judgement or her job to the public."
"How does your father feel about your trial today?" another wizard asked.

"He's relieved that the truth has been uncovered, and wishes he could have been here with my mother in support," Draco said.

"Mrs. Malfoy, anything further?" the wizard followed up, looking at Narcissa.

"He's incredibly proud of Draco for how he's handled the pressures of the last year, and we are very grateful that Draco can go back to normal life," she smiled as the cameras flashed around them. Hermione could tell how comfortable they both were with public statements, which made her job a hell of a lot easier.

"It's rumored that you've been dating your detective, is that true?" a woman pushed through the other reporters and Hermione did her best to control her annoyance at the sight of Rita Skeeter. Hadn't she learned her lesson from her intrusions during the Triwizard Tournament?

"When it comes to this investigation, our relationship has been nothing but professional," Draco answered like a true Malfoy.

"And outside of the case?" Rita raised her eyebrows as her Quick-Quotes Quill danced along the page in her notebook.

"Outside the case isn't pertinent to the outcome," Draco said firmly, "I was found innocent in front of the Wizengamot for the accusations against me and have lent my full cooperation to the whole team here and will continue to support the department in their fight against the Death Eaters."

Rita turned to Hermione, "Ms. Granger, a statement?"

"Today is about justice," Hermione tried to hide the resentment from her voice, "Today, the Wizengamot reviewed all evidence of the case and justice was given to Mr. Malfoy, whose patience throughout this process has been commendable. We're happy to have this behind all of us and to have the name of the leader to move forward with our investigation and prosecution of the Death Eater Activity."

"And is he your boyfriend?" Rita asked coyly.

"Does anyone else have any further questions for Mr. Malfoy?" Hermione asked, pulling her glare from Rita.

"Mr. Malfoy, how do you plan to celebrate your freedom?" another reporter asked.

"By continuing to do everything I can to help the department, and perhaps enjoy a nice wander through town in the fresh air later."

The reporter gave an obligatory laugh, "Congratulations on your win today," she switched gears, "Do you have any idea what their next move will be?"

"We don't, yet," Draco turned to Hermione, "Would you like to take this one?"

Hermione gave him an appreciative smile as he gestured for her to take his place, "We're working now to try and learn what it is they're planning. Until we figure that out, we've been holding interrogations of the Death Eaters we have brought in and following some leads we've been given. We don't have answers yet, but in the weeks to come we hope to have a good direction and update for the public."
"Does it worry you that no one is talking?" Another reporter asked.

"It would be more helpful if they were," she replied, "But we're confident that there will be some breakthroughs from our interrogations," she moved her gaze to the group at large, "That'll be all the time we have for questions, we've got a lot of us in the coming weeks. Thank you for being here and showing your support."

She felt Draco's hand on the small of her back and nodded at the group, turning and walking with him towards the elevators.

"Nice hand off on the questioning," she said to him once they were down the hall a little way.

Draco put his hands in his pockets, "That Skeeter woman is going to run a story about us, you know."

"I know," she sighed, "But maybe the other reporters won't. She's working the gossip column, not the main page these days so I do my best to ignore her."

The elevator opened and they stepped on with Narcissa and Alden, doors closing as the flash of the cameras finally subsided.

"Time for the real work?" Draco looked over at Alden.

"Indeed it is," he nodded.

Narcissa and Draco headed back to the Manor as Alden and Hermione returned to their offices to put together the packets they'd prepared for the Wizengamot before returning to the courtroom. This time, there were no reporters or spectators, just the witches and wizards of the Wizengamot and the Supreme Mugwump, who was a tall wizard from Italy that came dressed in sleek purple velvet robes.

They stepped in front of the group, Hermione passing out packets to the members, "What we're handing out to each of you are summary packets of all of the laws we've been discussing back and forth the last week. These are the final laws we'll be offering to the giants, along with the applicable approvals, also included within. Final approvals given today will be added to the packet for our files," she stepped back with Alden and they sat down at the table that had been set up for them. They spent the next two hours going through the packet and sending around signature pages for each law. When they adjourned, the Supreme Mugwump addressed them and reiterated the faith of the International Confederation of Wizards in her mission and in what they were looking to accomplish. Hermione took the master file back up to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and filed it away, bringing with her a packet to present to the giants.

When the day came to a close, she bid farewell to Alden, who wished her luck on her mission, and took her leave to the Manor to enjoy one last evening with Draco before they left in the morning to meet Hagrid and start their trek to the giant camps.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you're enjoying the story!! For you romance lovers, get excited for the next chapter :) xx
When Hermione arrived at the Manor, she was met at the gates by Draco, who was dressed much too nicely to anticipate an evening out at the Three Broomsticks.

"I certainly don't have anything nice to wear at your house," Hermione said, eyeing his crisp black slacks and sports coat as they walked up the stone path, "Should I run back to my flat before we go out?" 

"Absolutely not. You'll find a dress I've picked out for you on the bed upstairs."

"That you've picked out for me? From where!" she laughed.

"I went out while you were at the Ministry today and thought I'd get you a little celebration outfit from Madam Malkins."

"That wasn't necessary, Draco. I could have just brought something over."

"Think of it as a thank you gift for all of your help on the investigation. Besides, I took the tags off, I can't return it."

She shook her head, "There seems to be a pattern with you buying things you can't return."

"Did you see the Prophet this afternoon?" Draco changed the subject, handing her the copy he was carrying. She couldn't help but notice the extra spring in his step. 

Hermione took a look at the cover where a picture of Draco talking with reporters, Narcissa and herself standing behind him, looked back at her: Draco Malfoy Exonerated Again — Continues Cooperation with Department of Magical Law Enforcement to take down the Death Eaters. Hermione kept reading, Draco Malfoy, who had been accused of leading the new ring of Death Eaters, was tried today in front of the Wizengamot and cleared of all charges. Although once involved with the Death Eaters during the wizarding war, it is clear that Mr. Malfoy has turned over a new leaf. He has been in constant contact with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, lending his knowledge and time to their efforts to bring down dark forces once more.

She beamed at him, folding the paper back up, "I'll read the whole thing later, but this is wonderful, Draco. I'm glad it made the afternoon Prophet."

"I as well," he pushed open the door to the Manor, "Now, our reservations are at 7 o'clock, so you may want to go get ready to celebrate with me," he gave her a smug look.

Realizing he wasn't going to back down she sighed, "Fine, I'll go see what you bought."

She walked into the bedroom and over to the bed where it was waiting for her. She held the garment up. It was, no doubt, very expensive and unnecessary. But also, it was beautiful. She set it back down, moving into the bathroom to work a little magic on her hair, which had been pulled up in a bun all day. She let it down, shaking it out and combing her fingers through it before grabbing the jar of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion from under the sink. She'd hid it there when she started staying at the Manor for whenever she would wake up with an untamable mane. She put a couple drops in her palm and moved her fingers through her hair once more, watching as the curls calmed into
waves that hung loosely around her face.

She finally returned to the dress, shaking her head with a small laugh as she changed out of her clothes and slipped into it. She just had to love him for who he was. Extravagant gestures and all. She turned to look in the mirror, impressed not only with Draco's perfect sizing choice, but also his sense of style. It was a cap-sleeved emerald green lace dress, the slip underneath silky and short, but the overlay giving it a sophisticated modesty. She turned, appreciating how flattering it was all around, before catching a glimpse of another box on the floor outside the bed marked 'Granger.'

She furrowed her brows, walking over to it and placing it on the bed, opening it to find a pair of silver metallic leather pumps. She slipped them on, never the most confident in heels, but finding them acceptably comfortable. As she turned to walk back to the mirror she saw something else in the shoe box. It was a smaller box with a note attached that said, 'This is the last thing, I promise.' She opened it, mouth parting slightly as her eyes widened, "DRACO!" She yelled.

She heard footsteps coming up the stairs and placed a hand on her hip, looking at him sternly as he opened the door, "What is this!"

He grinned at her, "I just thought it would look nice with the dress."

"I do not want you to buy me things like this," she said, "These look like real stones."

"That's because they are," he said simply, walking over and taking a silver necklace out of the box, holding the pendant in his palm to show her in better lighting. It was a large diamond, at least a couple of karats, with emeralds magically embedded within it, in the shape of a small serpent. The serpent was small enough that if you didn't look too closely, you probably wouldn't notice it was a serpent at all. Draco looked at it and then back up at Hermione, "But I didn't buy this so you can't be upset. We have a lot of family heirlooms around, too many if I dare say, and my mother agrees. So I thought you should have one. As a sign of my entire family's appreciation of everything you've done for me. And, of course, as my girlfriend I wanted you to have something special from me to keep with you. Something to remind you that I care for you very much, even if I'm in one of my moods where I may seem like a real pain in the ass. Plus, it went so nicely with your dress."

"It feels like too much," Hermione looked at him seriously, "That has to be a very expensive piece. What if I lost it?"

"You won't," he smiled, "My mother knows a wonderful charm that locks jewelry so it can't be unhooked or broken away by anything but the counter-charm. She wears a lot of very expensive jewelry."

"Draco I—"

"It's a gift," he said firmly, "Please accept it and I'll hook it on for you. If you don't like it you can just hide it under your shirt or something in the future. But it would mean a lot to me if you had it and kept it close to you. I'm working on that hopeless romantic thing if you'll stop being stubborn."

She could see the authenticity in his gesture, "Of course I'll wear it, Draco. It's beautiful, thank you." She turned and lifted her hair off of her neck and he placed the necklace on her over the lace of the dress, pulling out his wand to say a quick charm before he stepped back.

She let her hair down and turned back to him. His smile broadened and his eyes lit up, "You are beautiful," he said, pulling her to him and kissing her, "That dress looks very elegant on you. I thought you'd prefer that style."
"It's very classy and very chic. I've noticed you do like putting me in green, though, don't you?"

"I really do. It's like role playing, seeing you in Slytherin colors," he smirked at the look she gave him and leaned back in to kiss her again, deeper this time, and they stood there with their arms around the other, tongues moving softly against each other before Hermione pulled back, "You've got me all dressed up, best to take me out before I end up undressed again."

"But that does sound fun too," he said in a low voice, swooping back in to capture her lips once more, "You're right though," he stole another kiss, "We should go," he kissed her one last time before finally letting her go to lead her off for the evening. The moment he moved away she almost regretted reminding him that it was time to leave. Tonight felt like a night to be close.

They apparated to Diagon Alley and Draco took her through a couple of alleyways before stopping in front of a modest looking bakery with a "CLOSED" sign on the door. Hermione looked at him questioningly but he just smiled and tapped the door with his wand, saying something quietly. He pushed the door open and in a matter of seconds the bakery transformed into a very swanky looking restaurant. He ushered her through and walked up to the host, keeping one hand on the small of her back.

"Mr. Malfoy," the host greeted him with a hint of surprise mixed with excitement, "We haven't seen you in so long, we'll get your table set up right away."

"Thank you, Maxwell," Draco said as the man walked off quickly.

"We used to come here often," he said, looking around.

"I didn't know something like this existed in Diagon Alley," Hermione told him honestly.

"You can find anything here if you know where to look."

"Mr. Malfoy, right this way," Maxwell motioned for them to follow him, "Very happy to see the Prophet this afternoon. We've known you much too long to think any differently, I hope you know." He lead them through the rows of tables, a few eyes following them as they passed, before pushing open a side door. They stepped outside with him into a small garden. There was a table in the middle set for two and string lights lining the patio that twinkled in the moonlight. Maxwell pulled out the chair for Hermione, who took her seat while Draco took the chair next to her.

"Have a lovely evening," Maxwell said as he left them alone.

"What is this place?" Hermione asked, looking around to take in their surroundings.

"It's one of the few Nimbus Star restaurants in London," Draco said matter-of-factly.

"Nimbus Star?" she chuckled, "What is that?"

"Oh right. Well you see, the creators of the Nimbus brand used to travel a lot, to show off their new broom models, of course. They would always talk to their customers and buyers about the restaurants they would try and people started really trusting their opinions because they'd eaten at so many different places all over the world. It was clear they knew what they were talking about and it kind of became a thing. They have designated salesmen who double as food critics, restaurants they feel are worthy receive Nimbus stars. Very coveted, brings in the tourists if a restaurant can earn a Nimbus star. This restaurant has two Nimbus stars. The chef is wonderful."

"Again, too much," Hermione shook her head, but couldn't deny that she was quite excited, "How do you learn these things? And why was it disguised as a bakery?"
"It's the world I was raised in," he said dryly, "The bakery ruse is just for intrigue. Things seem a lot more elite when you feel like you have a secret that every day people don't know about. But don't judge it yet, just wait 'til you try the food. I promise it'll be worth it." Menus materialized in front of them and Draco picked up his own, "You can just say the name of whatever dish you'd like into that rose to your left," he told her. "They don't use waiters here so your experience is intimate."

Draco and Hermione had a lovely evening of culinary adventure at the restaurant, Draco ordering most of the food that he thought was important for Hermione to try. They discussed the giant mission and some books they'd been reading on giant culture and interactions with wizards. Hermione mentioned to Draco that her parents were back in London and he conceded that he would meet them, once they returned from their mission. Somehow dinner turned to dessert and before they knew it, the moon had risen high in the sky.

"I'd like to show you my favorite feature of the garden table," Draco told her, standing and holding his hand out.

She tilted her head but stood with him, following to a more open area of the patio. He clapped his hands twice and piano notes filled the air. The music didn't seem to be coming out of anywhere in particular, more like it almost surrounded them, "The garden table has the best dance floor."

He took her hand, wrapping his arm around her waist as she laughed, her other hand coming up to rest on his shoulder. He moved her slowly around the patio, letting the music guide the way.

"I feel like you have a hard time letting me lead," he commented casually.

"Yes, Viktor told me the same thing at the Yule Ball in fourth year," Hermione nodded, "I guess it's inherent in me to be a bit in charge."

"I almost forgot you took the envied position as Krum's date to the Yule Ball," he laughed before leaning down so his lips were at her ear, "Though I will say, I like the sound of you being in charge very much."

She felt herself blush and shook her head, "I think I'll let you take the lead on that in the beginning."

He kissed her neck right below her ear and she felt her body shiver. Draco spun her around, pulling her back into him, "Did you enjoy dinner tonight?"

"Of course I did," she said, "Earned those two Nimbus stars in my book."

Draco grinned, "I know you think it's silly, but I thought it would be a unique experience. Something to really celebrate what we accomplished this last year," he looked at her seriously, "I know it's not over yet, but we've come so far and I feel like we've turned a big corner. I hope you know I've been sincerely impressed working with you."

"Thank you," she was getting lost in his eyes again. This always happened when he looked at her like that, his eyes burning into hers, "Tonight was lovely. I don't think it's silly, it's been a wonderful experience sharing it with you."

He kissed her softly, "Shall we take the evening back to the Manor?"

"Mmhmm," she replied, relaxed and ready to continue the night in a more private setting. His soft kisses always lingered and left her wanting more; Feeling like it wasn't fair that his lips were away from her again.
They arrived back, hand in hand, talking as they walked up the stone path and inside. When they finally reached the bedroom, Hermione was more than happy to kick off the heels she had been wearing, leaning a hand on the bed to throw each off before reaching behind her to find the zipper of her dress. The room felt exceptionally quiet tonight. Like she could hear her own breathing in the silence as they settled back in from their evening away. She felt hyper aware of Draco's shoes hitting the ground and his light footsteps moving across the floor. Why was she so aware of all of these things tonight?

"Let me help you with that," he walked up behind her.

"Of course," her voice came out a little higher than she meant it to, feeling his body close to hers.

He unzipped it slowly and she felt her heartbeat start to quicken, "Are you ready to take this off?" His lips were at her ear again. Did he realize she could barely focus when he did that? She just nodded, words caught in her throat.

He pushed the sleeves off of her shoulders, his fingertips grazing her skin, and the dress fell effortlessly to the floor. Draco leaned down and trailed kisses down the side of her neck and across her shoulder while he slipped his jacket off, letting it fall as well. Hermione turned around, her chest exposed, necklace shimmering in the candlelight, and just a simple pair of black panties keeping her from being completely naked. She reached up and started unbuttoning his shirt, their eyes meeting as she fumbled with it. Maybe tonight was a special night. Maybe somewhere deep down she'd known it was the whole time.

She saw a lot of emotions in his eyes in that moment. There was concern, which was always there when things would start moving between them. Like he was always concerned he would go too fast for her. There was lust. She couldn't miss that one. His eyes clouded in a different way when she wasn't fully dressed in front of him. She liked that look. It was almost dark, but it didn't scare her. It did something to her inside, giving her a feeling like she was about to melt at his feet. There was something else too, a look like there was something he wanted to say.

His shirt was on the ground now too and her hands had moved down to his pants, trying to figure out how to undo his belt. His lips connected with hers again. She could tell he was starting to lose concentration on breathing normally like she was. The belt finally unhooked and she moved on to the buttons on his pants so she could push them to the floor with everything else.

He pulled her to him tightly, his hands warm on her bare skin and she moaned quietly against his lips. He lifted her up onto the bed and she crawled back against the pillow as he followed her, looking hungry now, like he was a lion stalking up to his prey. And she'd never in her life wanted to be someone's prey like she did right now.

"Draco…" she said as he kissed up her stomach and past her chest.

"Mm?" He replied, his brain not fully registering conversation.

"I think tonight feels like the night," she whispered in one breath.

He looked up, lost for an immediate response, "Are you sure?" He asked, "Once you say yes, I don't think I'll be able to stop myself again."

Hermione looked at him, nodding slowly with a small smile on her face and he gripped the blanket with his fist before kissing her hard and pulling her to him a little roughly; excitedly, "I'd like to hear you say it out loud," he said in a sultry voice.
"Yes," she said breathlessly, not minding his extra enthusiasm in the slightest, "I'm sure."

He pushed himself up, hovering over her and searching her eyes for confirmation. Needing to know that she meant it. And he saw it. She loved him and she wanted him to have her; there, right now. He knew there was just one thing he had to do, had to say before he could. He leaned down and kissed her as gently as he could, given his current state, "I love you, Granger. I want you to know that and I want you to hear me say it because you deserve that in a moment like this. I've loved you for a while now and I know you know that. It's not fair of me to keep it from you."

Hermione's lips split into a smile as she looked at the man above her. She knew what it meant for him to say those words, "I love you too, Draco."

He kissed her, trying his best to give her all of him. So she could look back on this and know it was all real one day.

She felt him pressing against her leg and she moved her hands down to push his boxers off of him before pulling her own underwear down and casting them aside.

She felt his hands move down her body; past her chest, past her stomach, across her thigh... It was something familiar at this point, the feeling of his hands moving against her, caressing her; his touch igniting her, lighting every inch of her skin on fire. She let out a soft sigh, his lips at her neck, kissing and biting her gently. Her mind started to go a bit blank as she tried her best to concentrate. His hands moved up now, one entangling itself in her hair, the other finding her hand and lacing their fingers together as he kissed her soundly, "Are you ready?" He asked and she nodded, biting her lip. He tried to stifle the groan that came from somewhere in his throat, "Good, because you're driving me insane, Granger. Fucking insane."

And then she felt it. He positioned himself and pushed his hips forward, slowly, but deliberately and a small gasp fought its way past her lips as she arched her back. Everything around them faded as she closed her eyes, her free hand moving down his arm. So this was it, this was what it felt like to be completely entwined with another person. To give yourself to them fully and feel love, feel lust, feel every sensation your body could give you all together. She felt very hot, humid even, but it was good. Everything felt heightened and everything felt right as he moved inside her, his hand curling into a fist around her hair.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

The next morning she rolled over, a big smile on her face and a strong arm across her body. It had really happened. Draco was still sleeping but she kissed him anyway and he stirred, opening his eyes and trying to focus on her. He gave her a sleepy smile, pulling her closer, "Morning Granger," he mumbled, kissing the top of her head.

She nestled into him, but her mind was moving much too fast now to let her rest. She started tracing down his back, her breathing moving in time with his and after a minute he stretched his arms, letting her go a little to look down at her, "How are you feeling?"

"Very good," she couldn't stop smiling.

He grinned, happy to see she didn't regret her decision and kissed her cheek, "Is it time to get up already?"

"Unfortunately it is," she sighed, "We're meeting Hagrid at 8 o'clock to start our trek."

"Alright," he conceded, running the back of his index finger down her cheek, "Let's go befriend
some giants.

Chapter End Notes

Would love to hear what you thought, please review! xx
"Mornin' 'ermione!" Hagrid called from across the field.

"Good Morning, Hagrid," she smiled at him as they got closer, Draco's hand in hers.

"Malfoy," Hagrid nodded at him a little awkwardly.

"Professor Hagrid," Draco nodded back.

"So the Portkey will be chargin' up 'ere in a few moments an' we'll get on our way," Hagrid said to Hermione, "We'll be landin' a good way ou' from the gian' caves. Don' wan' to take the chance of landin' where we migh' be spotted. We'll wan' to camp outside of 'em fer a night er two, keep watch fer Death Eaters before we presen' ourselves. Should be able to tell the Gurg pretty easily once we're in."

Hermione nodded, "Great, we've got a tent packed with a few rooms in it so we should all fit without a problem."

"Borrowed it from my father," Draco added, not having much else to say to Hagrid. He knew he'd been a right pain in the ass to the professor at Hogwarts.

"Righ', good thinkin'," Hagrid said, "Jus' abou' time now, grab on," he held out an empty can of beans and they each put a finger on it.

After a few seconds, a pull behind the bellybutton came and they were whisked off, landing hard on their feet on a brisk mountainside.

"Bit cooler up 'ere in the mountains," Hagrid commented, "This way." He lead them upwards through the trees, off the beaten path.

The trees became thicker the longer they walked until it got to a point where they were forcibly pushing back brush and ducking under tree branches. The sun was starting to set behind the mountain tops and their path was getting more difficult to forge.

"They certainly stay hidden, don't they," Draco said, holding a branch up for Hermione to step through.

"Try ter stay out of the areas muggles migh' wander into," Hagrid pushed his way through a tight squeeze between trees.

They finally emerged into a small clearing, a view of the caves just visible above them.

"I say we camp 'ere tonigh'," Hagrid said, looking around, "Probably bes' we'll get."

Hermione dropped her backpack on the ground, certainly not complaining about stopping for the night. They'd hiked all day with the exception of a good break for lunch and her feet were aching. She rummaged through her bag before finding the edges of the tent. She pulled it out, revealing a modest looking muggle tent. She set it on the ground and stepped back as Draco performed the spells to get it set up, moving over to put up some protective charms around their clearing, not
wanting to take the chance of being spotted by Death Eaters.

"Tent's all set," Draco said, walking over to her to help with the last few charms.

When they finished, she pushed back the flap of the tent, climbing in, Draco and Hagrid following her through into a large living room. Hermione was reminded of the tent they had used for the Quidditch World Cup with the Weasleys, however this one was much larger and the fixtures looked ornate and unnecessarily expensive. She could see a full kitchen through a doorway off the living room and two other doorways that led to the bedrooms.

"We had a larger, double enforced bed installed for you," Draco said to Hagrid, "If you have any issues just let me know and my mother gave me a few enlargement charms in case it wasn't enough. Your bedroom is through the door on the left."

"Nice o' yeh to do," Hagrid said, "But it looks like there's only two bedrooms, I can sleep on the couch if one of yeh would prefer a bed, enlargemen' charms usually work ter fit me on normal furniture."

Hermione and Draco shared a look before Hermione turned back, "It's not a problem, Hagrid, we'll be sharing the other bedroom," she said with an embarrassed look.

"Oh…" his eyes widened a little as realization hit him, "Righ', o' course. Sorry."

"Should we make a bite to eat?" Hermione changed the subject, walking off to the bedroom on the right to drop her bag.

Draco made dinner that evening before they returned to the clearing to watch the caves, fully equipped with omnioculars for each of them. They watched for hours, Hagrid telling stories of his last encounter with the giants, but they didn't notice any witches or wizards going in or out of the giant camps. Late into the evening they turned in, bidding goodnight to Hagrid, who volunteered to take the first of two shifts they'd agreed on for the evening.

Draco and Hermione climbed into their plush four poster bed, happy for some time to rest before they took over for Hagrid.

"How many of them do you think are up there?" Draco asked, wrapping his arms around Hermione and pulling her close.

"I counted at least 15 or so that came out of the caves so I'd guess maybe 20-30 of them altogether, maybe more if the caves are bigger than they look.

"Do you really think they'll listen to what we have to say?"

"Hagrid's done this before," she said confidently, "I think he'll be able to get us a meeting with the Gurg and I think our offer is enticing enough for them to listen. Their species is going to become extinct if they keep trying to live together up here in the mountains. They need more space to spread out and live in their tribes, not packed together like this fighting for power."

She heard him give a small laugh, "If nothing else, you've got good intentions, Granger."

His hand grasped hers, thumb rubbing the back of her hand slowly and she took a deep breath as she felt her body relax into him. He kissed her shoulder and goosebumps popped up down her arms. She tilted her head a bit more to the side, not at all minding if he wanted to give her a few more. She felt him smile into the crook of her neck, planting one more soft kiss on her. She sighed contentedly, glad he could be there with her for this mission.
"I know we've got a lot ahead of us here, but I am looking forward to getting you back into my bed at home without Hagrid right outside the door," he whispered in her ear.

"Trust me, I am too."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

They spent two more days staking out the giant camps, taking turns watching the caves for any sign of Death Eaters or other deterrents. After their last evening, they made a plan to enter the giant camps after the afternoon meal ritual the giants seemed to have.

"Now if they speak English, you lot can talk to 'em abou' what we're offerin'. If not, I know enough gian' tongue to get us through the specifics so they ge' the gist of it. It'll be hi' or miss unfortunately. Some gian's know it, some don'."

"You'll enter first, Hagrid, with our gift to them. Once they've accepted the gift, Draco and I will introduce ourselves and we'll determine if we'll be talking or you'll be talking," Hermione said, handing Hagrid a large glass box. Inside the box was what Hermione described as a diorama before elaborating to Draco and Hagrid that it was just a miniature scene depicting the life they wanted to give to the giants. Through the glass you could see miniature giants walking around a town setting with markets and parks, huts visible along the dirt roads, spread out from each other. When the top to the glass box was opened, you could reach in and touch one of the scenes that would pop out as a hologram and play as a life size scene in front of you. She thought it might be a good way to show the giants what they were hoping to create for them.

They climbed the distance between their clearing and the caves and watched as Hagrid walked into the camp, the glass box high above his head. The giants stopped what they were doing and watched as he passed, eyes fixated on the Gurg, who sat in a large chair in the middle of the cluster of caves. Hagrid stopped in front of the Gurg and knelt down on one knee, "A gift for the Gurg of the Giants," he said loudly.

The Gurg looked at him curiously before standing and nodding to one of the other giants nearby. The smaller giant walked over to Hagrid and motioned for him to stand, "Grigerft," he said.

Hagrid knew this to mean 'gift' and he handed the box to the giant who brought it to the Gurg. The Gurg looked into the glass box, watching as the miniature giants walked around inside of it. He looked confused, which wasn't a good sign. Giants didn't like things that were complicated.

"An example," Hagrid said, his voice still strong, "Of what the Wizards want to give you."

The Gurg looked back down at the glass box and back at Hagrid, "Explain," he said gruffly.

It seemed as though the Gurg knew English so Hagrid relayed the message they had planned, "The Ministry of Magic and International Confederation of Wizards come to you with more than small gifts of magic. We come to you with a new way of life. Outside the caves and the mountains."

The Gurg looked back at the box again, watching it intently. Hermione's heart was beating fast in her chest with worry for Hagrid. Hagrid looked like he was starting to worry as well. The Gurg looked back at Hagrid and his lip curled up, "Talk in private," he said.

"I have Ministry officials with me," Hagrid told the Gurg, "Can I bring them so they can give you more details?"

The Gurg considered him before he nodded, standing and walking into one of the caves, his overly large steps echoing through the valleys below. Hagrid looked over his shoulder at the bush Draco
and Hermione were behind and motioned for them to come out. They walked slowly around the bush, joining him to follow into the caves.

They all walked in, the Gurg was sitting on the ground behind a fire that was crackling at his feet.

"My name is Hermione Granger, I work for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I'm here to give you details of our offer," Hermione said as they got closer, "This is Draco Malfoy. He used to side with the Death Eaters. He's here to explain what the other side is capable of."

The Gurg eyed them with a bit of contempt, but allowed them to sit around the fire with him.

"You, giant?" He said to Hagrid.

"Half gian'," Hagrid replied, "Me dad was a wizard."

"I Bosch," he pointed to himself, "Gurg of Giants."

"Bosch," Hermione addressed him, "What the Death Eaters are offering you is temporary. What we came here to offer you is a long-lasting partnership," Bosch tilted his head at her slightly, "New laws. Forever," she said, trying to make it easier to understand, "No more mountains, no more caves. You'll have towns and your tribes can live separately, not all packed together like this."

"How?" The Gurg asked.

"We'll set up magical protections. This is the magic we offer you. We'll create towns," she pointed to the glass box and Bosch held it up to watch again, "For your tribes. As many as you need. If you open the top," she motioned for him to remove it and he did, "You can touch anything inside to see it bigger."

The Gurg reached his hand in and touched a large green area. The scene popped out of the box and a large female giant could be seen pulling vegetables from a garden.

"We'll plant magical crops that will last you years as you settle into your new life," Hermione said and the Gurg poked his finger in to touch another section at the edge of the dirt path in the box. Another few giants popped out, sitting around a fire eating food while smaller humans could be seen walking towards their town and then turning and walking away, "And we'll put up magical protections to keep the muggles away from you so you can live freely."

Bosch pulled his eyes away from the box again and after a few seconds the hologram dissipated, "We never free," he said stiffly, "Always sent away by wizards. Why trust you?"

"The fate of the world rests in your hands," Hermione said simply, "If you join the Death Eaters, you could wipe out life as we know it. We need you to stand down from the fight," Hermione looked over at Draco, "More than that, if you side with the Death Eaters, they'll use you. You're important to them to beat us, but it will end there. Once they've defeated the government, they won't need you anymore. Their offer is temporary. Ours is forever. So we can all live our lives freely."

"How you know their alliance temporary?"

"Because I was one of them," Draco spoke up, "I was a Death Eater. They do everything for personal gain. They only want your strength, not your partnership. The Ministry, they want to give you your life back."

The Gurg looked at the glass box again and then back at Hermione, "We pushed into mountains.
"You were," she said with a sad nod, "It should have been handled better years ago. There's a way for us all to coexist. What's important is that we keep you hidden from muggles, not hidden from the modern world. If you let us make this right, give you back your freedom to live in your own society, safely and securely in line with the laws we propose, there doesn't need to be a war. You don't have to fight and put your lives on the line for the Death Eaters. This is the other option. Side with the Ministry and we will give you back your freedoms and a representative to hear your concerns in the future."

The Gurg didn't speak, but considered them all with a look of moderate distrust, but obvious curiosity.

"Let me show you everything we can offer you and the decision is yours to make," Hermione said.

After a moment Bosch nodded and Hermione let out the breath she'd been holding. They spent the next few hours with the Gurg going over everything the government had to offer, in detail, explaining both the freedoms it would open as well as the limitations of what they could do, knowing they still needed to protect the muggle and wizarding societies from outbreaks of giant fights.

When they finished, the Gurg looked pleased and almost hopeful, "Return each day for month," he said to them, "If you earn trust, we accept. Freedom is thing our giants never had."

"Do you know when the Death Eaters are planning to... unite you with the dragons?" Hermione asked.

"Two months," Bosch responded, "Christmas they say."

Hermione and Draco shared a look before turning back to him, "We'll be here every day at meal time."

The next month they did as they had said, returning each day during the mid-day meal. The other giants would always stop what they were doing to watch them enter the camp. The Gurg had explained to the giants what the offer was and they were all very interested in the prospect of building their own giant society out of the mountains in their smaller tribes. That was, if they could trust these wizards.

One giant in particular, Frennan, they called him, was outwardly against making any kind of deal with wizards. He would glare at them each day on their way in and out of the camp, muttering in giant tongue under his breath. If anything were to go wrong with their plan, they knew it would likely involve Frennan. But they put it to the back of their heads and continued on with their daily visits with determination.

They would sit with the Gurg, in silence sometimes, sometimes discussing the towns, sometimes Hermione working with Bosch on his English, which he seemed to love, partially due to his intrigue of Hermione, a witch who wanted to not only partner with the giants, but also genuinely cared that they were happy with what they were receiving. They would eat before returning to their camp below the caves. One night, a couple of weeks into their mission, they'd seen two Death Eaters enter the giant caves.

"Jus' stay the course," Hagrid said, "We do as we're told. They'll keep their word."
Around the same time, they had also received an owl from Ron:

_Hermione,_

_Having a great holiday with Charlie! He said he's got some news to share. Nothing urgent so we'll update you when we see you soon. Hope all is well on your holiday._

_Ron_

Another week later they were surprised to receive another message, this time from Alden:

_Granger,_

_Hope you're having a good holiday. I know you haven't been receiving the paper while you take a little break, so I wanted to inform you that there has been... an event that transpired in the last week. The town of York had some very large fires that rolled through. A few neighborhoods burned. There were two casualties from muggle families and a lot of land and building destroyed. We think the muggle town was targeted on purpose. A dragon was apprehended by Dragonologists that happened to be in town. The Aurors are on it, but times feel strained._

_Alden_

"We're doin' wha' we're supposed to," Hagrid said grimly when she relayed the message, "Our job is to be 'ere, parleyin' with the gian's so the casualties aren' greater later on."

"I know," Hermione said, "But it's hard not to be there. Especially knowing we've got to be here another week to finish out our promise. I just hope nothing else happens."

Two days before the end of their month, Hermione received another message:

_Granger,_

_Looking forward to your return. Two Aurors killed last night in a raid. McKelly and Barns. Sorry for the news on your holiday._

_Robert Bones_

Tensions were high as they finally woke up on the last day of their month with the giants. The three walked up to the camps, more nervous than usual, but did everything just the same. At the end of their lunch, they thanked Bosch for his hospitality and turned to retreat to their camp once again. Hagrid had told them the Gurg needed to come to them, they were not to press him for an answer.

"Herminy," Bosch said, still unable to get her name right, but she turned around, heart pounding once again, "You have come here every day. You have earned trust. You have my word, giants will stand down."

Her lips broke into a smile of relief, "Thank you, Bosch. We will send a team of agriculture and construction specialists to the towns we've pinpointed to create for you as soon as we return to England. Give them one month to finish the towns and we can start bringing your tribes to them."

"You will visit the tribes?" Bosch asked, "When we move to towns?"

"Of course," she said, bowing her head to him in respect, "We will meet again soon, Bosch."

He retreated into the caves, the giant next to him blowing into a large horn as the tribes assembled
to follow the Gurg for his announcement.

When Hermione, Draco and Hagrid returned to their camp, they started packing up their things.

"'Ermione," Hagrid said a little uncertainly, "I think I should stay here."

"With the giants?" She asked, "For what?"

"Ou' of precaution," he said, "I had a deal with the Gurg once too, in the Wizarding War, and then 'e was killed and things changed. I think I should stay 'ere so I can alert you if anythin' like that happens again."

Hermione nodded, "Yes, I think that makes sense. Okay, we'll put up a few new protections for you before we go."

"And we'll leave the tent for you," Draco offered, "We won't need it from here."

"Nice o' yeh," Hagrid said, "Alrigh', I'll send weekly updates and le' yeh know if anythin' here goes awry."

They finished packing up their things and Draco and Hermione said goodbye to Hagrid, Draco shaking his hand firmly, feeling as though they were leaving on significantly better terms than they had started on. The half-giant was a good man.

It was a long trek down that day, but they made it out of the forest before night fall and were able to apparate back to England, heading to the Manor until the morning, when they would share their success at the Ministry.

As they collapsed in bed that evening, Hermione brushed the hair out of Draco's eyes, "Thank you for being there through all of that."

"Wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else," he said with a smile, "I just wish I had a lot more energy right now. A month away sharing a tent with Hagrid was far too long."

She laughed, "I know it was. Tonight we sleep and re-energize and tomorrow we celebrate being back in our own space."

"I like the sound of that," he pulled her to him, capturing her lips with a lingering kiss.

"I love you," she whispered against his lips when they parted.

She heard him grumble for the slightest moment before responding with, "You too," and squeezing her tightly in his arms.

She rolled her eyes, but accepted it. He'd said it once and he'd say it again when he felt she needed to hear it. But she knew he loved her and that's what mattered. His arms eased up a little and she repositioned herself as the little spoon, his chin resting on the top of her head as they fell into a wonderful deep sleep back at home.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Hope everyone is having a great weekend! There was a sliiight delay to this chapter because late the other night another story idea crept into my head and I had to get a couple of chapters written down before I lost it. This story takes precedence, of course, and I’m back on my writing stride, but I guess on a bright note, I’ll have something new in the works when I finish! I’ll add a quick summary when I get to the last chapter of The Look on the Platform. Review if you’ve got a moment! Xx
"Hermione!" Ron's voice cut through the chattering of the office and she looked up to see him and Harry walking quickly towards her office, "You're back!"

She hugged them both, "We got in late last night. Very happy to be back in England."

"We heard the short version of the story that the mission was a success, but we wanted to hear the details from you," Harry said with a grin.

"They were very open and intrigued by our offer," she told them as they took the seats in front of her desk and she leaned back against it, "Honestly, the only thing they were unsure about was trusting the Ministry so we had to stay a while and prove our devotion to them and to our promise. The Gurg was quite friendly, he took to me very well."

"Of course he did," Harry laughed, "Grawp did too."

"Oh that's right," Hermione thought back fondly for a moment, "Well we went to them every day and I helped Bosch, the Gurg, with his English and we talked lots of details about the towns. He had some very easy requests that we added into the plans and we'll be sending the teams out to start on the construction and charms today or tomorrow, hopefully. The quicker we get them into towns, the quicker we can stop worrying about them changing their minds."

"How did Hagrid and Malfoy get on?" Harry asked.

"Took some time of strained conversation," Hermione allowed, "But I think they're on good terms now."

Ron avoided her eyes but nodded, "Our mission to the Dragonologists went well," he said, changing the subject, "We put a bug in Charlie's ear to be on the lookout for anything suspicious. He gave us a few names about a week ago so the Auror team is doing some research as we speak to follow the leads."

"Oh, that reminds me," Hermione jumped a little, "The giants said their attack was supposed to be on Christmas Day. The Dragon eggs that were being passed around must have already been hatching when they had to restock. They would have wanted the dragons to be 9 months to a year old to be in the prime of taking to a giant and being powerful enough to do damage. I think at this point we're looking for dragons, not eggs."

"Wow, definitely," Ron nodded, "Okay, I'll send Charlie a message, we worked out some code to share information. He's supposed to be making a trip out soon anyway."

"Even if they don't have the giants to reign in the dragons, they've still got powerful destructive dragons on their side," Harry said seriously, "We need to find them and it sounds like we've only got another month to do it."

"Has there been any movement on the search for Pansy?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked over at Ron uneasily and then back at her, "We thought we'd found her."

Hermione hesitated before asking her next question, "The Aurors that were killed… is that the mission they were on?"
Harry nodded solemnly, "We think they found her. The Dark Mark was spotted over a house that was on our list of hideouts and the two Aurors were found inside."

They were all silent for a moment, "I'm sorry, were you close with them?"

"Didn't know them well, but they were good people. It's a hard loss for the department," Harry said.

"I think they're going to start using the dragons to incite fear," Hermione sighed, "Almost like they're taking them out for practice before the big attack. We need to find Pansy. We're really going to have to refocus the department on finding her."

"We've got a few more leads on our list. You can come with Ron and I whenever we're sent on missions."

Hermione spent the afternoon at the Ministry, going over what everyone had accomplished in the last month. She was pleased to hear that there had been progress all around. One of the newer Death Eaters had talked. He was scared and wanted to strike a deal. His information had led to the house where the two Aurors were killed. In some ways, they were curious if it was a trap, but the man had broken down when he heard what happened, yelling "It was her! It was her!" Over and over again.

He'd given a whole list of hideout spots, but hadn't given more names, too afraid for his family if he did. Everyone knew the hideouts, not everyone knew everyone else involved as they were usually in masks during Death Eater meetings.

Harry and Ron had come back with a list of about twenty names of Dragonologists who had started in the last three years and had access to the Dragon Eggs and care. The Auror department had been through a full background check and investigation of a little more than half the list, not yet turning up anything unusual.

Once they had a plan for the next day, Hermione returned to the Manor to find Draco lounging in the den.

He looked up from the Daily Prophet, "Evening, Granger," he said, motioning for her to come join him. When she was close enough he pulled her into his lap, "Fancy some light reading?"

Hermione looked at the picture playing back at them from the newspaper - it was a picture of herself and Malfoy walking hand in hand up to the gates of the Manor with backpacks on. The title read: *Holiday Affair: Exonerated Death Eater Draco Malfoy returns from vacation with his Detective, Hermione Granger.* "Are you kidding me?" She said exasperatedly, continuing to read the article, which was on page 9 of the Prophet at the bottom of the page:

Late last night Draco Malfoy returned back to his family home for the first time in a month with Detective Hermione Granger on his arm, sources say. The two looked cozy, carrying their travel bags and heading in for the night. As previously reported, after the trial to exonerate Mr. Malfoy, the son of convicted (and later exonerated) Death Eater Lucius Malfoy, their love was exposed to the world. As scandalous as it was, it seems the two have been paying no attention to the tabloids on their month-long celebration getaway. The timing of the celebration, however, some may consider questionable, given the still ongoing case of Death Eater activity. Even more questionable is their decision to stay on holiday as Aurors died fighting against dark forces just last week. It seems it was more important to the pair to let their passions burn even brighter than the fires in
Hermione scoffed, "That troll. Has she been stalking us since we left the manor?"

"I would say she certainly has," Draco nodded looking amused, "What did you do to her for her to want to see you fall so badly."

She looked at him, a little embarrassed before responding, "Do you remember all of the articles she was writing about Harry during the Triwizard Tournament?"

Draco looked guiltily back at her, "Hard to forget. I fed her some of those stories."

Hermione paused, tilting her head at him, "Oh that's right, you were one of her sources," she rolled her eyes, "Well I ended up figuring out that she was an unregistered animagus and realizing it was how she was getting her information, through you among other means," she added, "so I captured her in beetle form and made her promise to stop the stories or I'd expose her. It seems years later she's forgotten about our little deal."

"She's probably just pissed your deal lost her the juicy stories to hit the front page," Draco grinned.

"Well I think I'll be reminding her of our last meeting the next time I see her. Or see a beetle scurrying around."

Draco closed the newspaper, setting it aside and wrapping his arms around her, "You can be quite cunning, can't you. That's a nice Slytherin quality."

She narrowed her eyes playfully at him, "I did what I had to for what was right," she said, "That's a Gryffindor quality."

He pulled her to him and kissed her soundly, "Whatever you need to tell yourself to sleep at night."

"Are you questioning my house?!" She laughed, "If anything I should have been in Ravenclaw."

"Getting cocky about how smart you are, now? Sounds like Slytherin again."

She pursed her lips, "You're trying to get under my skin and it's not going to work," she said matter-of-factly.

"What about getting under your shirt, am I doing well at that task?"

She shook her head, "I think you're being cocky now."

"That's because I'm a Slytherin," the look in his eyes was light and she couldn't help but laugh again.

He stood up, picking her up with him and walked to the door of the den before placing her back on her feet, "Shall we go enjoy, how did you put it, 'being back in our own space,' now?"

Hermione gave him a challenging look, "We can move our conversations upstairs and see how it goes."

His lips moved down to her ear, "You know I like it when you make it a challenge."
She blushed as chills erupted on her skin but held her head high and raised her eyebrows at him as she turned and walked towards the stairs, looking back at him with a grin as she started to climb. He let out a bit of a sinful laugh and followed her up two steps at a time, shutting the door hard as they walked into the bedroom. It had been a very long month and he intended to remind her of all the fun they had before their mission had begun.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

As the week resumed, Draco returned to the Ministry to help with the information they'd been given so far, lending what knowledge he could about the hideouts the Death Eater had mentioned. They began to strategize their next move based on the locations the hideouts were in and what they could get to in a day. They would resume their raids again the following week, taking an appropriate amount of time for the funerals of the fallen and to make sure steps were taken so it wouldn't happen again — namely larger raid groups and available backup in the area.

Near the end of the week, Charlie dropped into the Ministry to meet with Hermione, Draco, Harry and Ron in person. She'd never known Charlie well but she could tell he knew her and Ron used to date because he was a bit awkward with her and quite cold with Draco. He gave them an update on the background checks of the Dragonologists and what they were able to determine about the dragon they had captured from the York tirade. As far as they could tell, there were no trackers on it, which led them to believe the dragon had been unleashed on the town by the Death Eaters as a warning of what was to come.

"Granger, what are you still doing here," Alden popped his head into her office late on a Sunday evening.

She pulled her eyes from her files and looked up at him, "Being away from a month was too long," she gave him a weak smile, "There's just so much to catch up on."

"You should get out of here, the week starts again tomorrow."

"Detective Northcott? Detective Granger?" A voice called loudly from outside the door to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

They paused a moment before Hermione stood up and they walked briskly over to the door, swinging it open to see one of the Aurors that worked the weekend shift, Grant, she thought it was, "I wasn't sure if you'd be here but saw the lights on," he said quickly, "There's just been three dragon attacks all over England."

"What?" Alden asked, "Are there any casualties?"

"A handful so far, muggles again," he nodded, "The Dragonologists and a few teams of Aurors just left the Ministry."

Hermione looked over at Alden, "I'll get my bag," and he nodded, running to grab his jacket before they followed the auror out of the Ministry, apparating outside of Bristol where the first fire was spotted.

"Watch the skies!" One Auror was yelling to another as he cast a revealing charm, the Dragonologist next to them scanning the clouds through a pair of omnioculars.

Some Aurors were going house to house in the small neighborhood that had set fire to obliviate residents and replace their memory of the dragons with a gas explosion and check for any additional casualties or injuries. Another group of Aurors was spreading out through the town to
put out the fires that burned brightly in the night sky.

"Where are the other fires?" Hermione asked the Grant.

"Oxford and Whitby," he said, "This was the largest."

Hermione nodded, striding off towards the Aurors scanning the skies, "Detective Granger here," she said, joining them, "Did we get any sight of the dragons?"

"We did when we first arrived. There was just one and it was taking off from the scene. We're keeping a lookout in case it comes back," said a tall blonde Auror named Higgins.

"What type of dragon was it?" She asked.

The Dragonologist took his omnioculars down for a moment, "Horntail, of course," he said with a bit of a huff, "Of all the eggs to steal, they stole the Horntails."

"Was it alone?" Hermione asked.

"Someone was riding it," Higgins shook his head, "Not very well, at that. We just caught a glimpse but whatever was on its back was flopping up and down like a flobberworm."

"It's coming back!" The Dragonologists shouted, pointing at a dark shadow in the sky.

Hermione squinted her eyes as the outline of a medium sized dragon came into view, "Is there any way we can safely capture it without hurting the dragon?"

"We'll do our damnedest," Higgins said, grabbing his broom from the ground as he and the other Auror hopped on, taking off into the night.

"Will you know how to subdue the dragon?" She asked the Dragonologist, shaking her head quickly, "I'm sorry, where are my manners, I'm Hermione Granger, Lead Detective on the case with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

"Crazy night out here," he gave her a crooked smile, "Cristof Pohler, nice to meet you," he shook her hand briefly before getting back to business, "I've brought a sleeping draught, just have to get close enough to its nose for him to inhale it."

"Can I see those?" She pointed to his omnioculars and he nodded, handing them over. She focused in on the dragon and the five brooms now flying around it in some sort of formation. She could see spells being shot by the dragon rider, but their aim seemed to be quite terrible.

"They're wrangling the dragon," Cristof said, "We've been working closely with the Aurors, taught them some of our methods. When you weave the brooms like that the dragon gets almost entranced by the movements and it'll follow the same path."

As he spoke she watched as the brooms and the dragon weaved closer to the ground where they stood.

"Best to stand back a bit," he suggested, "They'll be coming in for a bumpy landing like that." Hermione took a few long strides backwards, watching as the Aurors pulled up quickly and hit the ground hard, rolling to the sides as the dragon's large talons dug into the pavement with a roar.

The dragonologist ran up to the dragon, crouching low and staying to the left of him before grabbing onto one of the spikes on its neck and climbing. Hermione joined the group of Aurors
casting spells at the wizard on top of the dragon. One of their Stupify spells seemed to hit and the body atop the dragon grew rigid, sliding off the back and down onto the street.

Hermione looked up to see Cristof reaching around the dragon's face and getting a bottle of the sleeping draught as close as he could to its nostril. With one large puff of smoke, the dragon's eyes closed suddenly and it swayed in the moonlight before falling to the side, Cristof jumping off right in time to get out of the way.

"Any idea who the Death Eater is?" One of the Aurors called as they walked up to the form on the ground.

Hermione looked down, "What the— yes I know him, this is Cormac McLaggen. He was in Gryffindor a year above us."

O-o-o-o-o-o
The Dragonologist wrapped the sleeping dragon at his feet with an invisible cord while the Aurors bound Cormac and grabbed onto him to apparate back to the Ministry.

Hermione turned to Cristof, "How do you transport the dragon like that?"

"We have special transportation charms for dragons," he said, "These cords around him, they won't hurt him, they just surround him with a charm that gives off the illusion of human-like features on the outside. So to say, you couldn't apparate with a dragon, but you can apparate with a dragon wrapped in Lacus Cords. They were developed a long time ago by a Dragonologist so that if dragons were found in the wild we could safely bring them back to the dragon sanctuaries."

"That's a great invention," Hermione raised her eyebrows, impressed, "And I heard the Aurors created a room for the dragons at the Ministry, correct? Somewhere in the Department of Mysteries."

Cristof nodded, "They taught us some really cool enlargement charms for the elevators and there was a free room on level 9 where we tried to recreate the dragon sanctuary terrain. Just have to enter when no one else is in the Ministry so we can get him through the atrium. Luckily it's late on a Sunday so we'll take him now."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

An hour later, Hermione was back at the Ministry sitting in an interrogation room with Harry and Ron, who had been alerted of the attacks and reported to the Oxford fires. Cormac sat across from them, still in a body bind curse. No other dragons had returned to Oxford or Whitby, so he was their only lead.

"Renervate," Hermione pointed her wand at Cormac when they were all ready, Alden and Bones in the watching room.

Cormac came to, his eyes doing their best to focus on the people in front of him, head bobbing side to side.

"Does he look right to you?" Ron whispered to Harry, who shook his head slowly.

Hermione gave them a worried look, "Cormac?" she said, trying to catch his attention, "Cormac, can you hear me?"

His eyes blinked again but didn't focus on anything in particular.

"Do you think he got hit with too many spells at once?" Ron asked.

"No…" Hermione said slowly, staring at him, "I think he's under the Imperius Curse."

They all shared another look and Harry stood up to walk around the table, waving his hand in front of Cormac before pointing his wand "Exponentia Vestigium." A bright light shone from the tip of Harry's wand, encompassing Cormac. Around him, a faint trace of golden lines could be seen in the light.
"Definitely some curse on him," Ron muttered to himself.

Harry looked at her, "If it's Imperius, we can do the counter curse but it's a hefty one. It'll take time and it'll weaken him. We have to know it's that."

"Let me run up to my office and grab a book," Hermione said, standing up and leaving the room.

"There's always a book," Ron rolled his eyes at Harry with a grin.

Hermione returned a few minutes later with a large worn-looking hardcover book in her hands.

"Classifying Curses," Ron read, "Is that like your 'Awarded Wards' book?"

"You bet it is," she smiled, opening it straight to the Unforgivables section and skimming through the Imperius Curse symptoms and traces, "Unfocused eyes, Non-responsive, golden aura, I think this has to be it."

Harry gave a heavy sigh, "Alright, well you should probably head home, Hermione," she looked at him incredulously, "It's going to take about an hour for us to break through the curse and then he'll need ample rest before he's any help to us, likely almost a day. We can interview him tomorrow evening but there's no use for you being here while we do the counter curse. You get some rest so you can be fresh tomorrow. With any luck he didn't want to be a part of the Death Eaters and maybe he'll know something."

Hermione teetered on her feet for a moment before she reluctantly agreed, "Fine, I guess that makes sense."

"I'll walk out with you," Ron said, "Harry's much better at counter curses so I'm pretty useless here as well."

She nodded as Alden opened the door to the interrogation room, "Sounds like we're calling it a night?"

"Yeah," she looked back over at Cormac, whose head was still lulling, "We'll do this again tomorrow."

Bones joined Harry with Cormac to oversee the process while Hermione, Ron and Alden left the Ministry, Hermione returning to her own flat due to the late hour.

The next morning, she stopped at the Manor, bright and early, and Draco met her at the gates.

"Late night last night?" he asked, pushing the gates open. She'd been in a habit of coming to the Manor unless she was at work past an acceptable time.

"Yes, did you hear about the dragon attacks?"

"Just read about it in the Prophet this morning," he said as they walked up the stone path.

"Well on the plus side, we caught one of the dragons and the person riding the dragon."

He looked over at her in surprise, "Well that wasn't in the Prophet. Who was it?"

"Cormac McLaggen," she gave him a grim smile.

"Mclaggen? Wasn't he a Gryffindor? Didn't you date him?"
"He was in Gryffindor," she sighed, "And no I never dated him, I just took him to Slughorn's party that one time to make Ron jealous. Big mistake. Anyway, we're pretty positive he was under the Imperius Curse so Harry was performing the counter curse when we left last night."

"Wonder how they roped him into it, or if he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time," Draco quipped.

"Well, we'll find out what we can today. We're interviewing him when he wakes up, Harry said likely the evening. By the way, Alden asked if you wanted to come in and help with some little things today, they were able to capture some very blurry photos of the other dragons and riders as they flew away, figured we'd see if they looked familiar to you at all."

"Sure," he turned his head towards her with a wry smile, "They going to put me on payroll anytime soon?"

Hermione laughed, "You can ask Alden about that. I think he's under the impression you just enjoy being a part of the investigation. If you do a good job, I might take you out to lunch, though."

Hermione stayed for breakfast and the two arrived at the Ministry together. Draco grabbed her hand, interlacing his fingers with hers as they walked into the Atrium and she whirled her head around to him, "You're not my detective anymore," he said into her ear, "And plus, Rita's been all over our relationship in the gossip column, may as well show we don't care."

She gave him a look and shook her head, but relaxed a little, "I'm sure there'll be a picture of this on page 9 tomorrow."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

After a day of busy work reading through old notes and files, Hermione and Alden met Harry, Ron and Bones in the watching room after they got Malfoy set up with his task for the evening.

"Have you talked to him yet?" She asked, looking through the glass at the back of Cormac, who was leaning his head in his hands.

"Not yet," Harry shook his head, "The dementors brought him in a little bit ago but we figured we'd wait 'til you got here so we can all go in together and read his reactions. He hasn't moved much since they sat him down."

"Alright, well let's get to it then," she said with a half smile.

Alden settled onto the back wall next to Bones while Hermione, Harry and Ron headed into the interrogation room.

"Good evening, Cormac," Hermione said in a professional tone as they walked in to take their seats.

Cormac's head snapped up, "Hermione? Harry? Ron? Thank the gods it's someone that'll listen to me."

"We've got a lot of questions, Cormac," Hermione said, looking at him seriously, "We know you were under the Imperius Curse, but we're going to need your whole story so we understand how you got there in the first place."

"I'll tell ya all of it, I swear," he said swiftly, immediately delving into it, "You see, a few months back, late summer, I was out and about in Germany on holiday and who do I run into, but Pansy
Parkinson! And I remember thinking she was cute back at Hogwarts so I thought hey why not give it a shot and strike up a conversation," Hermione leaned back in her chair as he talked, realizing they were in for a long, drawn-out story in full Cormac McLaggen fashion, "So I go up to her in this small local coffee shop and start talking, at first she's not pleased to see me one bit and I wonder if I did something back when we were in school to put her off, but I can't think of a single thing.

"So once she realizes I'm interested in her, she flips the switch and goes into flirtatious mode. Not to give too many details, but we spent a lot of nights together after that," he shot a smug grin at Harry and Ron, who did not return the look, and continued, "Then the fall rolls around and I find out she's involved in all this Death Eater activity and I'm like woah, Pansy, I'm going to have to call things off, that's pretty over the top. And I'm thinking to myself that I'm going to turn her in, can't believe I didn't know.

"So I try to have a sit down with her, let her know things are over, because I'm a gentleman and it's not right to disappear on a lady. So I tell her that what she's doing isn't cool and the next thing I know my mind goes blank for months til you lot broke me out of it. It was like everything happening around me was happening in the background of my mind. I know I was there and I remember certain details and conversations when my mind was working the hardest to fight the curse, but it's blurry. I think I knew I was under the Imperius somewhere in the back of my mind and I kept trying to take notes of what was happening around me even if I couldn't control my actions. The most recent stuff is the clearest right now, must have something to do with being broken out of the curse so close to all the action, but I have a lot of details in my head of other stuff that I forced myself to remember."

Hermione sat up again, "So to summarize, you dated Pansy and then found out she was the leader of the Death Eaters, tried to break up with her and she put you under the curse."

"I mean, I wouldn't say she was my girlfriend or anything," he defended, "But we were seeing each other, yeah. That's the gist of it."

"What do you remember from the last 24 hours?"

"A lot, actually," he said, "I've been trying to hone in on the memories and conversations I overheard so I can tell you as much as possible. They were mad they lost the dragon on the first attack, which is why they sent riders with the dragons this time; all people under the Imperius Curse in case the dragons turned on us. Didn't want to lose any of their own."

"Why did your dragon return to the scene after it burned the town?" Ron asked.

"It's a dragon and I'm not a giant," he gave a shrug, "Can't control those creatures. I tried to keep it on the course Pansy wanted it on but it's a damn dragon and it wanted to turn around."

"Cormac, we're trying to find Pansy, can you tell us anything that would help us find her?" Hermione asked, trying to get out the important questions, knowing they'd need to steer him into directly answering or else he'd go off on another tangent.

"Yeah, I remember most of the places. Those are some of the mental notes I took. I know they do a loop between hideouts. Every other day they move and keep a few people at each place. The last place I remember being was at a location in Spain. We were by the water and it was the home of one of our old Hogwarts classmates who had a summer home there," he closed his eyes for a moment while he thought, "Marcus Flint," Hermione wrote the name down while he continued to think, "They go to the Avery Estate, and… Stuart Craggy, he was one of the older Death Eaters, always bragged about being Slytherin Quidditch captain back in the 1960's, I remember being at
his house. Big talker."

"Any others?" She asked as he paused.

"One more, Borgin and Burke's. They've got a back room in the basement for the Death Eaters."

Hermione nodded, "We need to get on this as soon as possible," she looked at Harry and Ron.

"We'll find the addresses for the names on the list and get some Auror teams ready to go. We'll hit all of them at once."

"Are you going to put me back in Azkaban?" Cormac asked, "I've told you everything I can. I'll tell ya more if you've got questions."

"No," Harry said, "We'll keep you in one of the regular holding cells in the Ministry for now. Partially for your protection but obviously there's still a lot to discuss from your involvement to make sure we've got all the facts."

They left the room, another set of Aurors taking over to bring Cormac to the holding cell. Hermione went to grab Draco from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement while the rest of the group took off for the Auror Department. Ten minutes later, they were all back together to go through the list of names and places Cormac had mentioned.

As Draco scanned it for the first time, he held his hand up to break into the rapid conversation, "I know this one."

"Which one?" Harry walked up next to him, looking at the list from behind his shoulder.

"The Avery Estate. I've been there a hundred times with my parents."

"Any others?" Hermione asked as everyone looked on.

He scanned it again, "Flint," he said, "We used to play Quidditch, we had a summer outing to his folks' place in Barcelona."

"Great," Hermione said, "Three down since we know where Borgin Burke's is. Just need to figure out who this Stuart Craggy is."

It only took another half an hour before they tracked down information on Craggy and had four teams of five ready to go. Hermione would be with Draco, Harry, Ron and Bones heading to Borgin and Burke's. Alden was going with another group of four Aurors, lead by Higgins, to Flint's home in Spain.

"Malfoy," Bones pulled him aside before they left, "Just want to say I appreciate the work you've been doing with us. I know you don't have to be here anymore now that your name's cleared, but it's saving us precious time to have you helping."

"Looking forward to this whole ordeal being over," Draco said, "It's about more than just clearing my name."

"You're a good man. I'm sorry for doubting you."

"It's in the Past."

Hermione stood a table over with a smile on her face as she listened to their conversation, pretending to read through the file in her hands. For the number of times he'd apologized at this
point it was almost out of character now to think about how Bones had originally reacted to Draco.

"Alright everyone, let's dethrone the Heiress," Harry called to the group as they picked up their things and headed for the door, Ron groaning at his choice of words. The group left the Ministry together, apparating simultaneously to their destinations.

Hermione and Draco's group landed in Nocturn Alley, making their way as quietly as they could to Borgin and Burke's. They peeked in the windows. One man could be seen in the back of the store polishing something, another was behind the counter, and a third was straightening pictures on the wall.

"We've got three in sight, it looks like Borgin, Burke and a teenage boy," Harry whispered to the group, "We'll have to go in strong and block the exits. Send two downstairs and three to cover the main floor."

"I'll go to the basement," Bones said gruffly.

"I'll go with you," Hermione said.

Draco looked at her as though he was going to object, but Harry cut him off before he started, "Right then, the three of us will clear the main floor before we follow you down. Count of three, one-two-THREE!"

The door burst open and the group ran inside, "Put your wands down!" Harry called and the men jumped, pulling their wands out and throwing spells at them as everyone ducked out of the way, Bones fell towards the basement door, finding enough time to disarm Borgin, who's wand had been pointed menacingly at Draco's back, before he swung the door open and descended. Draco turned at the noise as Borgin snatched his wand from the ground, running out the back door, and Draco followed in pursuit.

Hermione had been knocked in the opposite direction by Ron as a flash of red hurtled her way. They had landed behind a statue, her path to the stairs clear but out in the open.

"You've got to stay here for a minute," Ron said, watching her eye the stairs as more curses flew in every direction.

"I've got to get to Bones. He shouldn't have gone alone," Hermione said, pointing her wand around the statue at Burke.

"There's only a one in four chance she's here," Ron said reassuringly as the ear of the statue blasted into pieces above them.

"I'm going to make a run for it," she said, watching as Burke turned and aimed his wand at the table Harry was behind, shooting curses at him.

"We'll be right behind you," Ron said as she took off. Another curse hit the wall hard behind her from the younger Death Eater, but she made it to the stairwell and ran down them as quickly as she could. She reached the landing where she saw another door ahead, presumably to the back room, was cracked open. She couldn't hear anything inside so she pushed the door open slowly, met with the scene she'd been fearing. Pansy Parkinson had Bones tied up to a chair and was standing behind him.

"Occludo," Pansy flicked her wand and the door slammed shut behind Hermione.

"Let him go," she said, wand pointed at Pansy.
"You don't have a clear shot," Pansy laughed, "Now here's what we're going to do. You're going to walk back upstairs and tell them I'm not here or I'm going to kill your Auror."

"Don't do it Granger," Bones said weakly, "We've got her. If you wait it out, the others will come. You've got to know she'll kill me either way."

"Pansy this has gone on long enough," Hermione's glare didn't waiver, "Give it up, we've got a whole group of Aurors upstairs."

"Sounds like my men are giving them a run for their money," she pointed her wand at Robert, "And it's the Dark Heiress. Crucio."

Bones shook in the chair, crying out.

Hermione took a deep breath, "Stupify!" She yelled, a red beam flashing from her wand, barely missing Bones, but making Pansy duck out of the way.

"Bold," Pansy said, regaining her footing as Hermione shot another curse at her that flew right past Bones' ear and hit Pansy in the chest. She flew back and Hermione lunged at Bones, "Relashio!" The binds fell off of him and he fell forward, catching himself on his hands and pushing himself away from Pansy to the corner of the room. Pansy stood back up looking livid, "I'm very much over you showing up where you're not wanted, Mudblood," she spat, angry now, throwing a curse at Hermione. Hermione deflected it, watching Bones in her peripherals.

"I did a number on him before you got here," Pansy said with a smile as she hurled a strong Bombarda curse at a chair in between Hermione and Bones. The blast threw Hermione in the opposite direction, catching herself and jumping back to her feet as quickly as she could, "I gave you a choice and you didn't go back upstairs. But instead of him, I think it'll be you."

Hermione didn't have time to react as in that moment, a handful of different things happened within a fraction of a second, but time felt like it slowed as each one seemed to occur individually.

The door flew open and Draco, followed by Harry and Ron burst in as Pansy cast the Killing Curse at Hermione, Bones mustering all of his strength to push himself off the wall and lunge across her path.

And then real time set in again; the life left Robert Bones' eyes as he landed hard on the ground in front of her, Draco shot a body bind curse at Pansy that hit her square between the eyes, Ron ran towards her, wrapping her in ropes with another spell, remembering what happened the last time they caught her, and Harry sprinted to Hermione and Bones, dropping down on the floor next to them.

"ROBERT," Hermione yelled, shaking him uselessly, "NO."

"Hermione, there's nothing we can do," Harry said quietly, his voice tight as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder, pulling her to him, away from Bones.

The room was silent with shock albeit the heavy breathing brought on by the battle that had transpired. Pansy Parkinson was in their grasp. Robert Bones was dead.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Chapter End Notes
Hope everyone had a great weekend! Had the pleasure of watching Wizard People, Dear Reader last night (Couldn't breathe from laughing) and tonight we're going to the San Diego Symphony production of HP and the HBP! I'll call that a Harry Potter Weekend :) Hope you enjoyed that chapter, leave a review if you've got a minute!
It took a few moments before anyone moved again with the weight of what had just happened.

"We've got to get Pansy back to the Ministry," Ron said quietly, his voice strained, "Before she escapes again."

Hermione heard him and nodded, but still couldn't process what he was saying, there were too many other thoughts going through her head. She was supposed to cover the basement with Bones before she'd gotten knocked in the wrong direction when they first ran in, and then Pansy had told her to go back upstairs and she'd spare his life. If she'd been quicker, if she'd done what she was told, maybe… no, she couldn't let her mind go there. She couldn't have predicted which way she'd dive when spells were thrown at them in the shop upstairs and she knew he'd been right when he told her Pansy would kill him anyway even if she did what she had said. Pansy was not going to spare them. There was nothing more she could have done, but that didn't make it any easier.

"Hermione," the voice was distant again and she wasn't sure whose it was.

She turned her head towards Harry who was looking at her with concern, "Hermione, he's right, we've got to go. We've got to finish this."

She nodded again, tuning back into the world. Harry let go of her and with one last look at Robert, they both pushed themselves off the ground.

"I'll take Bones's body," Harry said, "You all stay with Pansy."

Hermione moved over to the others, grabbing Pansy's wand from the ground and holding it with her own. Ron levitated her body as Draco led the way back upstairs where Borgin, Burke and the younger Death Eater were tied up.

"Levicorpus," he said as the three bodies lifted into the air to follow him out of the shop. They all apparated back to the Ministry where others were starting to return as well. They entered, waiting until they were inside the Atrium to place Robert on a bench by the fountain and regroup. Gasps erupted from the Aurors and Detectives filtering into the area with other Death Eaters in their hold.

Higgins and Alden strode up to them as they walked in a few seconds behind, "What happened?" Alden asked.

"We found her," Harry responded, gesturing to Pansy, who was hovering next to Ron, "But she killed Bones before we could disarm her."

Alden was quiet as he looked around at them all, "This is just the sort of thing that can happen," his voice was soft and he gave a sad shake of his head, trying to alleviate some of the guilt that came with being present for the death of a colleague, "You all went in there and did your job. Bones knew the stakes of the mission and he died a hero."

There were a few somber nods as they took a moment of respect for Bones.

"I'll stay here with him and find someone to take the body to St. Mungo's," Ron said, "You all can handle the interrogation. Alden, it would probably be better to have a Head of Department there for
Pansy's statement since Bones can't be."

"Makes sense," he said, looking down at the body again.

"You can leave the other Death Eaters with us if it's the Dark Heiress you want to speak to," Higgins said, still trying to pry his eyes from Bones, "We're logging them in as they come and taking them to the holding cells.

Draco levitated the three other Death Eaters over to Higgins, "I know she's calling herself the Dark Heiress, but her name is Pansy. No need to play into her hysteria anymore."

Higgins nodded, "Sorry, we've just been referring to her that way since it's what all the Death Eaters keep saying in the interviews."

"We should get going before things get crazy in here," Harry said as another group entered the Atrium with more Death Eaters in tow.

They all tore their eyes from the man on the bench and took Pansy to the interrogation room, sitting her down and binding her arms and legs to the chair before they lifted the curses off of her. They were all there, Alden, Harry, Hermione and Draco, in case somehow she got loose again, however Hermione held her wand tightly in her hand.

"Where are the dragons, Pansy," Hermione asked in a calm voice as she took the seat across from her.

"Getting straight into it, aren't you," she said snidely, turning her nose up at her, fuming at her predicament.

"The game is over, we've caught you, we've raided all of your hideouts, we've gained the cooperation of the giants, so I'll ask you again, where are the dragons?"

Pansy looked at her hard, she was cornered, but she was too proud to give away the last of the details.

"Pansy," Draco said in an almost defeated voice, still disappointed to accept her as the culprit sitting across from them, "Just tell us."

Pansy turned and her eyes locked with Draco, her anger changing slightly into disbelief, "You can go right on and fuck yourself if you think you're going to be the one to reason with me."

Draco sat back with a heated sigh, "Pansy you've nowhere in the world to run now, just give it up."

"You could have changed everything Draco. You and me together, we would have been unstoppable. All you cared about was yourself. Working on improving your own life, forgetting where you left me. In the darkness."

"Pansy you never had to do any of this," he leaned towards her, "I know I made mistakes with how I treated you, but you didn't have to turn to the dark for answers. You didn't have to recreate the Death Eaters for gods sake. Just tell us where the damn dragons are so we can be done with this."

"That's all you ever wanted," angry tears were falling from her eyes, "Was just to be done with me," she turned back to Hermione, "You're never going to find the dragons. They're hidden quite safely with another of my trusted Death Eaters. They will avenge me."
"Call the Dementors and have them take her back to the holding cells, heavily guarded," Hermione said firmly, they weren’t going to get anything else out of her. Her obsession with Draco was too overpowering for anything sensical.

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They spent the evening into the early hours of the morning going from one interrogation to the next with no cooperation when finally the younger Death Eater from Borgin and Burke’s sat down across from them. Ron had joined them at some point and they'd brought extra chairs in for the group, who were scattered about in different stages of sleep deprivation.

Hermione looked down at her parchment of notes, "Says here your name is Bernard Borgin, guessing you've got a relation to the owner of Borgin and Burke's shop. what's your involvement?"

"He's my uncle," Bernard said, he was a boy in his late teens who had dirty blond hair and piercing green eyes, "He's my only family and he dragged me into this whole charade a few months ago. I just do what I'm told and try to stay under the radar and avoid having to do worse."

"Now is your chance to save yourself some time in Azkaban," Hermione was tired of going through the same speech with each of them, ready for answers, "Are you willing to share what you know?"

"Can you protect me?" He asked seriously, "Like really protect me?"

"Yes, the Ministry can protect you," she said, tilting her head ever so slightly with interest.

"I don't really care for the Death Eaters so I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"We just want to know where the dragons are," Hermione said, "And any other names if you've got them."

"I don't know the name of the location of the dragons," he shook his head and her hopes fell again, "But I know where they are and I can take you there. They're guarded by the Night Riders, a small group of the Death Eaters that are handling the dragons, and there are about 18 dragons left that haven't been captured so you'll want backup."

Hermione felt a sudden rush of alertness at his words and looked over at Harry who looked unsure, but finally shrugged after a moment, "Best chance we've got."

"As for names, I'd say you rounded up a good lot of them. I'll tell you how she communicates with us and you can call them somewhere, raid the place. The more of them you round up, the better chance I have at not being murdered later."

"Alright, how do you communicate?" Hermione asked, grabbing her quill for the first time all night.

"We all have these marks on us," he turned his head to the side, revealing a small black snake behind his ear, "Works the same as the Dark Mark, she just taps it with her wand and it calls her followers. Difference is she wanted us to be discreet while she built up her network so the marks are hidden. She didn't want to reuse the old Dark Mark because of people like Draco."

"How did she gain so many followers?" Harry asked, standing from his chair to lean back against the wall behind Hermione.

Bernard considered him, "Because we didn't all come out of the war like you did," he said with a crooked smile, "The ones that were on the Dark Lord's side, even if they were exonerated, they lost
a lot, namely status, respect, jobs even. My Uncle lost customers and, in conjunction with that, money. When the Dark Heiress came to them with another plan, the Dark Lord's plan, it just didn't take much convincing. Rebuilding a life is a lot of work. This was the easy option. My Uncle was excited about the prospect of another Ministry overthrow. She wasn't the Dark Lord, but she was persuasive, she was entrancing and her words were like a drug relapse to many of the old followers. Her beauty and cunning convinced a lot of the newer, younger generation. I was taken with her when we first met, but after hearing what she'd already done, what she wanted to do… I stayed out of fear and loyalty to my Uncle."

"I get it in a way," Draco said, sprawled out on another chair with his legs crossed in front of him, "But it wasn't the only option. Rebuilding is difficult, but it's not worth giving up on when the alternative is Death Eaters in power again. Times were dark during the war for all of us, why go back?"

"I don't disagree with you," Bernard laughed again, "I wasn't old enough to play a part in the war and I don't think I understood fully what it meant to be a Death Eater. Once I'd been with them for a while, once I understood, I didn't want anything to do with this, but I wasn't going to abandon the only family I have."

"Until now," Hermione pointed out.

Bernard was silent for a moment, "This may not be a popular opinion, but what good is family when you're both locked in cells in Azkaban. My Uncle has done things that he can't take back. I can't imagine he'll escape that place, but I haven't done anything unforgivable. I'm telling you what I can because after this I have no family, whichever way I go. I'll have to go it alone so I'm trying to do what's right while I can."

"Alright, I think there's two things we need to do," she turned to Alden, "We'll have Bernard take a group of us to the dragons and I think a group of Aurors should call Pansy's followers maybe to one of the locations we raided and see how many more we can wrangle before word's out that she's been captured."

Alden nodded, "We'll tell Higgins when we're back in the Atrium and have his group stage the last raid and our group can go to the dragons."

Everyone agreed and Hermione released Bernard from the chair, binding his hands together in front of him for the time being.

He stood up, following Hermione with Draco walking behind him, "Harry, Ron, can you grab a few of the dragonologists to bring with us? We'll meet you in the Atrium."

Alden walked with Hermione and Draco while Harry and Ron took off towards the Department of Mysteries. A few minutes later they returned, along with five dragonologists and a couple of brooms as Alden solidified the plan with Higgins, who started pulling Aurors that were milling about for the task. When everything was worked out, Hermione handed Higgins Pansy's wand and led her group outside for the dragon mission.

"Take two people with you and one will return to grab a few more," Hermione said to Bernard, knowing nine people would be far too many to transport via side-along apparition at once, "When we're all there someone will bring you back to stay in a holding cell until the mission is over."

"Ron and I can go with him first," Harry suggested, "And Ron can come back for the next group."

Hermione knew the Aurors should be the first to go since they had the best field experience,
"Alright, we'll send a dragonologist in the next group. Let's get us all there as quickly as we can."

Harry and Ron each grabbed onto one of Bernard's arms and Harry gave a nod to Hermione as Bernard turned quickly on the spot and the three vanished. The next few seconds everyone held their breath until there was another small *POP* and Ron and Bernard returned, "Next two," he said as Alden and Cristof grabbed his arms and Bernard was handed off to one of the Aurors standing by to transfer to the holding cells.

Hermione let out her breath, Ron's return was a good sign that Bernard had done as promised. Alden returned a second later and Hermione and another dragonologist took his arm.

"See you soon," Draco nodded to her as they turned.

Hermione landed hard on her feet, spotting Harry and Ron a few steps away. They were on a hillside somewhere very rural. The grass was lush and green all around them although the early morning clouds above were a dark shade of grey.

"I'll go back again," Alden said, "You lot keep lookout."

Hermione and the dragonologist went to join the others as Alden disapparated again, they were looking over a small embankment where a wizard-built cave sat below.

"That's where they're keeping the dragons," Harry whispered to her as she crouched next to him.

Two by two, Draco, Alden and the remaining dragonologists joined them until they were all crouching behind the embankment. A dragon's roar filled the air and a jet of fire streamed from the mouth of the cave.

"Now's a good a time as any," Cristof said, "If the dragon's are already riled up it might cause some welcomed confusion when we run in."

Harry nodded, "Let's go," he stood and the group made their way around the embankment and down towards the cave. It was a good ten minute walk until they were walking the edge of the cave.

"On my count," he counted to three again and the group of ten rushed around the side into the opening of the cave yelling out different spells at the wizards inside going about their dragon duties. One was caught off guard and thrown to the floor in a body bind curse while the dragon next to him reared in frustration.

One of the smaller dragons opened its mouth, spitting fire towards Alden, who quickly cast a large Aguamenti charm to meet it halfway before diving to the side.

One of the smaller dragons opened its mouth, spitting fire towards Alden, who quickly cast a large Aguamenti charm to meet it halfway before diving to the side.

There were only four Death Eaters in the cave, one on the ground, the other three rushing forward towards the intruders. The dragonologists ran towards the dragons bound in chains, casting invisible cage charms around them so they couldn't spit fire into the battle. One dragonologist was hit with a curse as he rushed around to the next dragon and Hermione ran through the others to get to him, pulling him off to the side, out of the midst of everything.

One of the Night Riders yelled something and another nodded as they ran towards a pair of dragons, relinquishing the chains and climbing on their backs.

"They're making a run!" Hermione shouted, throwing a curse at one of the Night Riders closest to her.
Cristof, who was next to her, looked around the cave, grabbed something from the ground and ran to another dragon that wasn't yet caged, "Relashio!" he shouted as the chains fell off. He threw something up in the air that the dragon caught in its mouth, dropped more at its feet and climbed the spikes on its neck to its back. He made an odd sound with his mouth and the dragon spread its large wings with a roar and took flight. Hermione gasped as she watched him take off into the clouds after the Night Riders.

Draco sent a strong curse at the last Night Rider, who was trying to find a dragon for himself that wasn't already in an invisible cage. He flew backward, landing in a crumpled pile on the ground.

"Put him with the other one and bind them!" Harry directed as he ran past to his broom that was just outside the cave. He and Ron pushed off from the ground and into the sky to follow the battle.

Draco did as he was told, binding the two Night Riders they had caught and levitating them to the entrance of the cave, where he met Hermione, Alden and the other three dragonologists who were scanning the skies.

"Cristof is the only one of us trained in riding the dragons," an older dragonologist said from Hermione's side, "We'd have no idea what we were doing up there. The Night Riders, they must have been dragonologists, or trained by one at least."

"There!" Draco pointed as the shriek of a dragon was heard high above and the clouds turned a dark shade of red for a moment.

Two dragons swooped down as the wizards on their backs shot curses back and forth. The third dragon also descended from the clouds a ways away and two brooms could just be seen weaving along with it, taking it towards the ground as Harry and Ron dodged curses from the Night Rider on its back.

Hermione held her breath watching them, from the ground there was nothing they could do but wait.

"Malfoy, Lang, come with me and we'll run out to the dragon they're bringing to the ground," Alden gestured to the field in the distance where it would likely land, "Granger, you stay here with the other dragonologists to help when Cristof gets the second dragon on the ground."

With that, Draco, Alden and Lang, a dragonologist, took off on their pursuit as Hermione and the others quickly descended the hillside to meet Cristof, whose dragon was batting its wings to direct the other dragon back to the ground.

"They've got certain commands they all know instinctually," the dragonologist next to her said, "Very independent creatures, but what Cristof is doing is shooing it to the ground with a sign of shared purpose. When a dragon directs another dragon to the ground like that it usually means its got food to share."

"How does Cristof get his dragon to share the sign?" she asked.

"He must have found food in the cave that he's baiting it with. If he fed his dragon right before they left the cave, showed it there was more, it's probably under the impression its got too much and can share, which gives it pride as a leader. Every dragon wants to be a leader and a fighter. When they can provide for each other, it makes them feel powerful. Although they'll fight over everything if there's not enough to go around."

"They're almost down," Hermione said as the group prepared for its landing. As soon as it touched
down, a mixed yelling of curses broke the morning air as beams of red flashed towards the wizard on the dragon's back. Another dragonologist was hit with a stunning spell, sending him backwards. But finally, Hermione hit the Night Rider square in the face and it slumped down and slipped off the dragon's back to the ground. Cristof's dragon touched down and he climbed off, casting his cage charm before moving to the other dragon to do the same.

"The others are coming back, I saw them as I was landing," Cristof said, "They had the last dragon caged."

They brought the dragons and Night Riders back up to the cave, catching their breath for a few minutes before the other group returned with the last of them. Draco walked up to Hermione, hugging her tightly. She pulled back, "Everything go okay?"

"Like clockwork," he grinned, "I was just worried about you."

They apparated back to the Ministry with the Death Eaters as the Dragonologists stepped into the magic dragon cages to put them to sleep and wrap Lacus Cords around each to transport back. A few of the dragons put up a good fight, but they got each one safely back to the Ministry as the sun rose over the entrance.

They waited in the Atrium for another hour until Aurors started popping in a few at a time from their raid. Higgins strutted in with three Death Eaters floating behind him. "Mission was a success," he said, "There were about 15 more in total and we've rounded them all up. They came in spurts so it was easy to tackle with our group."

As they walked the toll of Death Eaters down the hallway of the holding cells, they heard a particularly frustrated scream coming out of the cell where Pansy was sitting, a dementor on either side of her. Hermione turned to look at her as they passed, her face screwed up and eyes lit with anger, and Hermione's lip curled up into a smile. If Pansy was angry, they'd found what she didn't want them to find. Maybe now, it could all be over, right in time for the holidays.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hope you enjoyed that chapter! I've finished outlining the rest of the story and I'd say we've got 5-6 chapters left (give or take), just wanted to give you a reference of where we're at :) I'm loving writing this story so I hope you're loving reading it! Please leave a review!
Early the next week, an elegant funeral was held for Robert Bones where he was honored with a purple drape with twinkling yellow stars that hovered over him, the sign of an Auror killed valiantly in battle. Alden gave a moving eulogy with stories of his years with the Ministry, dedication to his colleagues, accomplishments as Head Auror, and a touching nod to reuniting with his wife, Amelia.

In the week following, the giant towns were completed and the movement of the giants was in full force, the Death Eaters were booked into Azkaban one by one as the holding cells thinned out, and a few of the dragons were moved each night from the Ministry to the Dragon Sanctuaries. Pansy, miserable and crazed, was tried in front of the Wizengamot and found unanimously guilty of all charges, sentenced to a lifetime in Azkaban and the administration of the Dementor's Kiss within the year. Draco attended the trial, sad to see it happen, but accepting that justice had to be done.

When all was said and done, the holidays were upon them, Christmas another week away. Hermione and Draco were in the process of cleaning up the den, making sure all of the necessary files made it back to the Ministry and throwing out all of the old sheets of notes they'd made along the way.

"Remember when we'd first gotten Goyle," Hermione laughed, "I just found the note sheet from my interview with him."

"How could I forget, he made me leave the room and I was sitting in the entrance way to his apartment building fuming that I'd ever thought he was my friend. That oaf. And then you broke him down in five minutes."

"Possibly the easiest interrogation I've ever done," she looked back at the notes again before crumpling it in her hands and throwing it into the fire.

"It was fun playing detective with you," he said, walking over to her and taking the papers she was flipping through out of her hand to set on the coffee table and pulling her close as she gave into him, her arms wrapping around his neck lightly.

"You were incredibly helpful," she said, looking up at him, "I dare say you'd make a good detective… or Auror."

"I think I'll be straying away from the Ministry life," he gave her a crooked smile back, "Wouldn't want to show you up at your job."

She rolled her eyes, "I'd love to see you try. By the way, we're having a holiday party at the Ministry on Friday. Will you come with me?"

"Of course," he may not want to work there, but he quite enjoyed being a part of it all while he was and could get behind a good celebration.

"Great, and also… my parents asked if we'd come for Christmas," she said hesitantly.

He looked down at her, his smile intact, but eyes clouding, "Granger, I'm just not sure your parents want to meet someone like me."
"You just helped save the Wizarding World, Draco," she laughed, "Not sure how better to prune your reputation than to be a part of that mission."

"It doesn't take back the things that I did," he said quietly, willing her to understand, "Nothing ever will."

Hermione pulled back a little, looking at him sadly, "The best you can do is try to be a better version of yourself and you are. Please come with me for Christmas."

They stared at each other for a moment before he gave a sigh of defeat, "Fine. Obviously I'd love to meet your parents. I just don't think I'm the kind of boyfriend you bring home."

"Then what kind of boyfriend are you?" She asked incredulously.

"The kind that ravishes you and brings you presents and looks nice on your arm until you're ready for something real," he said, half-joking.

"This is real," her brows furrowed, "Sometimes I'm afraid you still think this is temporary."

He needed to back peddle, this wasn't a conversation they had to have when times were finally lightening, "My feelings for you aren't temporary," he said, "I'll go with you at Christmas if it's important to you."

"Wonderful, I'll send them an owl," she gave him a smug smile and leaned up to kiss him before she let go of his neck and returned to her tidying.

"Also for the Ministry party, I'll be getting ready with Ginny at my flat, I think Harry and Ron will be enjoying some drinks at his house with some of the other Aurors beforehand, he invited you to join them."

Draco grimaced slightly, still a little uncomfortable being thrown into a room of Aurors without Hermione to vouch for him, "I'm guessing the polite thing for me to do would be to accept."

"It would indeed," she said without looking over.

"Alright, tell Potter I'll come by."

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Saturday afternoon Hermione gathered all of the things she would need from the Manor and apparated with Draco to Harry and Ginny's home. They walked in hand in hand and everyone turned to greet them. Ginny waved from across the room, coming over to play hostess. She hugged Hermione and without thinking twice pulled Draco in for a hug as well, as a gesture, "Glad you came," she said, "Come in, come in!" she grabbed Hermione's hand and dragged her towards Harry and Ron, "I'll get my bag and we can head to your place. They're talking about work already," she bounced off towards her bedroom.

"Hi Harry, hi Ron!" Hermione said, hugging them both as Draco shook their hands with a nod, "Potter, Weasley."

"All of you boys look so nice," Hermione said looking around at them all in their suits. Draco was in all black, which made Hermione feel like she could melt at his feet, but she wouldn't admit that to him just yet.

"We do clean up nice sometimes," Harry said, "I'll grab you a drink, Malfyoy."
"How's it going?" Ron asked with an awkward smile as Harry headed for the kitchen.

"Good," Hermione said brightly, "Excited to relax a bit tonight with everyone."

"Glad you both could make it," he said earnestly, "I think it's high time we all get to relax."

"Ron! What's the name of the keeper for the Cannons?" Higgins called from the couch.

"Horton," he called back, "'scuse me," he said to Draco and Hermione, "Sounds like my expertise is requested." He wandered over to the other Aurors milling around the sitting room chatting with butterbeers in their hands. They all looked familiar from the missions over the last few weeks and Hermione could tell Draco was relaxing, seeing now that it was a group of Aurors he'd worked with, that had treated him with respect.

"Alright, let's go!" Ginny returned with a large bag, leaning up to give Harry a kiss on the cheek as he returned from the kitchen.

"Have fun," Hermione said to Draco with an inconspicuous wink as he leaned down to give her a kiss goodbye.

"See you in a bit," he said, taking a glass of firewhiskey from Harry gratefully.

Hermione and Ginny left and Harry held up his glass to Draco's, "Cheers," he grinned at him.

Draco clinked his glass and put his other hand in his pocket, "Calming down in the Auror's department yet?"

"I expect we'll have paperwork to last us through the next year from the Death Eater trials," he sighed.

"Granger's dream."

Harry laughed, "Sad, but true. So what's your plan now that it's all over and you're free again? Planning to spend some more time around the Ministry?"

"I think my Ministry days are behind me," he said, taking a sip from his glass, "Not sure what I'll try to do next."

"That's a shame, Alden said he hoped you'd apply for something in one of our departments, offered to put a good word in for you, as any of us would."

"As much as that is appreciated, my name is a little too well known to be comfortable there."

"The stigma of a name goes away after a while," Harry shrugged, knowing better than most, "Once they get to know you."

"Well I told Granger that I'd consider going into a Healer program," Draco told him, hoping to steer the conversation away from a potential Ministry job, though flattered at the prospect.

"As Hermione tells it you were top of the class with her so I suppose that makes sense," Harry leaned back against the wall, "How have things been with the two of you now that the dust is settling?"

"Great," he said, "They're always great if I don't mess things up."

"Can I ask what scares you about being with her?"
Draco considered him for a moment, simultaneously annoyed and impressed with his lack of boundaries, "I'm just scared for her. She doesn't deserve the stares that come with being associated with me."

"She's been my best friend for ten years now," Harry said, "You think she's not used to undeserved stares? I tried to distance myself from her and Ron in fifth year when the Ministry was against me, and again after 6th year when I knew my task to destroy Voldemort was going to be dangerous. You think she listened then? Not a chance. She called me daft and refused to leave my side."

"Everything you were doing was for a good cause," Draco said, "Same can't be said for my past."

"You know, Malfoy, there's a reason I testified at your trial," Harry said quietly, trying to keep their conversation private, "There was something about you at the Battle of Hogwarts, I could just tell you didn't want to be a part of it. I could tell you weren't the git that you were when we were students, like you'd realized what it all meant, being a Death Eater, and you didn't want any of it. I'm guessing you only came looking for me that night to get your wand back. We all saw you hesitate when Voldemort called you back."

"Is this where you remind me that you saved my life that night?" Draco sighed, "And saved my arse from going to Azkaban?"

"No," he grinned, "Just want you to know Hermione's not the only one that forgave you a long time ago and hopes you give yourself a second chance."

"Bloody Gryffindors," Draco said under his breath as he rolled his eyes and Harry laughed.

"Alright, alright, down your glass and I'll get you a new one."

Draco tipped the glass in his hand back for the last sip and gave it back to Harry, who turned for the kitchen.

"Malfoy!" came the voice of Higgins, "Come over here, we've just heard from Weasley that you've got a Quidditch practice room in your house!"

Draco looked at Ron who looked a little embarrassed, "Hermione mentioned it," he said, "We were just talking about the dreary winter weather making it hard to get out to play."

"Your sister seems to brave the weather just fine," Draco said, earning the laugh of a few of the other Aurors as he walked over, "Read she played an impressive game this last week even with all the rain."

"She gets paid to do it," Ron waved him off, accepting the jab, "An indoor setup would just be really cool is all I was saying."

"You're welcome to come check it out sometime," he said, trying to put in the same effort with her friends that they were with him.

"How's it work?" Higgins asked.

Harry returned with another glass of firewhiskey for them both and Draco settled into the conversation, telling them about the charms he had in place for the Quidditch room before the conversation turned to the national Quidditch standings and the upcoming holiday party.

Hermione and Ginny returned another hour or so later dressed for the evening. Hermione in a red satin dress that flowed out at the hips and a deeper v-neck than she normally would have braved.
Draco felt the conversation around him hush in his head as he watched her walk in, curls tamed with SleekEazy Potion once again, dress flowing in time with her stride as if instigated by a breezy day, eyes bright with laughter at something Ginny had said. She was beautiful. He wouldn't brag, but he was likely the luckiest bloke in the room. His lip curled up as she spotted him leaning on the chair Harry was sitting in.

She walked over and did a twirl as everyone else was caught up in whatever the current topic was, "Do you like it?"

"It's not green, but it will do," he said, pulling her in for a soft kiss before he moved his lips to her ear, "You look quite stunning."

"You've got a whole evening of schmoozing before you can get it off of me, so enjoy it," she whispered back.

Ginny flopped down on Harry's lap and Draco was jolted off the arm in surprise.

"Sorry, Malfoy, Harry wasn't appropriately ogling my outfit from afar," she looked back at Harry with her eyebrows raised.

"Beautiful, always Ginny," Harry said with a big smile, "Shall we get going?"

There was a general murmur of agreement and the group grabbed their coats and headed for the door.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

The Ministry holiday party was held in an extended room off the Atrium that was used for events. Every department had been invited so the room was packed full of happy, chatting, half-drunk employees talking of holiday plans. The group ran into some of their old Hogwarts classmates; Dean and Cho, who were working together at the Department for Magical Games and Sports, Seamus, who was working for the Muggle-Worthy Excuses Committee in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes and Ernie McMillan who was in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. It was clear that they'd all read the gossip columns about Hermione and Draco because no one seemed very shocked to see them together.

"What are you doing for the holidays, Hermione?" Ron asked, taking a large bite of the pumpkin pasty in front of him as they all sat at a table together with their snacks and drinks.

"We're going to go to my parents," she said, looking at Draco with a smile, who nodded, taking a sip of his newest cocktail.

"Hermione!" someone called from behind them.

"Parvati, hi! Sorry, I'll be right back" she said, getting up.

"You'll enjoy the Grangers," Ron said to Draco as they were left to the conversation alone, "They were very welcoming when I met them."

"I'm sure they are," he said a little uncomfortably, avoiding his eye, "Just not sure they'll be very impressed with her current choice in men."

"She's already told them, you know, about your past, hasn't she?"

"Yeah, but I'm sure she's downplaying their concern."
"They're very supportive of her," Ron told him, "They'd never judge you before they met you."

Draco finally looked up at him, "Thanks," he said sincerely, "I'm just a bit nervous. And I mean, they're muggles, still not sure what kind of stuff to talk about."

"Just talk about Hermione," he grinned, "Every parent loves to hear how wonderful you think their child is."

Draco grinned back, "I can certainly do that," his smile faltered a little as he realized how bloody welcoming all of her friends were to someone who was awful to them, "Look, Weasley, I'm sorry for all that stuff I said to you back at Hogwarts. I know it doesn't mean much now, but I feel it needs to be said. I was a real prat."

Ron held his butterbeer up to cheers Draco, "Water under the bridge, you make Hermione happy enough to make up for all that."

"I also hope it's not uncomfortable for you that I'm, well, dating your ex-girlfriend."

"Oh it absolutely was," Ron laughed, "But we've gotten used to you by now. She'll always be important to me, but I've been dating here and there. Nothing exciting, but I promise I'm not sitting around waiting for it not to work out," he paused, "I never thought I'd say this Malfoy, but I'm glad it's you she chose. I can see you care for her very much. That's all that matters to me."

They shared a look of mutual respect as Hermione walked back over, "Alden's going to do a toast," she said to the table, "Let's go over with everyone else."

The room quieted as Alden took a step up onto the small stage in the room, magnifying his voice the slightest bit to reach the edges of the crowd, "Good evening everyone!" he called, "I just wanted to take a quick moment for a couple of items. First, I wanted to say how wonderful it is to have everyone gathered together enjoying a happy evening in light of recent events. This is why we do what we do, to keep the Wizarding World safe and times light so we can all enjoy what's important in life. Good drinks and good company," there was a rumble of appreciative laughs and Alden continued, "And secondly, we wanted to present a very hard-earned award to one of our attendees. As I said, the events over the last year have impacted us all severely, but it's what we're here to take care of. One of you, however, had no obligation to undertake the work of the past year, but were unceremoniously dragged into it," he looked into the crowd, "Mr. Malfoy, could you join me on stage?"

Draco froze for a moment before he looked over at Hermione who was smiling broadly at him. "Go!" she whispered and he remembered to move again, handing her his drink and joining Alden on the stage to a sea of clapping. He clasped his hands in front of him while he listened to the Head Detective's speech.

"Draco, that entire Ministry owes you more of a thank you than we could express in words. Almost a year ago you had fingers pointed at you for something that didn't involve you in the slightest. You dealt with the process with more patience and understanding than anyone could expect of you until the charges were dropped, and even after you were relieved of your obligation to be a part of it to clear your own name, you showed up whenever called and lended your invaluable knowledge to the Ministry and were on the front lines of each mission. For all of your hard work, the Ministry would like to present you with an Order of Merlin, First Class. The accolade is, of course, from all of us here at the Ministry, but with a special emphasis of thank you from the Minister for Magic and both Robert Bones and myself. If Robert were here, he'd be presenting it to you himself. After all, it was his suggestion to nominate you for the award," he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small gold box, opening it to present to Draco.
Inside sat a gold medal attached to a purple ribbon. The medal was engraved with the Ministry logo in the middle, encircled by the words Order of Merlin, First Class. There was a small plaque below the medal that read: Presented to Draco Malfoy on behalf of the Minister For Magic.

Alden held the medal out in one hand and his other hand out to Draco, who shook it firmly while the crowd clapped and woop-ed loudly, "Thank you, Alden," he said quietly, "This is truly an honor I don't feel I totally deserve."

"You deserve much more than this," Alden shook his head with a smile.

With that, Alden stepped to the side, "Say a few words if you'd like."

Like a true Malfoy, Draco addressed the crowd with a grin, "This is such an honor to receive after a long year of work for everyone here to bring calm back to our world. I'd just like to say thank you to Alden for the support of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and the opportunity to help where I could. To Robert Bones, who, although we did not get off on the best foot, ended up showing me the true meaning of being brave and humble," he locked eyes with Hermione, "And to Detective Granger. For your unwavering trust and the never ending sacrifices you make for your job to find the truth and do what's right."

He stepped back and shook Alden's hand as the crowd clapped once more and then he stepped off the stage while Alden took back the attention of the room, "I hope you all have a wonderful evening and happy holiday!"

With that, the party resumed and Draco joined Hermione again, "Did you know he was going to do that?"

"Yes," she laughed, "And I knew you'd hate it, but you deserve it."

Harry walked up andclapped him on the back, "Congratulations on the award, Malfoy."

"This should really go to any one of you instead," he said.

"Oh I've got a whole pile at home," Harry waved him off and they laughed. The group reformed slowly around their table as they enjoyed a few more drinks, everyone getting a little more tipsy than they meant to.

"Okay, listen, we've got to make a plan to visit Hogwarts this winter," Harry told them all, "February. Ginny's got a few months break before spring training starts again. It's happening, put it on your calendars."

"That's a great idea!" Hermione said excitedly.

"I'm serious," Harry reiterated, "February 10th we're going. Put it on your calendar."

"What on earth are we going to do at Hogwarts?" Draco asked.

"Visit Neville of course!" Ginny said, "And Mcgonagall and Hagrid!"

"You're coming, Draco," Hermione said with a wink, "It'll be fun."

"Alright, alright," he conceded, "Might be nice to see the rebuild they did on the castle."

The evening wound down and the crowd thinned out as the group finally resigned to call it a night. After an onslaught of hugs, which Draco gave into out of both obligation and an abundance of
alcohol in his system, they all apparated back to their respective homes.

Hermione and Draco crashed in bed that evening, having enough energy to throw their clothes on the ground, before they passed out, arms and legs wrapped haphazardly around each other. A smile crept sleepily onto Hermione's face as she buried it into his side, excited to continue the holiday celebrations at home.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Happy Sunday all! Spent my day yesterday at San Diego Comic Con!!! Stopped by the Cursed Child booth and took a very fun picture with the setup they had. Also bought myself some Slytherin robes, a really cool cartoon drawing of Harry Potter, and went [lamely] dressed in my Slytherin tee and Mauraders Map shoes! Next year I pledged to go full costume, but this was my first Comic Con ever! Please review if you’ve got a minute!! Xx
"Ready?" Hermione asked the next afternoon, feeling excited but a little nervous.

"Yes I think we've got everything," Draco said, grabbing the small pouch they'd packed with all their things from the dresser and following her out of the bedroom.

Narcissa was in the sitting room off the entrance hall as they came downstairs, and came to see them off.

"Have a lovely Christmas morning," she said, hugging Draco, "And please tell your parents we say Happy Christmas," she hugged Hermione next.

"I will, thank you."

"We'll see you for dinner tomorrow, mother," Draco said, taking Hermione's hand in his as they left the Manor.

"Am I taking you away from anything you would normally do on Christmas day?" Hermione asked as they walked down the pathway.

"We'd normally have breakfast in the dining room, exchange presents and go about our day," Draco said, "Reconvene for dinner and an evening walk around the garden - or lately with my father's situation, we'd move to the ballroom for some music and a nightcap."

"At least we'll be back for dinner tomorrow," they were outside the gates now and Hermione looked over at Draco, who gave her a reassuring smile as she turned on the spot and apparated them to Hampstead. They appeared on the doorstep of a normally sized two-story house located on a quiet suburban street.

Hermione knocked once before pushing the door open, "Hello!" she called, "We're here!" there was a bustle of footsteps and pots and pans from the kitchen before her parents rounded the corner into the hallway, "Hermione, dear, so wonderful to see you," her mother said with a wide smile, arms out to hug her daughter. She embraced her tightly before shifting her gaze, "And you must be Draco, it's a pleasure to finally meet you," she beamed, pulling him in for a hug as well, as Mr. Granger stepped up to hug his daughter.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Granger," he said.

"Draco, happy to have you here," Hermione's father held his hand out and shook Draco's firmly with a welcoming nod.

"Well, come in," Mrs. Granger motioned them into the kitchen where the table was set for dinner, a large roast in the middle, fresh out of the oven.

"This looks wonderful," Draco said politely as he took the seat next to Hermione.

"The Mrs. has been cooking all day," Mr. Granger said with a smile to his wife, "So tell us a little about you, Draco, now that we've finally got a chance to meet you."
Draco had prepared himself for these kinds of questions, "Well, my family comes from one of the original wizarding families," he accepted the serving fork from Hermione's mother and picked out a few good pieces of meat for Hermione's plate, and then his own before handing it back, "So I grew up in that world before attending Hogwarts. Proud to say I was second in our class, behind your daughter, of course," he looked at her fondly as her parents laughed, "I haven't chosen my career path yet, but I spend a lot of my time these days studying in the Manor, with the exception of the adventures she's taken me on in the last year."

"Hermione says you've got interest in becoming a doctor," Mr. Granger said as he took a bite of his potatoes.

"A healer," Hermione said to Draco's confused look.

"Ah, yes," he nodded, "It's something I'm definitely interested in, just need to take the steps to make it happen," he shifted a little, not wanting his past to be the elephant in the room, "I know she's already told you about some of my less impressive life choices," he held his head high, addressing her father directly, "So it's been a long road of rebuilding, but I plan to do everything I can to set up a life to be proud of."

"He was with me on our last investigation to bring an end to events I was telling you about over the summer," Hermione added, "They awarded him with an Order of Merlin, First Class last night at our holiday party. It's an incredibly prestigious medal for his services to the Wizarding World."

"The funny thing about growing up is that we hit a point in life where we realize we have to accept our pasts as they are, flaws and all," Mr. Granger gave Draco a small smile, "Nothing good comes out of dwelling on mistakes, when we're in the perfect position to apply those lessons to pave the future. Sounds like you're well on your way to paving a good one."

"Doing what I can, sir."

"From your post last week it sounded like the case was all wrapped up, has it been quieting in the office?" Mrs. Granger said to Hermione, the change in subject signifying that no more needed to be explained regarding Draco's past.

"Marginally," Hermione said, "Lots of administrative things to do now, but no more missions to hunt down Death Eaters."

"Or giants, or dragons," Draco grinned at her.

"Giants and dragons?!" her mother looked at her in shock.

"The giants were quite friendly," she said, shooting Draco a look, "And we had dragonologists with us to wrangle the dragons."

"Dragonologists," her father shook his head with a laugh, "Your world never ceases to amaze me."

"Go on then, tell us the story," Mrs. Granger said, "Now that the cat's out of the bag that you've been hunting down giants and dragons."

Hermione, with the help of Draco's detailed memory, recounted their month with the giants and their mission to recapture the dragons. It turned out Draco was very apt at storytelling, describing the scene of dragons in the cave in a captivating tale.

They finished dinner and evening tea before their expeditions came to an end and Mrs. Granger started clearing away dishes, "Hermione, I had a few boxes upstairs I was hoping you could go
through before you leave. We're getting rid of some things, wanted to try and pass them along."

"Sure mum," she got up from the table, "I'll be back," she said to Draco as she followed her mother upstairs.

"So, Draco," Mr. Granger leaned back in his chair with his last sips of tea, "Not to put you on the spot, but I know my daughter cares for you very much. I was hoping we could have a little talk about where you see this heading."

Draco took a sip from his own cup before setting it on the table, deciding how to choose his words, "I love your daughter," he said, making deliberate eye contact, "I'm hesitant to think too far in the future for the sole reason that I think she deserves better than what I can offer her."

"I appreciate your honestly," Mr. Granger said, "You seem like a take-the-bull-by-the-horns kind of lad; Own your faults. It's an admirable characteristic. That being said, Hermione is a strong woman."

"A force to be reckoned with, if I've ever met one," Draco agreed.

"And because of that, she tends to care much less about outward appearances and niceties and much more about what she wants, regardless of what's good for her. She has impeccable judgment, so you should let that speak for itself."

"I try, very hard," he said, "And I am doing my best to move past a lot of the lingering feelings I have about… the things I can't change. She's been nothing but good for me, but I need to be able to say the same for her."

"Do you see a chance for a future together? Because if not, you should consider having that discussion."

He thought for a moment, certainly not disagreeing with him, "I absolutely see a chance. It feels odd now to remember my day to day without her in it. But I have considerations I need to weigh still, that haven't been fully vetted. My hesitations have nothing to do with her and everything to do with myself. She's the most impressive person I've ever met."

"What would you say she is to you? Just another girlfriend or something more?" He was certainly checking all of the fatherly conversation boxes.

A smile crept subconsciously onto Draco's face as he thought of what she was to him, "She's the light in my life."

"Then it sounds like you should at least let yourself give it all of your effort and see where it takes you, instead of keeping her at arm's length and letting yourself constantly replay the negatives in your narrative. If you stand in your own way, you'll never know what could have been."

Draco nodded slowly, "I've always thought of it as protecting her, I guess, but I understand what you're saying. How do we move forward if I keep looking backwards."

They heard footsteps coming back down the stairs and Mr. Granger gave Draco a crooked grin, "Keep your chin up, it sounds like your answers will come to you with time."

"Mum says you've picked out a movie for the evening?" Hermione asked as they came back into the kitchen.

"Yes, thought it'd be nice for you to sit back and relax after the hectic year you've had," Mr.
Granger stood up, walking towards the living room.

"Movie?" Draco asked, looking to her for reference.

"Um, like a book in moving pictures," she said, "Odd thing to try and describe but it's a very normal muggle thing. It means no more questions to answer for a while," she whispered, "Mum finally admitted that dad had asked for a few minutes to talk with you so I came back down as soon as I could."

"He certainly had some questions," he said dryly.

Hermione and Draco sat down on the couch and Mrs. Granger turned the tv on. Draco jumped a little as it happened, settling back in when he realized what it was. They turned the movie on, *Back to the Future* sprawled across the screen, and Hermione leaned into Draco, pulling her legs up under her on the couch and taking a deep breath as his arm came down over her. It felt like such a long time since she'd been able to absently stare at a screen with nothing else invading her mind.

At some point Hermione fell asleep on Draco's chest and awoke to him shaking her lightly, "Granger, looks like it's bedtime."

The movie was over and the credits were rolling, "I think I needed this kind of night," she yawned as her mother laughed.

"I thought you might," she said, "Now I've made up the guest bedroom for Draco and there are towels in both rooms. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

Draco gave her a side-eye glance at the mention of sleeping separately and she caught his eye with an apologetic grimace. Once they were upstairs she pushed the door open to the right, "This will be your room tonight," she said, "Sorry, they're a bit traditional when it comes to sharing a bed when you're not married."

He grinned at her, "It's really fine, I just thought it was funny."

"Well the bathroom is right outside your door," she pointed at the hallway bath, "And I'll be going to sleep in my room."

"Get some sleep, Granger," he leaned down, wrapping her in a warm hug, and kissed her, lingering for an extra moment as their eyes met. He never made it easy to leave the confines of his arms.

"Goodnight, Draco," she gave him one more kiss before she stepped away towards her bedroom, turning back to see him still standing in the doorway looking at her, a grin plastered on his face. She gave him a coy wink and closed her bedroom door before he made her heart beat any faster than it already was. It wasn't fair the things he made her feel just by looking at her. A moment later she heard the other door close and she sighed, Draco Malfoy had come home with her to meet her parents. A year ago she would have thought herself mad at the sheer idea of that.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

"Granger," she heard Draco whisper through her dream world.

She blinked a few times, it was still dark out. She rolled over and the clock on the bedside table said 3:15AM, "Is everything okay?" She whispered urgently, sitting up in bed.

The door creaked closed, "Everything is just fine," his voice sounded mischievous and she fell back onto the bed, her heart slowing itself back down again. She felt the end of the mattress weigh
down and sat up on her elbows to see Draco crawling up from the foot of her bed.

"What do you think you're doing?!" She said incredulously.

"What?! You gave me that little look as you were walking in here, I thought you wanted me to come sneak in later," he said innocently, now hovering over her, his face inches from hers.

"I most certainly was not giving you a 'come sneak into my bedroom against my parents rules' look," she said, trying her best not to laugh in fear of him not taking her seriously, "Now get out of here and go back to bed."

Draco closed the gap between them with a sultry kiss that made her sigh ever so slightly against his lips.

"It doesn't sound like you want me to go back to bed," his eyes locked with hers and even in the dark they did something to her that made her brain fuzzy.

"Why are you so difficult to say no to," she breathed.

"It's a character flaw," he smirked, capturing her lips again. She let herself get caught in the moment, loving the feeling of his body so close to hers. There was an extra layer of excitement that coursed through her, knowing he shouldn't be in her room and she ran her fingers through his hair, pulling him closer. He moved his kisses down her neck and she felt goosebumps pop up down her arms. This boy would be the death of her yet.

A creak downstairs made them both jump, crashing back to reality.

"Get back to bed!" Hermione whispered, half-laughing, half-frantic.

Draco jumped off the bed, landing cat-like on his feet and tip-toeing out the door, closing it softly behind him and making his way into the hall bath to splash some cold water on his face before he returned to his own bed.

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"Happy Christmas!" It was her mother's voice this time that broke through her slumber as she stretched, slowly opening one of her eyes and taking in the light from her bedroom window.

"Happy Christmas, mum," she mumbled.

"We'll have breakfast ready soon if you'd like to wake Draco."

Hermione sat up with a long yawn, her brain finally registering the new day, "Of course, we'll be down in a few minutes."

Her door closed and she threw the blankets off of her, the excitement of Christmas Day now in the forefront of her thoughts.

After she'd tamed her hair a bit and thrown on the red and green sweater sitting on the bench at the end of her bed, she wandered down the hallway to Draco's room, opening it quietly and shutting it behind her before she jumped onto the bed, unceremoniously jolting Draco awake in a panic.

"What in the bloody hell —" he cursed, eyes opening wide to meet Hermione's, which were laughing down at him.

"Payback for your mid-night promiscuity," she leaned down and kissed him soundly before he
could protest, "Now come on, it's Christmas morning," she said as she jumped back off the bed and headed towards the door, "We'll be in the kitchen," she started to close the door but opened it back up, "Oh, and there's a sweater on the bench you'll need to put on. Granger tradition."

Draco mumbled a few choice words under his breath as the door shut again and as he swung his feet over the bed, "Happy Christmas," he called after her.

Draco stood from his bed and walked over to the bench, "You've got to be joking me," he said, picking it up to hold in front of him. It was a red and green Christmas sweater depicting a large evergreen, complete with sewn-on Christmas ornaments and a bow for the topper, "The things you do for love."

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Chapter End Notes

Hi all! I'm nearing the end of my writing on this story! It's looking like 46 chapters altogether, so we've got a few more to go :)
Draco joined the Grangers in the kitchen, who were sitting around the table with their morning tea waiting to begin Christmas breakfast.

"Don't you look like the epitome of Christmas Spirit," Hermione grinned at him in his ornament sweater and he laughed it off, looking around at the sweaters everyone else was wearing.

"Well I've learned the Grangers certainly have style," Draco quipped, taking his seat and accepting the cup of tea offered to him by Mrs. Granger.

"Hermione used to love the decorative sweaters her grandmother would wear at the holidays," Mrs. Granger said, "So we made it a family tradition after her passing and we each picked our favorite to wear each year. We kept a few extras in case there was ever an addition to the family."

"That's very sweet," he looked over at Hermione, "The elves on yours seem appropriate for your love of house elves."

"Yes I guess I was a supporter even before I knew what they were," she looked down at her sweater of Santa and his helpers and smiled.

"I've got a soufflé all ready over here," Mrs. Granger said, grabbing it from the stove and placing it in the middle of the table, "Tuck on in."

"How was your stay in Australia over the summer?" Draco asked Mr. Granger as he dug out a good portion of soufflé for Hermione, and then himself.

"Quite relaxing," he said, "We've got a nice little house on the beach just outside Sydney. The food is wonderful and the Mrs. loves her evening strolls along the boardwalk."

"I haven't been to Australia since I was little," Draco said, "We had a house in Germany where we spent most of our holiday time and each year my parents would choose one new country for us to visit. Father always said the international portkey process was just a pain. Didn't like having to give his personal information to book them."

"It wasn't that difficult," Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Do you spend much time with his parents?" Mrs. Granger asked Hermione, "Seeing as Draco's still home?"

"We don't really run into them much," Hermione said offhandedly.

"My father isn't the easiest person to get on with," Draco said, putting it nicely, "And the Manor is large enough to give us our own space."

"Manor," Mr. Granger repeated with a little laugh, "That sounds grand. How many rooms does it take to be considered a manor?"

"Well there are seventeen guest bedrooms," Draco said dryly.

"Seventeen guest bedrooms?!" He exclaimed, "Well now I've got to know more. What else have
you got at the manor?"

"Let's see, there's also two dining rooms, a ballroom—"

"The most beautiful library I've ever set eyes on," Hermione couldn't help but gush a bit.

"Five sitting rooms, the Quidditch practice room, the grand piano room, the wine cellar—"

"The what?" Hermione said, "I've never seen the wine cellar."

"Where did you think all the wine comes from?" He smiled.

"I certainly think it earned the Manor title," Mr. Granger looked somewhere between awestruck and amused.

"Mum you would just love the gardens," Hermione turned to her mother, who was smiling brightly at them, "There are these... fairies... they're like little fireflies, and they give off fairy dust that almost glows. They've collect some of it into jars that line the gardens at night. It's magical."

"Sounds like it," Her mother couldn't help but notice the joy on her daughter's face when they interacted. It warmed her heart. She saw the spark she'd never seen when she was with Ron. Ron had been her comfortable content companion, but Draco brought out the passion in her.

"But the manor has been in our family for centuries," Draco shook his head, "It's not like we did anything special to make it what it is," he didn't want to come off like a brat.

"It's just so interesting," Mr. Granger said, "Never heard of anything like that."

"Gave me a bit of a big head when I was younger," Draco looked over at Hermione with a grin.

"Sure did," she returned the look.

Draco turned back to her parents, "So Hermione says you're dentists, I'd love to hear about that," he'd practiced saying the word 100 times in the last week so he didn't sound like an idiot.

Mr. Granger gave him a wry smile, "We clean teeth and do dental surgeries. Hermione's told us you all take care of that with magic so I'm sure it sounds silly."

"Not at all. She explained it like a healer for teeth and how all sorts of things can happen to muggle teeth. Seems quite crazy really. Gingivitis sounds like a nightmare. And I heard a boy bit you once."

"He did indeed," Mr. Granger nodded at the memory, "She does love that story."

"It was quite funny, dear," Mrs. Granger gave him a cheeky look and he sighed lightheartedly, "Alright, time for Christmas presents! Meet in the living room." She cleared away the breakfast plates and wandered into the other room while Hermione ran up to grab theirs.

They all reconvened on the couches a few minutes later and Draco stood, "This is just a little something to both of you from my parents and I," he said, handing a bag to Mrs. Granger.

She pulled out a large bottle of a deep red liquid labeled Rosmerta Mead.

"It's an aged Mead bottled by a close family friend of my mother's. I enhanced it a bit with a colorless charm so that it wouldn't stain teeth."
Mr. and Mrs. Granger both smiled broadly at him, "That was very thoughtful," Mrs. Granger said, "I'm sure this will be delicious, haven't had a good mead in a long time. Thank you, and please tell your parents thank you for us as well."

"And this is from me," Hermione said, handing her parents an envelope and shooting Draco a wink for his well-executed gifting.

"Theater tickets!" Her mother said excitedly, "This will be wonderful, Hermione, thank you."

"There's a play coming to the West End Theater we've been wanting to catch," Mr. Granger told them, "Only playing for a couple of months so this is great motivation to get over there."

"Alright, sweetheart, here's a little something for each of you," Mrs. Granger handed a box to each other them.

Hermione opened hers to find a biography on the new muggle Prime Minister and a crimson woven blanket, "Thank you, mum, this is lovely," she ran her hand across the blanket, which felt soft and warm under her fingers.

Draco opened his box and pulled out a green cashmere sweater and he looked impressed, "Thank you, this is very nice," he turned to Hermione, "I'll have to find a reason to get dressed up and take you out now".

"Or, a reason to stay in and read books in the den," she held up her blanket with a smile.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger exchanged their gifts and Draco pulled a large envelope from behind him as Hermione pulled a smaller envelope for him.

Draco opened his first and pulled out two tickets to the next Cannons match, "Granger, are you going to watch Quidditch with me?!"

"Yes," she sighed, "Christmas is the giving season," she leaned in and kissed him before opening the envelope in her hands and pulling out a few pieces of worn parchment. She looked at it, confused, until she read heading, clapping her hand to her mouth, "Draco! But… how?!"

Draco's lips split into a wide grin, "I sent an owl to McGonagall a month ago," he said.

"What is it, dear?" Her mother asked, paying attention to them again.

"It's… well, it's the essay I wrote and turned in on my very first day at Hogwarts," she looked stunned and a bit beside herself.

"I had asked McGonagall if she had any of your old papers from first year, I thought it would be something sentimental, and then she sent me this and I realized I'd hit the jackpot. Apparently," he addressed her parents, "She had written an essay on the three main things she was looking forward to learning in her first year of Transfiguration and what she wanted to do in the future that would utilize those skills because, and I quote, 'the things we learn in our first year of study in any subject become the stepstones of everything we will come to learn.'"

"You're quoting my essay!" She laughed, "Draco this is crazy, how did she even find this?"

"Well, funnily enough, she also told me there was no essay of the kind due on the first day of classes and you marched in and handed it to her, telling her about the reading you'd done over the summer on first year transfiguration spells and wanted her to know you were serious about your studies. She was so taken aback she put it aside in a safe place because she had a feeling you'd be..."
someone important one day and she looked forward to returning it to you then. I think she felt now was that time."

Hermione was speechless, staring at the words of an aspiring witch, and felt tears well behind her eyes, "Draco, this is very special."

She looked over and her mother had tears in her eyes as well. She handed the paper to her, "Look how eager I was," she laughed before turning back to Draco and throwing her arms around his neck, pulling him in for a tight hug, "Thank you for this."

They spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon with the Grangers before it was time to pack up and return to the Manor.

"Here you go, darling," her mother handed her a large platter filled with cookies and wrapped in plastic with ribbons around it and a large bottle of champagne.

"These are for the Malfoys. Send our well wishes. Cookies are homemade and the champagne is from our trip to Paris this fall."

"They will enjoy that very much," Draco said, taking the bottle of champagne from Hermione to carry.

"It was wonderful meeting you, Draco," Mrs. Granger pulled him into a hug.

"Thank you very much for having me, it's been lovely spending the holiday with you both," he told her, holding his hand out for Mr. Granger, who shook it, placing a hand on Draco's shoulder.

"Good luck with your studies. Hope to see you both again soon," he said with a nod.

Hermione embraced both of her parents warmly, "Happy Christmas," she said as they turned to leave.

"Safe… travels," her mother said unsurely with a little laugh.

They closed the door and a *POP* whisked them back to the Manor gates.

"I hope you had a nice time," Hermione said as they walked back up the path.

"Your parents are good people," Draco said, "It was a wonderful Christmas Day."

"It meant a lot to them, to me, that you came."

"I'm doing my best for you," he gave her a crooked smile, "You deserve the world and the least I can do is try to compartmentalize the negative thoughts I have and focus on what I can control to give you as much of the world as I'm capable of."

"I love you," she said as they reached the main doors, "I read the book you gave me on post-war trauma and what it's like for people who were on the other side. I know you're trying and I hope you find a way to keep your present and future in the front of your mind, more than your past."

He cupped her face in his hands, if he was going to give this relationship a real chance, he had to give her all of him. "I love you, too," he said the words firmly, "If there is ever going to be a chance for us, I know I need to start telling you that more often."

Her breath caught at his words and she smiled bigger than she may have ever smiled, "That was a good start," she said, leaning up to kiss him, molding her body against his as she kissed him deeply,
letting the world melt away.

And then the door opened.

"Oh!" Narcissa exclaimed as they broke apart, "I'm sorry, that was not ideal timing," she said, "I heard the alarm for the gates and was getting worried you'd lost your way up the path."

Draco grinned at her, "Found our way just fine, mother."

Hermione looked a bit embarrassed but managed a smile to Narcissa as she handed her the cookies and Draco handed her the Champagne, "This is from my parents."

Narcissa took the gifts with a smile, eyeing their Christmas sweaters and stepping aside for them to come in, "That was very sweet of them."

"The champagne is from their last trip to France."

"Nothing quite like French bubbly," Narcissa said as they walked through the entrance hall, "Dinner will be brought up from the kitchens in about an hour, we'll serve it with Champagne tonight. You can get ready and meet us in the main dining room."

Draco and Hermione went upstairs, showering and cleaning themselves up. Draco had already warned her that Christmas dinner at the Malfoys meant evening attire, which she had scoffed at until he reminded her that he had just worn a grandma sweater to the Granger Christmas breakfast. So in the name of fairness Hermione slipped into the green lace dress that Draco had bought her for their night out after his trial. It seemed appropriate for Christmas, and she had sworn to him she'd rewear it and make the purchase worth it, to which he'd rolled his eyes.

"Just as stunning as the first time I saw you in it," he said as he walked out of the bathroom, taking in her appearance.

"Personally, I liked you better in the Christmas sweater, but the one my parents gave you is nice too," she said, trying not to stare and give herself away. Green did suit him well.

"I thought it'd be fitting to wear tonight. Now come, an invigorating evening with my parents awaits," Draco held the door open to her with a wink and she took a deep breath and marched through as they descended the stairs for dinner.

"You look very nice," Narcissa said to Hermione as they walked into the dining room, "The necklace is beautiful with that dress."

Hermione's hand automatically moved to the diamond hanging from her neck and she smiled timidly, "It's quite beautiful all on its own," she said, "I'm certainly not used to jewelry like this."

"You wear it well, dear," Narcissa said, and they all took their seats, "Lucius will be down in a moment. How was your time with your parents?"

"Very nice," Hermione said, "They were so happy to meet Draco and spend some time catching up. We told them all about the action of the last few months. Makes them feel a little more a part of my world."

"Must be hard for muggles to understand," came Lucius's drawl as he entered the dining room, "A bit beyond their comprehension."

Hermione gave him an expressionless look, "They've been hearing about it for such a long time
now that it's almost normal for them, actually. They've always been incredibly supportive of my life in the wizarding world."

"Lucius," Narcissa gave him a perturbed look, "Christmas dinner will be out shortly."

Lucius took a seat at the head of the table, giving his wife a forced smile, "Alright, darling."

Marty entered with the bottle of champagne from the Grangers and popped it open, pouring a glass for each of them before she headed back to the kitchens.

"Happy Christmas," Narcissa held her glass up, "This year we are thankful to spend Christmas together, with Draco free, after a long year of uncertainty. We are also thankful," she glanced at Lucius pointedly, "That you were there supporting him through everything, Hermione."

Draco took her hand under the table and they smiled at each other as they raised their glasses, Lucius the last to raise his, but knowing better, he didn't object. They all took a sip of their champagne and Lucius inspected it through the glass, "Very good champagne," he said, and Hermione accepted that as 'Thank your parents for the champagne.'

"Did you hear that Draco was presented with an award at the Ministry holiday party?" Hermione said to Narcissa, planning to just ignore Lucius as much as she could.

"No, I didn't," Narcissa looked at Draco with bright eyes, "What did you receive an award for?"

"Order or Merlin, First Class," he said, "The Head Auror nominated me for it and it was backed by the Head Detective and Minister for Magic. It's for the help I provided to take down Pansy and her new Death Eaters."

Narcissa looked at Lucius, her eyes illuminated, waiting for his reaction.

Lucius looked at Draco, hesitating a moment before speaking, "I'm very proud of you, son."

"I don't fully think I deserve it," Draco said, "But it felt like a nice gesture."

"You absolutely deserve it," Lucius said, "You've brought a bit of respect back to our family with your actions. Something to be very proud of."

Lucius was not going to give more emotion than that, but Hermione could tell he was incredibly proud of Draco.

"How about you tell us a little about what you did on your last missions," Narcissa said, seemingly content with Lucius's response, "We haven't heard any details since the giant mission."

Marty brought out dinner one course at a time and they ate as Draco and Hermione recounted the mission to Borgin and Burke's and the dragon caves, again.

"How did it feel, bringing Pansy in?" Narcissa asked Draco, sounding a bit sad.

"Not great," he said, "But I knew enough about who she'd become to know it was the right thing. She wasn't Pansy anymore."

"The power changes you," Lucius said quietly, "She was a good girl, I'm sorry to hear she got wrapped up in the power struggle."

After dinner, Marty cleared the plates and Draco indicated that it was time for presents.
"We told Draco he'd be in a lot of trouble if he got us anything this year," Narcissa said, "After the year he's been through."

"As your gift, I obliged," Draco said, a bit disappointed.

Narcissa handed a small box to Draco and a larger one to Hermione.

Hermione opened hers, a bit shocked they had gotten her something, but Narcissa did seem the type. She pulled out an old looking book that read: *Hogwarts: A History*.

"It's the first print," Narcissa said, "There's some papers bound together in the back," Hermione pulled the pages forward, another fifty pages or so that were bound together between leather covers with a heavy string, "Those are Bathilda's original notes and research she had done while writing it. This version is a lot longer than the course book, the academic editing process cut out a lot of what it didn't think was pertinent, but Draco's told us what a big reader you are and we've had this in the library for a long time, I thought it would be something you'd enjoy."

"I... I love it," Hermione said excitedly, "This is fascinating," she flipped through the pages in the research section, all hand-written with a kind of magical lamination over them to protect from additional wear.

"Alright, alright, you can read it later," Draco grinned at her and she stacked the book back on top of the notes with a smile back.

Draco unwrapped the gift from his parents, opening the small box to find a key. He took it out of the box, looking at his parents questioningly.

"It's the key to the house in Germany," Lucius said, "It's yours now."

"Mine?" Draco repeated, "Like for a vacation?"

"The house is in your name now, to do whatever you'd like with," Narcissa said, "If you'd like your own space, you can live there. If you'd like to keep it for holidays, you can just use it for that, but the house is yours. You're an adult now and you've been through so much. Until we're gone and the Manor passes to you, it only makes sense to give you the house in Germany."

Hermione did her best not to laugh at the thought of his parents feeling it was his right to just *have* a house. But it was a very sweet gesture.

Draco grinned, "This is amazing, thank you. Granger, I'll have to take you there sometime soon."

"Of course," she laughed, "Sounds wonderful."

"Well, happy Christmas to you both," Narcissa raised her new glass of champagne to them, assuming the gifts were over.

"I've got a little something for you all, actually," Hermione said, pulling an envelope out from her small bag she'd brought down.

"You didn't have to get us anything," Narcissa told her with a shake of her head, "Same rule for Draco goes for you."

"It didn't cost anything," Hermione assured her, "But I wanted to do something."

Narcissa took the envelope and Lucius watched with a bored look as she opened it, "Oh my..."
Lucius," she breathed, handing it to him.

He looked warily over at Hermione before he grabbed the piece of paper from Narcissa and read it over. Narcissa reached across the table and grabbed Hermione's hand that was resting by her glass. Draco looked over at her with a confused glance, he had no idea she'd done anything at all.

Lucius looked up, "How did you do this?" He asked, stunned, his eyes more open than she'd ever seen them. Not welcoming, but almost broken out of their emotionless, cold trance by the words on the page.

"It's not a complete reversal, obviously," she said, "But it's an extension of premises, meaning you won't be confined to only the Manor. It extends the premises of your home to mean the gardens, the Quidditch Pitch, and yard as well. Anything within the Manor gates."

"You can get fresh air again, Lucius," Narcissa said, her voice quiet but full of unbelieving excitement, "We can walk the gardens and have wine in the gazebo. You can watch Draco fly around the pitch like you used to love."

Draco's head whipped around to look at Lucius, mouth hanging open slightly in surprise.

Lucius nodded slowly, still unsure what to say to Hermione, "This is..." he looked at her, "This is a gift."

"Your interview led us to some of her followers early on," Hermione said, "Think of it as a thank you for your cooperation with the Ministry."

With the champagne finished off, Marty returned with a fresh bottle of port that she poured for each of them and Hermione opened the plastic wrap on the tray of cookies, grabbing one for herself and passing a few down the line for everyone to try. With their port and cookies, they took to the gardens, enjoying their first Christmas stroll through the flowers in almost six years.

"That was very thoughtful," Draco said to her as they lagged a bit behind his parents, "Lucius has never even been nice to you."

"Your mother has been, though, and I thought it would mean the world to her to be able to do little things like this with her husband again. And Lucius did tell the Ministry what he could during the interviews. I thought that might be enough to sway the new Head Auror to lighten his sentence just the slightest."

"It'll mean a lot to both of them," Draco said, stopping and pulling her to him. His eyes shone down at her in the moonlight, almost as bright as the glowing fairy dust that lined the flowers at their feet, "I am very lucky to have you."

"You may scoff a bit, but I feel exactly the same, Draco," she smiled up at him and he leaned down for a soft kiss, or two, or three.

"Happy Christmas, Granger."

"Happy Christmas," she kissed him once more before they turned, his fingers interlacing with hers as they sipped their port and followed the Malfoys through the winding garden paths in back of the Manor.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
A/N: Hope you enjoyed the holidays with Draco and Hermione!
Return to Hogwarts

The month of January was a cold one in England. The ground was covered with snow and their evenings were filled with hot chocolate, spiked with a bit of firewhiskey, and spent wrapped under a blanket together on the couch in the den with books in hand.

Lucius had been less curt with Hermione, even going so far as to say hello when she walked into a room and to keep the snide comments to himself. He wasn't pleasant by any means, but the gesture was there that he was appreciative of what she'd done for him and his cordial acknowledgement of her presence was a step in the right direction.

They made time one weekend to visit the giant towns. Bosch had been elated to see Hermione again and they sat at the fire pit in the middle of town as he told them about the new life for the giant tribes and all of the positive impacts it had. Some of the female giants were pregnant, meaning their lines would live on, as close to extinction as they had been before the move from the caves.

Another weekend, Draco had taken Hermione to the Malfoy house in Germany. His house. They'd read books on the balcony, overlooking the crystal clear lake. The Alps had been visible in the distance; the snow caps captivating. They spent some quality time enjoying the bedroom in a house where his parents were not a few doors down and neighbors were not a wall away. They'd quipped about what life would be like to live there year round, together. All conversations hypothetical, of course, but the most forward-thinking Draco had ever been with her. It seemed as if he'd been serious about giving their relationship a real shot and Hermione had never been so happy, so comfortable, or so deeply in love in her life.

The next weekend, Hermione had taken Draco to the Quidditch match she'd bought tickets for, the last of the season before the Chudley Cannons' winter break, and they watched Ginny lead the chasers on the Cannons to a victory. As much as she didn't care for Quidditch, she had a wonderful time watching Draco, who was so invested in the game, describing what was happening feverishly, eyes glued to his omnioculars as the players flew above their heads, cheering when points were scored and rubbing his hands on his face when they lost the quaffle. After the match, they'd met Ginny in the locker rooms where she introduced them to the other players on the Cannons. Luckily, Draco had met enough celebrities in his life that he kept his cool as he shook their hands, and waited until they were on their way home to go into which were his favorite players and the moves he loved watching them perform. Draco had also gone out for drinks with Harry that weekend and came back in quite a good mood, to Hermione's relief. They got on quite well, Draco going so far as to say he thought of Potter as a friend now. A friend who had suggested drinks as a normal occurrence in the future.

Near the end of January, they made a trip out to Diagon Alley to pick up some supplies to bring to Hogwarts, something Draco had wanted to do as a donation to the school, an apology of sorts, from the Malfoys. They purchased the entire set of Transfiguration course books for years one to seven, which the Headmistress would take off the list of items for the upcoming classes to purchase themselves.

As they wandered the streets, hand-in-hand, the coursebooks packed snugly in the small bag of Hermione's, they talked about their upcoming trip to the school casually.

"I bet McGonagall will be happy to see you," Hermione said, "After requesting such a sentimental gift for me and pledging to provide the Transfiguration course books."
"I think Hagrid will be happy to see me, too," Draco said confidently, "I think we built a good relationship during our month with the giants."

They rounded the corner and an older wizard bumped Draco's shoulder, muttering something under his breath. Draco was able to make out a couple of choice words and stopped in his tracks, "Excuse me?" He said to the man, a few steps away now.

The man stopped, turning around with a grimace on his face, "I said, it's a pity to see such a promising witch in the presence of a Death Eater like you. You may have the Ministry fooled, but the rest of us, we know who you really are," he turned to Hermione, "Better off with a dementor than a Malfoy."

"People change," Hermione said firmly to the man, refusing to give into his incivility.

"Don't," Draco said to her.

The wizard pulled up his sleeve, revealing a bare arm, "Let's see yours Malfoy, let's see if that changed."

"Let's just go," Draco said darkly, pulling Hermione's hand.

"No," Hermione said, turning back to the man, "Draco just helped save the wizarding world from falling to the Death Eaters again, how dare you speak to him that way. You clearly don't know him or what he's been through."

"We all remember how the whole family used to strut about, Dark Marks on their arm and a bag of galleons jingling loudly for all the world to hear. He's only pretended to change because he knows how far they fell. Well, Mr. Malfoy, I don't buy it. You'll always be a Death Eater to anyone with a brain."

There was a small crowd watching the exchange now and Draco let go of Hermione's hand, looking like his demeanor was about to break, fire behind his eyes, "Let's go," Draco said again to Hermione through gritted teeth.

"It's incredibly rude, what you just did," Hermione said, turning from the man to follow Draco, who was walking away.

"You should distance yourself while you can, Detective Granger," the man's voice called after them.

Once around the corner and away from the onlookers, they apparated back to the Manor and Draco walked through the gates, Hermione having to catch the gate before it closed to slip in after him, "Draco, come back here."

"Go home, Granger. I need to be alone."

"Draco, just wait a minute," she rushed to catch up with him as he stormed down the path.

"Granger," his voice was icy as he turned around, "I don't need you fighting my battles. My past is always going to follow me, no matter how hard you want to pretend it won't. Please, just let me have some time."

"To what, brood by yourself?" She said incredulously, "Let's just talk for a minute."

"I can't right now, please," he gave a frustrated sigh, "Give me some time to be angry without
taking it out on you."

Hermione was silent for a moment before she nodded, thinking again about the book he'd given her to read about the post-war psychology of the 'other side' and what he needed when he was triggered, "Alright. Can I come back tomorrow?"

"Give me a couple of days," he said quietly, "You can come back some time next week. I need to push you away right now."

"I know," she said sadly, walking up to him and kissing his cheek, "I'm always an owl away."

She turned and left, a tear falling from the corner of her eye and streaking down her cheek as the gates opened for her, Draco likely opening them from afar.

When she'd apparated away he walked into the Manor, slamming the door behind him and just standing there for a moment, his heart racing with anger and a tinge of sadness at sending Hermione away.

"Draco?" Came his mother's voice as she stood from the dining table, "Draco what happened, come in here."

Draco walked into the dining room, his hands balled into fists, "We were in Diagon Alley," he started, trying to take a deep breath, at least his parents would understand, "Someone decided they had a few words for an ex-Death Eater."

"Oh, darling," Narcissa walked over and hugged her son tightly as Lucius sat in his chair at the head of the table, staring at the glass of wine in front of him with a sullen look on his face, "Draco, you need to tune them out."

"He made it a spectacle for the entire street to hear," Draco said, "Granger was there. He told her she shouldn't be with me. I hate that I agree with him. I told her I'd give this a real shot. I can't give this a real shot and agree with someone that thinks she shouldn't be with me."

"What did Hermione say?" Narcissa asked quietly.

"Oh she told him off, like you'd expect. Defended me," he closed his eyes for another deep breath, "Not something she should have to fucking do."

"Not something you should ever have had to do," came Lucius' voice, "I'm sorry, Draco."

"Father, this has nothing to do with how I became what I was," Draco looked at him, knowing his father must feel some degree of exactly what he was feeling right now.

"Where did Hermione go?" Narcissa directed the conversation back to her.

"I told her to go home," he said, "I need some time to deal with this on my own."

"You need to let her in sometimes, Draco, when it comes to your demons, if it's ever going to work."

He heard Lucius heave a loud sigh but didn't turn to look at him, "I don't want her to see me like this. I don't want to say out loud the things I feel when that happens. She's too pure to understand, to empathize. It just feels like pity."

"It's always going to," Lucius said quietly.
"She loves you, Draco," Narcissa said, holding his hand tightly in hers, "She doesn't pity you, she believes in you."

"I need to be alone," Draco said, pulling his hand gently from his mother's, not wanting to upset her, but feeling the anger starting to bubble below the surface again. Of course Hermione believed in him. That was the worst part of it all.

Draco left the dining room, heading for the den as Narcissa took a seat at the dining table, "I wish I could take the anger away from him," she said to Lucius.

"I wish I could as well."

"I know you don't approve of the girl, but they love each other," Narcissa grabbed his hand, "They love each other unconditionally. Like we did when we were their age."

"I know. I see that they love each other and it's not just that I don't approve," Lucius said in a mocking tone, "It's that I think when these things happen — and they will continue to, no matter how much I wish I could make it stop — when they do happen, it'll hit him harder, being with her. Because she never will understand and he'll blame himself more. If he were with someone that could empathize with his past, I think he could set the feelings of anger aside a little. She brings out the best in him, I can admit that. But when his demons come out, I think it cuts deeper knowing that the person he loves has such a pure past in comparison. And the worst part, Narcissa, is that I know deep down that it's not his fault, but mine."

"Lucius I wouldn't have changed a thing that happened if it meant losing you," she said sweetly and his lip curled up in the slightest way.

"I know you wouldn't."

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

February brought the continuation of grey skies over England. After a few days at home, Hermione had returned to the Manor, hesitant of the state she would find Draco in, but he was surprisingly normal, trying his best to seem as though nothing had happened, although there was a certain spark that was missing behind his eyes. He'd thanked her for giving him some time and had embraced her tightly, promising that he'd worked through what he'd needed and was fine. She didn't push him, knowing maybe he just needed a little more time to get fully back to normal.

It took a few more days to settle back into their routine and for Hermione to feel the calm again. She'd tried to bridge the gap with a very intense and intimate night of activities and had been more than pleased to see that their physical connection had not been impacted in the slightest. His passion for her was evident and his kiss as lush as it had always been. Afterwards, he'd said the words again, that he loved her. She felt them, but she felt something else along with them, uneasiness; the same she'd felt before he'd told her he'd give their relationship a real shot. Not that the words weren't true, but that he didn't know if he should say them. She tried to put it to the back of her mind, he was openly telling her that he loved her and the last week had been difficult.

As a welcomed shift in focus, the time had come for their group trip to Hogwarts, for which details had been solidified over the last few weeks. Draco and Hermione, along with Luna and Ron, all met at Harry and Ginny's that morning, Harry welcoming them brightly as they came out to join them.

"Lovely day for a trip to Hogwarts," he said, "So glad everyone is coming."
It was another cold, grey day and Draco laughed, "Yes, beautiful day, indeed."

They apparated to Hogsmeade where they walked the trail up to the school, met by Hagrid at the gates.

"Good ter see yeh," he said, hugging each of them, including Draco, who wasn't quite used to his bone-crushing greetings yet.

They walked up through the grounds, talking amongst themselves, Draco finally acting as normal as Hermione had seen him since their trip to Diagon Alley. Something about being around the rest of her friends seemed to bring him back into his current reality. She guessed it was because they treated him like one of the group now. Whatever the reason, his eyes were light again and he threw his arm over her shoulder, kissing the side of her head as they followed the gamekeeper, catching Hagrid up on the events of the last couple of months. When they reached the lake, he broke off, "Got to run to the cabin to le' Fang out, but you kids enjoy the grounds an' I'll meet yeh up at the castle for lunch."

They sat by the lake, using a heating spell to clear a bit of snow from the ground first. Harry reminisced about the few weeks back at Hogwarts that he and Ginny had been dating and how they'd spent them down by the lake.

"Such a sweet memory," Hermione said and Ron rolled his eyes, fake gagging.

"Hard to forget the first few weeks of you dating my sister," he said, "It was like my brain fighting between wanting to punch you in the nose and wanting to go whooping around the grounds that she was dating a decent human that I didn't need to punch in the nose."

They all laughed, "If you'd punched Harry in the nose, I'd have punched you right back," Ginny said feistily, "Probably for the best that you didn't."

"Dean was a good lad, too," Harry said with a laugh.

"Yeah, but they were snogging all over the castle, weren't they? I wasn't a big fan of that."

"Alright, I think that's plenty of reminiscing on that," Ginny said with a sarcastic smile at her brother.

"Malfoy, how's it feel for you to be back here?" Harry asked.

"Well I was king of Slytherin for most of my time here," he said with comedic arrogance, "It's like being back in my castle."

Harry pushed his shoulder, "Get back off your high horse, you're here with a bunch of Gryfffindors."

"And a Ravenclaw," Luna said airily, "But really, just with friends."

Draco grinned at the girl, she was a weird one, but he liked her calling him a part of their friends, "Alright, alright," he sighed, "Really it's nice to be back here and not be that. Just be here and enjoy sitting by the lake, beautiful girl on my arm and good conversation around me."

"Now you fit in with the Gryffindors," Harry teased.

Neville joined them and Luna jumped into his arms, kissing him unabashedly before he set her down, a bit embarrassed, "Morning, everyone. Sorry I'm a bit late, Herbology club ran over today."
They all greeted him with hugs, Draco shaking his hand a little awkwardly, "Nice to see you, Longbottom."

They spent another hour down by the lake until Harry looked at his watch and stood up, "Since we're at Hogwarts, I think we should take some pictures, you know, so we can remember our trip." Everyone agreed and they walked up towards the castle a bit so it would be their backdrop, "Hermione and Malfoy, why don't you go first?"

"Sure, Harry," Hermione shivered slightly in the breeze as she and Draco walked a little closer to the castle. They'd never taken a picture together and some part of her felt a little nervous for some reason.

"Here, take my scarf," Draco offered, unwrapping it from around his neck.

"Ready you two?" Ginny called from a little further away, pointing a camera at them.

Hermione looked at the green and grey scarf as he took it off, "Uh-uh, Draco, I'm not putting on your Slytherin scarf," she laughed.

"Oh yes you are," he grinned back at her, throwing it over the back of her neck as a flash went off from the camera.

Hermione's head snapped over towards Ginny, "Hey, we weren't ready!"

"I know but it was kind of cute," she yelled back, "Okay, for real this time."

Hermione begrudgingly fixed the scarf around her neck, Draco smirking at her from the side while another flash from the camera caught their attention.

"Sorry, your face is just priceless," Ginny called over again, "For real this time, when you're ready."

Hermione shook her head and laughed, catching Draco's glance as they both turned towards the camera, arms wrapped around each other's waists.

"Say 'Looove,'" Ginny said in a sing-song voice.

They both gave an obligatory laugh, Hermione squeezing a little tighter with a broad smile while Draco's smile fell just the slightest, his free hand slipping into his pocket. The camera flashed again and Draco looked down at her, trying to push the negative thoughts of how she should love anyone but him out of his head, "Bet at least one of those is good," he said in Hermione's ear.

She leaned up and kissed him, "We tried our best."

"Alright, our turn," Ginny called, motioning for Hermione to come take the camera.

She grabbed it from her as Ginny walked up towards the castle, Harry walking behind her. As he passed by Hermione, he gave her a small wink, pulling something out of his pocket and clutching it in his hand as he threw his arm around Ginny, "Take a couple!" he said.

Hermione looked at him curiously before holding up the camera.

"Alright, first one — let's turn and look at each other and make funny faces," Harry said to Ginny. She laughed, agreeing as they prepared themselves.

"Count of 3!" Hermione called, "1-2-3!"
On three Harry and Ginny turned towards each other and Harry dropped down to one knee, presenting and opening a small box in his hand. Ginny’s hands flew to cover her mouth.

"Oh my gosh!" Hermione exclaimed, clicking the camera a couple more times as Harry said a few words they couldn’t hear to Ginny and her head nodded frantically up and down. He stood up and Hermione clicked the camera again as he picked her up and spun her around, her arms locking tightly around his neck.

"Did he just… propose?" Ron said from behind Hermione.

"I sure think he did," she smiled back at him.

"I had no idea. He didn't even tell me!"

Hermione turned back the other way where Draco, Neville and Luna were standing. Neville and Luna were clapping excitedly and Draco was standing there with a crooked smile, hands in his pockets, looking on as Harry and Ginny celebrated. He looked over as he felt Hermione's gaze and gave her a big grin, walking over closer, "Well this is exciting."

"So exciting," she breathed, "Now I understand why Harry wanted to get us all to Hogwarts so badly."

Harry and Ginny had walked back over and everyone was hugging each other. Draco shook Harry's hand firmly, clapping him on the back, "Congratulations Potter, happy for you both."

"Thanks, Malfoy," he grinned back, "I was sweating like a dog."

He moved on to Neville who pulled him into a big hug, Luna adding herself in as well.

When everyone had gotten the chance to congratulate them, Harry rallied them all together, charming the camera to go off to take a few different group photographs.

"I'll take a few of all of you," Draco said after the first couple, stepping out of the pack and grabbing the camera before anyone could object. He wanted them to have a nice group photo they could look back on later.

Afterwards, they made their way into the castle for lunch in the Great Hall, where Hagrid and McGonagall would be joining them with a celebration cake. They spent the rest of the afternoon at Hogwarts, enjoying the time together reminiscing on old memories and making new ones.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Harry and Ginny had thrown a large engagement party a few weeks later with a group of Aurors, the entire Chudley Cannons team, and a bunch of their friends from Hogwarts, as well as old professors, order members and the entire Weasley family. It had been an affair for the books, and the magazines. The Prophet covered the engagement at the bottom of the front page, though the reporters from the Sports column and the gossip column had fought hard for it.

Draco and Harry had been getting weekly drinks at the Hogs Head on Sundays, when Hermione was at the Ministry prepping for the week, something she inexplicably loved to do. Ron had even joined them once, reporting back to Hermione that Draco and Harry seemed to have an immediate connection as friends, something he didn't quite understand but that he found very funny. Harry had tried to explain that beneath everything, he and Malfoy were quite similar. They'd both spent their lives growing up in the spotlight of the wizarding world, both been highly impacted by the reign of Voldemort and both preferred to publically handle it with a sarcastic sense of humor while bottling up and internalizing the less glamorous aspects of what it was like to be in that spotlight. Plus they both loved Quidditch and had immediately slipped into an unspoken natural banter in conversation.

"If he hadn't been such a spoiled brat about picking sides that first day at Hogwarts, we may have actually been friends," Harry said as he, Hermione and Ron sat at lunch one day, taking a break from the administrative work that had flooded the Ministry.

"Also if he hadn't been a miserable pain in the arse for six years," Ron added in.

"Right right, I guess if you peel all of that back, we would have been friends," Harry laughed.

"Well I'm just glad you're getting on," Hermione smiled, "It makes life much easier to be able to share it with you both. How has he been with you, Ron?"

"Very pleasant, actually," Ron said, "We just talk Quidditch. He's been around it longer than Harry so he gets my references from the golden days of the Cannons."

"I think they're heading back into the golden days again with Ginny on the team," Harry said confidently, earning a scoff from Ron.

"They've still got a daft keeper, if you ask me. Bet he'll lose them the game one of these matches."

"There have been some close ones," Harry conceded.

"Well, it means a lot to me that you're taking Draco out," Hermione told them, "His mood has improved a lot from our run-in in Diagon Alley."

"I bet that one took a toll," Ron said, "Can't imagine someone calling me out in front of a crowd of people. Sounds like he handled it best he could've."

"Yes, I just feel like it made him reconsider us again," she sighed, "But I guess he's entitled to having doubts still. How is wedding planning going, Harry?"

"Oh Mrs. Weasley is doing most of it, much to Ginny's dismay. And Fleur is insisting on taking her dress shopping."
"She's ecstatic about that," Ron said dryly, "But she wants you to go with them some time next month."

"And we'll be sending out save the dates next month as well."

"Looking forward to it already," Hermione beamed at him.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

In March, Draco and Hermione made another relaxing trip to the house in Germany, this time for both leisure and business. They'd been doing walkthroughs of the house to decide how to redecorate the place a little more in his style and little less in his parents' and making lists of what they'd need to buy for their next visit. They also took the opportunity to explore wizarding Munich while they were in the country. Much like muggle Munich, there was a Butterbier Haus at every corner with boisterous and welcoming patrons.

Draco had invited Harry and Ron, along with Blaise and Theo, over one night while Hermione was dress shopping with Ginny, Fleur and Mrs. Weasley, to take a spin in the Quidditch practice room. Hermione had returned to the Manor that evening to a very disgruntled looking Lucius sitting in the dining room reading the Prophet.

"Granger," he nodded at her, "Draco and his… guests… are in the Quidditch room."

She could tell he was trying not to grit his teeth while he spoke and she had approached the Quidditch room to the sounds of whooping and laughing coming from within before pushing the door open, decently surprised to see all of the boys there together. She'd watched for a bit while they took turns riding the broom, dodging the faux-bludgers and throwing quaffles into the hologram hoops before she took off for her own flat that night, leaving them to enjoy some time together.

Draco and Hermione had made a few trips to Diagon Alley to pick up some accent decorations for the Germany house, some standing art pieces for the foyer and wall art to match. Another time they went to pick out furniture for the den. She could tell his senses were heightened as they wandered the cobblestone streets, almost expecting another altercation, but none came. He walked with his eyes directly ahead of him, as if trying to just get through the streets to the next store. At the end of their trips, they'd return back to the Manor to store their purchases until their next trip to Germany. She could tell he was trying his hardest to put it all behind him and be there with her, one hundred percent, but the brightness in his eyes had dimmed and she could tell that first incident in Diagon Alley had gotten in his head.

And then... it happened again at the end of March in a similar scenario. They'd been in town to pick out some new fixtures for the dining room, trying to take the style from Victorian to modern. They'd stopped into the Three Broomsticks for a quick drink when a woman at the table next to them watched as they sat, eyes wide at Draco, and immediately stood up and shooed her children to the front, picking a different table to eat at. Draco's gaze had followed her as they moved, pushing his chair back angrily and storming out of the restaurant, Hermione following close behind. This time, when they arrived back to the Manor, Draco again asking her to leave as he walked back in through the gates, she followed him.

"I know you want to be alone," she called after him, "But how are we ever going to keep moving forward if you push me away when this happens?"

Draco stopped, halfway up the path. It's what his mother had said to him. He loved Hermione, but he was still trying to protect her from the other side of him; the side that came out when he was
reminded of his past.

She walked up hesitantly as he stopped and he turned, his eyes blazing and heart racing and he looked at her, "I don't know," he said fiercely, "I just don't want you to fucking see me like this. That woman moved her children away from me like I was going to harm them."

She took a step closer, gently placing a hand on his arm, "I want to see you through everything," she said softly, "The good and the bad. I've tried supporting you from afar, like you asked, but I can't stand to see you fight these battles on your own without at least trying to be here for you."

"Fine," he said, pulling his arm from her grasp and continuing his walk, "You can stay for the show if you really want to."

"It's not a show, Draco," she said, hurt, but determined as she followed him up the pathway.

He walked in, leaving the door open for Hermione as he stomped down the hall towards the den.

Narcissa was in the sitting room, standing from her chair in concern.

"It happened again," Hermione said sadly, "I just… wanted to be here for him."

Narcissa nodded without saying anything, knowing how difficult it must already be for the both of them, and sat back down as she watched Hermione follow her son.

Hermione heard glass crash against something as she stood outside the door, taking a deep breath before she pushed it open.

Draco stood in the middle of the room, a broken vase, along with the flowers it held, lay at the foot of the bookshelf, water dripping down the side wall.

"Why don't we sit, Draco," Hermione said quietly, "We can just sit and you can tell me what you're feeling."

Draco turned his face towards her, his eyes were the darkest she'd ever seen them and he looked like he might lash out at her at a moment's notice.

"How do I feel?!!" He yelled, "Like a Monster. Like a fucking monster. I used to be apathetic when it happened, scoff at it even, but having you there, having you feel what it feels like to be looked at like that. It makes me angry, Granger. It reminds me what I am and what the world looks at me as."

"You're not a monster," Hermione said calmly, "You are a kind, loving man. You are funny and sweet. You are strong and determined. You stopped them from taking power again."

He was breathing heavily, but he wasn't throwing anything else… yet.

She took a step closer, "Don't," he said, "Just stay where you are."

"You're not going to hurt me, Draco," she said, taking another step towards him and watching as he clenched his fists.

"Please don't come over here," he said again, turning his face away from her.

She didn't listen, walking until she was in front of him and she tilted his chin up from where his stare was glued to the floor, "I love you Draco. I know you. Who they think you are is just something they've fabricated in their heads from headlines and uninformed judgment."
His eyes were burning through her. That look made her want to run, but she wouldn't.  

"You don't know who I was," he said darkly.

"I don't need to," her voice was firm, "People are allowed to change. The world is better for it. I've watched you grow and I love who you are."

"Have you ever thought that maybe you shouldn't?"

"No," her answer was simple and immediate, casual and pointed, "I thought about it once, when I learned everything in your past and at the end of it all I wanted was to be here to support you and to let myself fall in love with you."

An angry sound came from somewhere in his throat and he took a step backwards, turning and grabbing the whiskey decanter sitting on the desk and throwing it at the wall. It shattered, loudly, into a thousand pieces and Draco collapsed on the floor. They were both silent for a moment before angry tears fell from Draco's eyes, a coping mechanism he hadn't succumbed to before now, seemingly triggered by Hermione's presence to his outburst. If he had ended things then, if he had stopped her from falling for him, if he had stopped himself, this all could have been so much easier for her. But if he had, he never would have had this time with her.

Hermione walked over, falling to her knees, tears streaming down her face as well and she wrapped her arms around him, wanting to take the pain away. His hands came up to rest on her shoulders as he let himself give in to all of the emotions bottled up inside his chest. He didn't want to be a monster. He never had.

They sat there for a long time that night, not moving, the tears subsiding at some undetermined point. At the end of it, Draco found himself finally breathing normally, head resting in Hermione's lap as she combed her fingers through the hair wisped across his forehead.

"Let's go to bed," he finally said, looking up at her, "Let's put it behind us tonight."

She nodded, wrangling back her own hair as he sat up, standing slowly and holding out his hands to help her up.

"Evanesco," Draco pointed his wand at the floor, wet from alcohol and the water from the vase. As it dried, he flourished his wand again, "Reparo," he said at the decanter and then at the vase as they both started to piece themselves back together.

Hermione took his hand as the vase and decanter flew back onto the desk, whole once again, and they climbed the stairs to the bedroom.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Draco's return to normalcy was substantially quicker this time than it had been the last. It was like a horde of negative thoughts he'd kept inside for years had made its way out of him as they sat there together that night and had been replaced by this overwhelming appreciation for Hermione and what she brought to his life. They didn't talk about it; he didn't want to. But things had changed that night in a good way. They didn't just have this great relationship broken up by spurts of triggered anger and static space, they had a great relationship and a power to overcome the obstacles together.

Draco had returned to his weekly outings with Harry, and occasionally Ron, and things once again seemed steady.
"Draco, look what came in the post this morning!" Hermione said as she walked into the manor waving a card in her hand.

"What's that?" he asked, taking the card from her, "Ah, they've got a date!"

"August 15th. It'll be beautiful. At the Burrow, just like Bill and Fleur's wedding."

"Fleur, I remember her from the Triwizard Tournament," Draco commented.

"Of course you do," Hermione rolled her eyes, "She's part Veela."

"Don't roll your eyes at me, you went to the ball with Krum," he grinned at her, reading over the details on the card.

"Would you like to read for a bit in the den?" Hermione asked as they walked down the hall.

"Maybe later," he said with a bit of a twinkle in his eye, "Something upstairs I'd like to show you."

She tilted her head at him and he paused at the bottom of the stairs, pulling her close and kissing her. She could feel him smiling against her lips and she looked at him as they broke apart, "Alright, I'll bite, let's go."

"I hope you will," he said under his breath, just loud enough for her to get the gist of it and shoot him an eyebrow-raised look over her shoulder.

As they walked into the bedroom, Hermione was met by what looked like a hundred candles hovering about the room, the main torches unlit, leaving the atmosphere dim and romantic as the moonlight shone in the window.

"And what is this?" She asked, turning back to Draco, who was leaning in the doorway.

"It's a 'thank you', and an 'I'm sorry', and an 'I love you'," he said, pushing himself off the wall and closing the door behind him as he sauntered towards her.

"You think this is going to get me in the mood or something?" She asked playfully, her hands finding his waist when he was close enough.

"I do, yes," his confidence was tangible and it made her want to match it.

"It might be working," she said quietly, her hands slipping under the hem of his sweater and running smoothly up his chest. She took a step towards him, pushing him backwards slowly until the back of his thighs hit the bed and he lifted himself onto it, Hermione climbing on top of him as he moved back. It was a different view, hovering over him like that. She leaned down to kiss him softly, too softly and she heard him half-laugh and half-groan when her lips left his. Their eyes locked and she could see how badly he wanted to take control. But this was much too fun.

She kissed him softly once more, moving her lips across his cheek and down his neck, as he unbuttoned her pants with one hand, the other balled in her hair. She swatted his hand away and he looked at her with intrigue, moving his hand to trace across the bare skin on her pant line. She held her composure as she made her way back up his neck. She already felt the want to give in, but she wouldn't, not yet.

She kissed him softly once more, moving her lips across his cheek and down his neck, as he unbuttoned her pants with one hand, the other balled in her hair. She swatted his hand away and he looked at her with intrigue, moving his hand to trace across the bare skin on her pant line. She held her composure as she made her way back up his neck. She already felt the want to give in, but she wouldn't, not yet.

She moved back to pull his shirt up as he released his hands from her long enough to let it slip over his head before he all but ripped hers off. She trailed kisses across his collarbone and to his shoulder and she felt him tense under her, his hands now tightly gripping her waist.
"I know what you'd like," she said quietly in his ear.

"Then let me have it," he whispered back.

"I don't think I want to yet," her voice carried a tone of enjoyment that made him illicit a bit of a dark laugh as she captured his lips again, slipping her tongue smoothly into his mouth. Every time he tried to turn up the intensity, she'd pull back and kiss him softly again and she could feel — could feel — that it was having exactly the effect she wanted it to.

"How about now?" He asked as she unbuttoned his pants and moved her hands back up his chest.

"No, not yet," she kept her voice even and she could sense his tension. She kissed down his chest slowly, too slowly again, until her lips were grazing over his stomach.

"Nope, that's it," he said, his voice low and definitive as he pulled her back up to him, kissing her hard and flipping her onto her back, "You've had your fun."

She laughed a very Slytherin-like laugh and he kissed her again, pushing the remainder of his clothes onto the ground along with hers as quickly as he could.

"I'm going to make you regret that," he said, in a very unintimidating way, goosebumps popping up down her arms as he nipped at the soft skin on her neck.

His hands had moved down her body at some point, she wasn't sure when, but her skin burned in every place he touched and his lips finally reconnected with hers, her heart beating out of her chest as he pulled back the slightest bit, "Tell me, right now, what you want."

"You," she breathed, "Always."

His lips broke into that signature, annoying, taunting, cocky, electrifying smirk of his and he kissed her once more as he pushed into her. Her back lifted from the sheets and her hands twisted into his hair as he pulled her as close to him as she could get. There was something so pure about how the world melted away when they were connected like this. It was a moment where the only thing that mattered was the she was his and he was hers.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

They lay there for a while that night, tangled in the sheets, arms wrapped around each other and they talked. For hours, they talked. About the Germany house project, and the upcoming wedding, and the application for a Healers program Draco had received by owl post upon request that was sitting on his dresser, and who knows what else or if they'd remember everything tomorrow.

Hermione and Draco lay on their backs, legs draped over each other, "You know, we've been together over a year now," she quipped.

"Time has certainly flown galavanting around with you," he smiled over at her.

"How are you feeling about our relationship now?" She asked, not pressing, just conversationally, "I know you said you wanted to give it a real shot, and then all of those things happened on our outings, I guess I just wanted to ask what you thought at this point. If you see things moving forward or if all of the negatives are getting to you and moving us backwards."

He stared at the ceiling, hands behind his head as he thought about how to answer, "Sometimes I can see glimpses of a future together. Glimpses where we're traveling the world, seeing all of the sights and trying all the food. Where we're sitting in the den in the Germany house ten years from
now sprawled out reading books in a calming silence. Where we're talking over dinner and you're rolling your eyes at something inappropriate I've said for the hundredth time as these tiny, stubborn, curly-haired blondes are rampaging about the dining room demanding our attention," his lip curled up briefly before he sighed and turned his head towards her, "And sometimes I still look at you and think how unfair of me it is to want those things with you when your future is brighter without me pulling you into my darkness."

Hermione rolled onto her stomach to look at him, "Those things would make my future bright," she said lightly, her eyes soft and heart fluttering at the things he saw in their future, "You bring something to my life that I want to experience every day and I think it's unfair of you to take that away from me if they're things that you want as well."

His look was sad as he brushed his fingers through her hair, "But in a future with me I also see you taking on burdens that you don't need. Stares from people judging you for being with a Malfoy, whispers of the Dark Mark on my arm while we hold hands walking down the road… that doesn't seem fair to you."

"I think you need to let me decide what I do and don't care about in my future," she said, "Coming home to you every night would make it all worth it. This feels like a great love, you know. It feels like what you're supposed to strive for when you're looking for your person."

"Are you saying that you're desperately in love with me, Granger," he drawled.

"Yes," she said matter-of-factly, "Unequivocally. And you?"

"Hopelessly," he said with a small laugh, "I am hopelessly in love with you."

"They call that a great love in novels," she tilted her head at him with a coy smile.

"Passion, longing, something you'd fight with your whole heart for and go unabashedly into with a complete disregard of common sense," he returned her gaze, "I know what great love is, Granger. I feel it every time I look at you."

"Then stop letting yourself get caught up in how people might look at me because I'll tell you every time that I couldn't care less. Having you by my side… I could take on the world."

"You could do that on your own, too," he said, "But I like being by your side while you do."

She smiled at him, adoring the open side to his personality, "Do I make you happy, Draco?" she asked quietly.

"Happier than I've ever deserved," he leaned down and kissed her softly and she cuddled into his side, draping her arm over his chest.

"Then let go with me," she said as she closed her eyes, "Let us have that great love."

Draco rested his hand on top of hers and watched her silently that night as her breathing slowed and she drifted off to sleep. Maybe she was right. Maybe he had to accept that love could trump all of the little things that he saw as negatives. If they had each other, they could, indeed, take on the world. She'd already proved she could support him at his best and his worst. He smiled as he finally closed his eyes to join her in a restful sleep. She could be his and he could be hers. It could be that easy.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
A/N: You have now reached the 'create your own adventure' part of the story! To read the happily-ever-after version of The Look on the Platform, please continue on to Chapter 44: The Question and Chapter 45: Epilogue. To continue on to the not-so-happy ending of the story that is completely Deathly Hallows epilogue compliant, please proceed to our alternative ending, Chapter 46: Alternate Ending Ch44 and Chapter 47: Alternate Ending Ch45. All warnings for our alternate ending are included at the top of those chapters. If you do not want to read those chapters, please feel free to stop after chapter 45 and enjoy the Dramione HEA :)
The next morning, Hermione left bright and early for the Ministry and after a few more minutes of contentedly staring at the ceiling, Draco pulled himself from bed and headed for Diagon Alley in search of Blaise.

He wandered into Quality Quidditch Supplies where Blaise was positioning the newest Nimbus 2006 in the display case, "What in the world are you doing over this way? Here for the new model already?" he asked with a grin.

"No Blaise, I'm in Diagon Alley on another mission," he said with a smile broader and more genuine than Blaise had ever remembered seeing on his friend, "A shopping mission I will be needing the help of my best friend on."

Blaise looked at him curiously, his interest piquing, "Are you going to tell me what we're shopping for?"

"Oh no, I'd rather show you," he said, walking out of the store while Blaise got down from the show case and flipped the sign to 'CLOSED,' following Draco into the sea of shoppers.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Draco arrived home that afternoon feeling high.

"Draco, sweetheart, where did you get off to today?" Narcissa asked from the table, where she sat with Lucius.

"Diagon Alley to do some shopping," he said smoothly with that smile still plastered on his face, hopping lightly up the stairs two-by-two.

Later that evening, Draco returned to the dining room for dinner with his parents, his mood uncharacteristically bright.

"Is Hermione coming over tonight?" Narcissa asked as she daintily cut a bite of her food.

"She's over at Potter's tonight helping her friend with wedding plans so she won't be over until tomorrow," he said.

"I'll never get used to hearing that name being casually thrown around in this house," Lucius said with a shake of his head.

Draco gave a small laugh at the irony, "We're friends now, father, you'll get used to it eventually," he cleared his throat a little, wanting to talk with his parents about what was on his mind, "You know, things have been going very well with Granger and I lately. I've been thinking of asking her if she'd like to move to the Germany house with me. I figure we could get a license for an international daily portkey so she can commute to work and we can still visit everyone as though we're right nextdoor."

"Draco, that's a big step," Narcissa sounded excited for him and Lucius stayed silent.

"It feels like the right time," he said, "Seeing how she supported me through the most recent… events…," he said, avoiding talking about the last Diagon Alley mishap, "I think it showed me that I don't have to push her away."
"And what about how those mishaps impact her?" Lucius asked nonchalantly, "How are you feeling about that."

"I'm never going to feel great about it," he said, his high dampening the slightest bit, "But we talked the other night and she told me I need to let her decide what's important and what's not and at the end of the day she just doesn't care if it's something that's going to happen now and then because as long as we've got each other…” he trailed off, it sounded a bit silly to repeat to his parents.

"I think you should reconsider moving things forward until you've taken some more time to date each other and vet out these things that happen," Lucius said.

"I don't feel it needs more time, father," Draco was over Lucius's negativity, "We love each other. More than either of us can put into words. She saved me from a dark place in my life and supports my growth every day and I know I will do nothing but support and love her in return. We may have to deal with some of my darker days but if it doesn't bother her, then why should I deprive us of something we both want?"

Lucius considered his son, there was a large part of him that felt the need to warn him that he'd be making the same mistake he had when he was younger. Narcissa had been the love of his life and he'd brought her into his darkness and taken the chance at an easier life from her. But who would he have become without her? He may have slipped even further into the dark if not for her light begging him to stay afloat. Hermione was clearly his Narcissa and he could never take that light from his son when he had the chance for true love. Even if it was with... a muggleborn.

Lucius nodded slowly, "I'm sorry," he finally said, "You'll always have my support, Draco."

Draco felt there was more his father wanted to say and was grateful to him for stepping down and letting him make his own decisions, "Thank you, father," he paused, wondering if the opposition would come on his next statement, "When we move to the Germany house, if it's what she wants, I'm going to propose."

"Oh darling," Narcissa reached across the table and squeezed Draco's hand, "This is wonderful news. Is that what you were out shopping for earlier?"

Draco's lip curled up and he reached in his pocket, pulling out a velvet box and passing it across the table. Narcissa opened the box with a teary smile, passing the box to Lucius before getting up and walking around the table to hug him.

Lucius looked torn, his eyes completely expressionless, something Draco was sure he was doing on purpose to not show his true disappointment or frustration, or whatever it was he was suppressing. He nodded again, "I had a feeling you'd already considered that step in your first statement."

"O-o-o-o-o-o-o"

The next day, Hermione returned to the Manor after work. As she walked by the dining room, Lucius noticed the same dreamy look on her face that had been on Draco's for the last twenty-four hours.
"Evening, Granger," he called dryly into the hall.

"Evening, Lucius," she said back as she wandered to the den where Draco was sitting in his reading chair skimming through the Prophet.

He looked up as she walked in and his smile widened, "How was work?" He asked, setting the Prophet aside for her to climb onto his lap.

"We've got a mildly interesting case going on," she said with a light sigh, "But you're not a suspect, so I can't tell you about it."

"I think I prefer it that way," he said with a grin, his hand rubbing up and down her thigh casually, "How would you like to go for a walk out back? It's a beautiful night."

"Sounds lovely," she kissed his cheek before she hopped off of him and he stood to lead her into the gardens.

"I had something I wanted to talk to you about," Draco said, grabbing her hand in his to sway back and forth as they walked.

"Just you, me and the wind tonight," Hermione looked over at him with interest.

"I've been thinking I'd like to move to the Germany house," he quipped.

"Oh," Hermione furrowed her brows, "Like full time? Would I have to get some kind of special visa so I can visit?"

"I'd think you'd want to get a license for an international daily portkey," he nodded, allowing her to think on his words.

"In… case I want to come over more often?" She asked coyly.

"More like in case you want to get to work every day," he looked over at her and even in the dark she could see the gleam in his eyes.

She stopped and he stopped with her, "Draco, are you asking me to move there with you?"

Draco slipped a key out of his pocket and looked at her confidently, "Granger, will you move to Germany with me?"

Hermione's lips broke into an elated smile as she laughed, jumping on him and wrapping her arms tightly around his neck as he caught her around the waist.

"So is that a yes?" He drawled, setting her down again, her arms still locked around his neck.

"Yes," she said automatically, "Yes, when do we move."

"We could start this weekend," he suggested, her decisiveness dispelling any hesitations he had left, "Fill out the portkey paperwork, bring over all of the things we've bought recently and get it looking how we want it before we move all of our stuff there. There's no rush since I already own it, but we can aim to be fully in by May."

"You're sure this is what you want?" Hermione said seriously, "You're sure you're ready to move forward with me?"

"Yes," he said simply, without thinking twice, "If you're comfortable moving forward with me,
there's nothing else I'd like in the world."

Hermione leaned up and kissed him softly, their lips lingering a millimeter away from each other as they parted, eyes still closed as they savored this moment to look back on later.

"I love you, Granger," Draco said quietly.

"I love you," she kissed him once more before she finally pulled back and he grabbed her hand again.

"Shall we continue our walk?" He grinned.

"I'd follow you anywhere," she returned his look as they walked forward through the rows of flowers, discussing plans for the sitting room downstairs with a renewed excitement for their redecorating efforts.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

"Granger, what are you doing? You're a witch, levitate the boxes! You're going to throw your back out!" Draco said from the top of the stairs as Hermione carried a hefty box across the foyer.

"No reason to deprive myself of a little exercise," she called back, taking the box into their new den.

It had taken them a few weeks to make all of their trips, setting up new furniture and artwork, painting the walls (which was significantly easier to do with magic than Hermione remembered from the time she'd helped her dad as a kid), and moving all of their possessions to their new places. Narcissa had helped one weekend with the decorating, and Harry and Ginny had helped them with the painting so things had moved along quickly. Their house warming party was that evening and the last of the boxes were being moved and unpacked before they could officially say they were moved in.

It took the better part of the morning and afternoon, but by dinner time, Hermione was hanging the last pictures on the wall of the sitting room — the photographs they'd taken at Hogwarts just a few months ago now. They'd invited a few friends, Harry, Ginny, Ron, Blaise, Theo, Luna and Neville, and Narcissa and Hermione's parents to celebrate this next step with them for the weekend in Germany. Lucius had understood, of course, that he wouldn't be able to make it, but Hermione thought that it might be for the best for her parents to meet Narcissa before their inevitable run-in with Lucius.

Hermione had thrown on a casual green, flowy summer dress, accompanied by the sparkling diamond around her neck, and Draco was donning his sweater from the Grangers with a pressed pair of slacks.

"You make a gorgeous hostess," Draco said, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear as they sat, cuddled on the couch, in the den, relaxing before they welcomed their first guests.

"Tell me that again later and you might get what you're looking for," she raised her eyebrows playfully at him.

The doorbell rang and they looked at each other with a deep breath in and out. They'd invited their parents a bit earlier than everyone else, so they assumed it was either Narcissa, or the Grangers, for whom Hermione had booked flights, a car service and a wizard escort to get them to the house.

Hermione pulled the door open, revealing Narcissa… and Marty.
"I've brought you your house-warming present!" Narcissa said smoothly, ushering Marty in.

"Thank you, mother," Draco said, hugging her.

"Hello, Marty," Hermione bent down to talk to the elf, "It'll be lovely to have you living here with us."

"Marty is very excited, ma'am. Marty used to love joining the Malfoys for trips to the lake."

Hermione stood back up and Narcissa hugged her tightly, "You look wonderful, darling."

They lead Narcissa into the sitting room as she fawned over the decor, "It barely looks like the house it used to," she said, "It feels brighter in here. Must less like an ancient dark castle."

"That's what we were going for," Draco said, looking around at the space.

The doorbell rang again and Hermione and Draco excused themselves.

They greeted the Grangers, who looked a little out of place, but very excited.

"This is breathtaking," her mother commented, noticing the grand staircase as they walked through the foyer.

"We've been putting our own touches on it the last few months," Hermione said, "It's starting to feel like home."

Draco squeezed her hand in his with a smile and they entered the sitting room.

"Narcissa," Hermione said, "I'd like you to meet my parents."

"Lovely to meet you," Hermione's mother said, holding her hand out for Narcissa, who swept over to them, ignoring the hand and embracing her, kissing both cheeks.

"Wonderful to meet you. It's been such a pleasure getting to know your daughter."

Narcissa moved over and embraced Mr. Granger the same way before stepping back, Draco gesturing for everyone to sit.

"So exciting to finally see the house Hermione's been writing home about," her mother said as she poured tea for each of them from the teapot sitting on the coffee table, "It was so generous of you to gift it to Draco."

"We thought he deserved his own space after all he's been through," Narcissa waived it off, "I'm happy to see it coming together for them."

They talked for another hour, Mr. Granger unable to help himself from asking more about the Manor, before the doorbell rang again. Their guests arrived quickly after that, everyone getting their own personal tour of the house, which modestly boasted seven bedrooms, six bathrooms, two sitting rooms, one office den, one library, one half-completed new version of the Quidditch Practice room, a large entertaining kitchen and dining room, and a few breathtaking balconies, including the sprawling back patio that overlooked the lake.

Everyone had gathered in the dining room, talking animatedly about summer plans and enjoying the appetizers and wine as Draco clinked his glass to focus the attention.

"First off, we wanted to thank you all for going through the process of getting portkeys to join us in
Germany tonight," there was a rumble of chuckles and some confused looks on the Grangers as Draco continued, "My family and I have been coming here since I was little and a few months ago, I started being able to share this with Granger. Since then we've been making regular trips out here, and more and more it's began to feel like home, here together."

Hermione smiled at him with an endearing look as he talked, proud of how far he had come and how much he had accepted their relationship in the last few months.

"I think, perhaps, there's just one more thing to do to make it really feel like home now that our friends and family have joined us here."

Hermione tilted her head to the side, curious what he was up to as a few whispers echoed behind her before he held out his hand to her, "Granger, if you'll join me over here."

She gave him a look of amused skepticism as she took his hand and walked to his side.

Draco cleared his throat a little, aware of their audience, but focusing in on the woman in front of him. He let his eyes lock with hers and found everything he needed there. He'd prepared a little something to say, but that didn't seem to matter now.

"Granger," he smiled at the name coming off his lips, "I think the only thing that would make this house feel more like our home, would be a promise to each other for the future," Hermione was mentally reminding herself to breathe normally as she suddenly realized what was happening and her mouth parted in shock, "A promise to let go, completely," he was talking and she was trying to pay attention to the words, but they were meshing together in her overstimulated brain, "To support each other in everything life throws at us, through the dark and the light, and to never stop chasing this great love that we've found in each other."

It felt almost like she was watching the scene from somewhere else. Like a movie playing on the screen. She felt her eyes fill with tears and she did her best to blink them back, but felt a few stray happily down her cheeks.

Draco pulled a velvet box out of his pocket and Hermione's hands slowly raised to clasp over her mouth, her eyes moving rapidly between the box and his grin. He dropped down on one knee as excited gasps erupted around them and a camera clicked from somewhere. He opened the box and a beautiful, unnecessarily large, diamond ring stared back at her, "Will you spend the rest of your life chasing that with me?"

She stared at it, her eyes wide and her voice caught. It could have been a piece of string and she wouldn't have cared, because she knew that what he held out to her signified his commitment to letting go — of his past and of his doubts — and moving forward with her to build a life together.

"Granger?" He gave a laugh at her look of shock.

"Yes," she breathed, pulling herself back into reality, her ears tuning into the sound of clapping and whooping around them as Draco stood, pulling the ring from the box and sliding it shakily onto her finger.

He leaned down to kiss her soundly and she wrapped her arms around his neck, whispering, "You're more nervous than you let on," quietly so no one else would hear, when she finally found her words.

He chuckled, "But I sounded damn confident, didn't I."

He rested his forehead on hers, his hand running through her hair as they took a moment between
They finally turned back to their audience and everyone crowded in to hug them both, individually, together, it didn't matter, there were arms being thrown around them from every direction.

"Draco asked me a few weeks ago for your hand," her father whispered to her when he got his chance to congratulate his daughter, "I couldn't be happier for you."

Marty bounded into the room with two bottles of opened champagne and started pouring it into champagne flutes to pass around.

Ron was one of the last to make his way up to the couple and he hugged Hermione tightly, "Congratulations," he said earnestly, "I'm really happy for you."

"Thank you, Ronald," she pulled back, her look of pure bliss was evident on her face and Ron couldn't help but smile, moving over to shake Draco's hand.

"Treat her good," he said with a crooked smile, "We know you will."

"Thanks, Weasley. Glad you could be here to celebrate with us."

The group made a wonderful toast before enjoying their champagne and continuing on with their evening of new beginnings, Narcissa pulling Mrs. Granger aside to discuss potential wedding plans. Hermione didn't mind too much as it gave them a reason to bond.

In the fuss of it all, she glanced over at Draco, who was talking with Harry, a relieved grin on his face, and she felt her heart swell. It didn't matter what their future held, because she knew she would always be there to pull him out of his dark days and he would always fiercely support her in return. Her life would never be mundane, and it would never lack passion with him by her side. They would take on the world together; She would be his light and he would be her spark.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
A year later, they'd held a small wedding in the gardens at the Manor with close friends and family. Lucius had only griped about 'muggles in the house' once that evening, quietly, under his breath for no one else to hear, and for that, Hermione was thankful.

Draco had stood in the Gazebo, their friends lined in chairs through the rows of flowers, and Hermione had turned the corner into the aisle, arm in arm with her father, who had tried very hard to keep his eyes straight ahead instead of looking around at all of the oddities in their wizarding yard.

The moment she'd come into view, Draco's lips had split into a transfixed smile as everyone else faded away and she looked lovingly back at him. She was breathtaking in her white strapless lace dress, a halo of pastel flowers perched on her head, almost gliding towards him. It was like she really was his angel that had come to save him and bring him into the light. His smile broadened as glimpses of a future with this woman started to form in his head.

Mr. Granger handed her off to him with a firm shake of the hand before he went to take a seat next to his wife. Narcissa had grabbed Lucius' hand from the other side of the aisle and he squeezed hers, doing his best to give her some version of a grimace-y smile, head held high in support of his son.

The officiant had given a speech about love and commitment through the years, but neither of them heard many of his words as they stared into each other's eyes that afternoon, finding so much more there than they'd ever imagined. There was no doubt this was the love that people searched the world for. In that gaze, there was want, there was longing, there was a look that screamed *I'll do whatever it takes for you to be happy, and I'll do it with an unabashed disregard for logic.*

They had locked hands, the officiant waving his wand as a glowing white mist wrapped in an infinity circle around their wrists, binding them in marriage, before he had given the nod to kiss the bride. Draco had pulled her to him, ignoring their audience, and kissed her deeply as her arms snaked around his neck, leaning in to everything that lay ahead in their future together.

They'd danced smoothly around the dancefloor that Narcissa had created in the middle of the gardens, Hermione letting Draco lead as he twirled her and dipped her and held her close. They celebrated with their guests and danced all evening, returning to the Germany house — their home — in the wee hours of the morning for an unforgettable end to the night.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

The years ahead held the highest of highs they had ever hoped for, mixed in with some unavoidable lows as they maneuvered the obstacles that came with being a Malfoy after the war. As he had anticipated, there had been days filled with angry door slams and bottles thrown at walls in the heat of an uncomfortable run-in in town, which would be followed by words of support from his better half, who never failed to remind him who he was under it all. But for every one dark day, there had been countless late nights reading peacefully in the den; There had been monthly dinner parties hosted with friends and family, where wine flowed heavily and memories were formed; And there had been trips all over the world together, as they planned for what the next steps held.
Draco, ultimately deciding a life in the public eye as a Healer wasn't something he could go through with, had been coerced by Theo to apply as a financier at Gringotts, and was proud to say that, although it wasn't his passion, he was damn good at it. Hermione had been promoted to Head Detective seven years after the case that had put her in the spotlight, as Alden had taken over the position of Minister for Magic. As difficult as it was for her to let work out of her own hands, she was loving the new experience of watching others take on cases and grow as professionals as she focused on the cases that really piqued her interest.

They had two beautiful children, Scorpius and Adelinda, who had brought a new layer of joy, as well as learning and patience, into their hearts. In the next phase of their life, there were first words and broom rides, bedtime stories and family holidays, as their personalities bloomed, displaying some uncanny characteristics of their parents. There were play dates with the Potters, and loud, rambunctious evenings of little footsteps running around the dining room furniture while they talked over dinner. There were quiet nights of dropping the kids with their parents for a fancy dinner out, or a romantic evening at home, and there were adventurous nights of treating the kids to the local family pub in town and trying to hold their attention at the table for an hour.

Through it all, they found a new level of appreciation for each other, and the love they had to hold it all together in the craziness of every day life. There was never a night they didn't spend entwined, never a dark day that wasn't turned around, and never a kiss that didn't spark that something they couldn't explain.

**Nineteen Years After the Battle of Hogwarts**

"Draco, do you know where Adelinda's jacket is? It wasn't in the closet," Hermione said, popping her head around the corner, her hair going every which way this morning.

Draco looked up from the Prophet he was reading at the table with an amused smile, "It's in the library. She insisted you read her a story as soon as we returned from our dinner outing last night. She's got that feisty need for knowledge like her mother."

"That's right, of course!" Hermione said, walking briskly across the foyer as Adelinda, who was seven now, chased after her, going on about how fast she'd become on her broom lately from her lessons with 'Aunt Ginny'.

Scorpius hopped down the stairs, his trunk packed and thunking along behind him.

"All ready to go, son?"

"All packed and ready to make it on the train. Albus said he'd save me a seat," Scorpius said excitedly.

"Scorpius, sweetheart, can you wrangle your sister so we can grab our jackets?" Hermione asked, bending down to kiss the top of his head.

Scorpius looked over at Adelinda, who was now riding her toy broom in circles around the dining room, "I haven't learned magic yet, mum!" He said and she laughed, albeit a bit exasperatedly.

"Well, just watch her for a moment and we'll be right back."

"Did you hear back from Alden yet?" Draco asked as he helped her slip into her jacket in the next room, all sorts of crashes and screams of playful joy coming from the other room.

"Um, well, I talked with him yesterday," she said hesitantly, turning and placing her hands on his chest before noticing his look of concern and backtracking with a halfhearted smile, "We can talk
about it later, we should really get Scorpius off to the train."

Draco brought it up again as they made their way through King’s Cross, Scorpius running ahead and Adelinda holding Hermione's hand, skipping along beside them.

"I'm guessing it didn't go well if you don't want to talk about it," Draco said quietly, his hand on the small of her back as they traversed the crowd on a busy fall morning.

"Look, Draco, I knew there was a chance that someone else might be more qualified for it right now."

He scoffed, "You and I both know that's not true."

"They just… they decided to go with someone else," she sighed, bending down to explain to Scorpius how to get through the brick wall.

She stood back up and they watched as he took a running start before disappearing through the barrier.

"What did Alden say when he told you the news? And be honest with me," he was irritated, as she knew he would be.

"He did everything he could to put in a good word for me," she said, "But it wasn't totally up to him and the group, as a whole, wanted to go with someone else."

"You should have kept your own last name," he said darkly, "They're holding you back because you're a Malfoy. If you were still a Granger, you'd have been Minister for Magic already."

"I wanted to be a Malfoy," she reminded him, "And there's no way to know that," she waved him off, walking forward with Adelinda after Scorpius and through the barrier, Draco behind her.

"We both know it," he said as they emerged on the other side in a sea of wizarding families, "You deserved it."

"Draco, I am perfectly happy with my position as Head Detective," she said firmly, "I put my name out there and it didn't happen. It's okay."

"It's not," he said.

"Hermione!" She turned to see Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hannah across the Platform.

"Go on over, I just need a minute," Draco said, looking away with a huff.

Hermione looked at him for another second before she turned with a shake of her head, motioning for Scorpius to follow her and leading Adelinda over to the group, hugging them each hello before bending down to hug Lily, Harry and Ginny's youngest, and Rowan, Ron and Hannah's little boy.

"Albus and James are on the train," Harry grinned at her, "Is Malfoy coming over to say hi, or is he having his own party with some imaginary friends over there?"

"He's a little frustrated right now," she said, "He just needed a minute to calm down."

They all looked over and Draco caught their glance, giving them a curt nod before he looked away again. The unfairness of it was blinding. This is what he'd warned her about before they'd gotten engaged. These were the setbacks she could have avoided in her life.
“What’s he frustrated about?” Harry asked.

“I didn't get the Minister for Magic position,” she said with a look Harry and Ron both understood, "And it’s okay because I love my job, but he's taking it on himself again."

“He'll be alright in a couple minutes,” Harry told her reassuringly, "He always gets over it. I was telling him just the other day that you’d be happy with either outcome."

“Mum, I'm going to miss the train!” Scorpius pulled at her arm.

“Alright, sweetheart, I'm sorry, let's get you on there,” she said with a smile, turning back in Draco's direction and flagging him down, motioning to Scorpius. He nodded, taking one more heavy deep breath before walking over to join them.

“Malfoy,” Harry clapped him on the back in greeting as Draco gave him a crooked smile.

“Morning, Potter,” he said, turning to greet the rest of them before he bent down and hugged Scorpius tightly, he knew his son wouldn't have the easiest time at Hogwarts with his last name, but he was a strong, smart boy, and he already had a good friend, with a much more accepted last name, going in. It eased Draco's worries the slightest bit. Hermione hugged him next, reminding him of all the resources he had at Hogwarts and that they were always just an owl away before she stood up and he ran off towards the train, waving from the compartment with Albus when he sat down.

"Daddy, I want to go to Hogwarts," Rowan said to Ron and Hannah laughed, picking him up, "In a few years, Rowan. It'll be here before you know it."

Adelinda, finally worn out from her morning adventures, tugged on Draco's sleeve and he pulled her against him, rubbing her back, "Couple more years for you too, Addie," he said, his voice losing the edge it had earlier.

"I don't mind waiting, we've got books at home to read," Adelinda shrugged.

Hermione grabbed his hand on the other side and he looked over at her with an apologetic half-smile as she leaned up to kiss him; a reminder that she was exactly where she wanted to be in life. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder as the others debated who should bring what for their dinner party at the Malfoys the following week. Draco insisted they didn't need to bring anything, but they were all stubborn and he finally conceded to accepting side dishes and desserts, as long as someone talked Neville out of baking again. This was unanimously agreed to, with the compromise that Blaise wasn't allow the supply the alcohol anymore. Whatever he'd brought last time had been much stronger than anyone had anticipated, but it had been so delicious that they hadn't realized until late into the night when the group was doubled over with laughter at whatever it was Ginny had just said.

"Can we go home now?" Adelinda asked with a yawn as the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station and the group waved once more.

Hermione reached around to run her fingers through the girl's curly, pale yellow hair and smiled, "Yes, it's time to go home."

They bid farewell to their friends, until next week, and left King's Cross to return to Germany. After putting Adelinda to sleep that evening, Hermione crawled into bed next to Draco, her leg draping over him as their bodies molded together in the same beautiful way they always did.

"First one off to Hogwarts," she said with a sigh, her hand running down Draco's arm softly.
"Feels almost surreal," he smiled, his expression conflicted, "Are you happy with your decision, Granger? The decision you made to be with me all those years ago?"

"I can't imagine my life without you," she brushed her thumb over his cheek, "Whatever life I had pictured with you back then, reality has surpassed even my wildest dreams."

"Even though I went into finance and not healing?" He asked, "Even though we still get looks sometimes when we're out together? Even though you may never get the Minister for Magic title?"

It had been a while since he'd done this. She knew he kept it bottled inside, letting it out when something would happen and she'd tell him the same thing every time.

"I don't care what you do or what anyone thinks as long as you're happy and you're by my side," she said simply, "You will always be my great love. Without you, life never would have felt complete, no matter what it could have held."

Draco's lip curled up again and he looked deeply into her eyes. There was no regret, no disappointment, just that endearing, piercing gaze that had broken through his walls all those years ago. He didn't deserve her love or her faith in him. He never had, but she had given it to him without looking back. As they lay there in a peaceful silence, arms and legs entangled around each other, he swore to himself again to never stop fighting to be the man she saw in him; The man he felt he'd become through her unwavering belief in him as she had fought for his second chance at life.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

The End

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you endlessly to everyone that took the time to read this story that has meant a lot for me to write, I hope you enjoyed the ride with me and that you’ll join me for my next story down the road!

If you continue on to chapter 46, you will be continuing to our alternate ending, which does not have a happily ever after.

Here is a sneak peek of my next story, for those interested:

Professors

Summary:

“So when are we going to acknowledge this, Granger?” He asked in a low voice, arms crossed as he eyed her with amusement.

“Acknowledge what?” She said evasively, shifting a little against the desk, heart rate speeding up on its own at the implication.

His lip curled up into that signature smirk as he reached out and grabbed her hand that was hanging at her side, pulling her close to him, “This thing between us.”
Five years after the Battle of Hogwarts, the Hogwarts professors have been totally re-staffed by none other than the Golden Trio and their classmates. With Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger heading up the school’s Duelling Club, it’s guaranteed to be an interesting year, indeed.

DM/HG / Post-BoH compliant, epilogue not applicable, rocky/unhappy RW/HG in the beginning, Rated M for later chapters.
The next morning, Hermione left bright and early for the Ministry and after a few more minutes of contentedly staring at the ceiling, Draco pulled himself from bed and headed for Diagon Alley in search of Blaise.

He wandered into Quality Quidditch Supplies where Blaise was positioning the newest Nimbus 2006 in the display case, "What in the world are you doing over this way? Here for the new model already?" he asked with a grin

"No Blaise, I'm in Diagon Alley on another mission," he said with a smile broader and more genuine than Blaise had ever remembered seeing on his friend, "A shopping mission I will be needing the help of my best friend on."

Blaise looked at him curiously, his interest piquing, "Are you going to tell me what we're shopping for?"

"Oh no, I'd rather show you," he said, walking out of the store while Blaise got down from the show case and flipped the sign to 'CLOSED,' following Draco into the sea of shoppers.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

Draco arrived home that afternoon feeling high.

"Draco, sweetheart, where did you get off to today?" Narcissa asked from the table, where she sat
"Diagon Alley to do some shopping," he said smoothly with that smile still plastered on his face, hopping lightly up the stairs two-by-two.

Later that evening, Draco returned to the dining room for dinner with his parents, his mood uncharacteristically bright.

"Is Hermione coming over tonight?" Narcissa asked as she daintily cut a bite of her food.

"She's over at Potter's tonight helping her friend with wedding plans so she won't be over until tomorrow," he said.

"I'll never get used to hearing that name being casually thrown around in this house," Lucius said with a shake of his head.

Draco gave a small laugh at the irony, "We're friends now, father, you'll get used to it eventually," he cleared his throat a little, wanting to talk with his parents about what was on his mind, "You know, things have been going very well with Granger and I lately. I've been thinking of asking her if she'd like to move to the Germany house with me. I figure we could get a license for an international daily portkey so she can commute to work and we can still visit everyone as though we're right nextdoor."

"Draco, that's a big step," Narcissa sounded excited for him and Lucius stayed silent.

"It feels like the right time," he said, "Seeing how she supported me through the most recent… events…," he said, avoiding talking about the last Diagon Alley mishap, "I think it showed me that I don't have to push her away."

"And what about how those mishaps impact her?" Lucius asked nonchalantly, "How are you feeling about that."

"I'm never going to feel great about it," he said, "But we talked the other night and she told me I need to let her decide what's important and what's not and at the end of the day she just doesn't care if it's something that's going to happen now and then because as long as we've got each other…" he trailed off, it sounded a bit silly to repeat to his parents.

"I think you should reconsider moving things forward until you've taken some more time to date each other and vet out these things that happen," Lucius said.

"I don't feel it needs more time, father," Draco was over Lucius's negativity, "We love each other. More than either of us can put into words. She saved me from a dark place in my life and supports my growth every day and I know I will do nothing but support and love her in return. We may have to deal with some of my darker days but if it doesn't bother her, then why should I deprive us of something we both want?"

"Draco you don't know what you're doing," Lucius said sharply, standing from his seat at the table, leaning towards him on his hands.

"I know you don't approve of her, father," Draco's voice was firm, "But I've never thought I was capable of loving another person like I love her. I would feel lucky to wake up to her every day for the rest of my life. Please, just support me in this one thing."

Narcissa looked back and forth between them.
"I can't," Lucius said as his gaze faltered. For a moment, Draco was taken aback by his father's reaction. He didn't sound angry or cold, he sounded… defeated, "Narcissa, can you give us a moment to talk, father to son?" he asked.

She stood slowly, "Draco would you like me to stay?" she asked.

"No, it's alright mother, I think we need to have this talk, I think we've had to for a while."

She nodded, leaving the room and heading to their bedroom to give them some space.

When the room was quiet again, Lucius sat back down with a long sigh, picking up where he left off, "Draco, I can't support this because I've been in your shoes. I married the woman that made me a better person, but the problem with that is that I didn't make her a better person. I've regretted dragging your mother into this life for twenty-five years. I would do anything to take away the choices she's had to make, the choices you've had to make, all because I was her husband and your father. I see the way you look at the girl. You love her, but you know your name, the name you bear because of me, will hold her back. I see the inner conflict you have at the thought of her bearing that name and the burdens that come with it. You've told me how people look at you together and Draco, I understand. Narcissa has had to live with the stares, with the whispers, with the guilt of the choices she has made, all because of me. She's held her head high through it all and given me nothing but support and I consider myself lucky every day to have her and you, but if I could give either of you back the life you deserved, had my name and choices not been thrust onto you, I would do it in a heartbeat."

"But what if I'm taking away a future from her that would make her happy?" Draco asked quietly.

"You won't want to hear this Draco, but you have to know that she'll heal from the heartbreak. And then someone else will come along and make her happy again. It might be a different happy than you would make her, but she will fall in love again and you likely will too, hopefully with someone who can empathize with your life and understands what you've been through, and you can both be happy, separately. And you won't have to live your life regretting the burdens you've placed on her that she could have avoided if you let her. It's been hard for me to tell you this because, at the root of it, I know it all comes back to my choices and my burdens that continue to be passed down. But I need you to hear it before you make this decision and live the rest of your life with the same regrets as your father."

Draco looked at the man he'd spent years idolizing, fearing, feeling sorry for, and finally he understood some portion of what was going on behind the facade. They looked at each other, father to son and Draco nodded. If he asked her to be with him, start a life with him, he would only be asking her to accept his own fate. To accept the stares and the whispers with her head high, to be held back at her job for the fear of others at the thought of a Malfoy rising in the ranks of the Ministry. He could never ask that of her. He loved her more than he'd ever thought possible, and because of that, he had to let her go. Anything else would be selfish.

He stood up, pulling a small, velvet box out of his pocket and opening it, four carats of flawless diamond staring back at him, taunting him now. Lucius didn't move, his piece spoken, as he watched him from his chair. Draco snapped the box shut, placing it on the table, his hand lingering for one heart wrenching moment before he pulled it back, turning from his father, "Can you return this for me? I don't think I could do it on my own."

With that, he left the room and left the Manor, knowing his next destination had to be wherever Hermione was.
He apparated to Harry and Ginny's, knocking on the door.

Harry answered after a minute, "Hey Malfoy," he noticed his look and furrowed his brow, "Everything okay?"

"Is Hermione here?" He asked, "I just need to talk with her and it can't wait."

"Yeah, I'll grab her," he said, walking off quickly.

Draco closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. He had to do it as quickly as he could, before he lost the nerve. Every piece of him felt like it was about to break.

"Draco?" Hermione looked at him questioningly as she appeared in the doorway, "What's going on?"

He held out his hand for her to take, wanting to talk in private and she grabbed it hesitantly as he apparated them to her flat.

"My place? Why are we here?" She asked, "Talk to me."

"Can we go inside to talk?" He asked; his voice sounded foreign in his own head.

She looked at him, confused before she turned and walked up the steps, opening her door and leading him in. She sat on the couch while he took a seat next to her, grabbing her hand in his. He finally lifted his eyes to hers and his voice failed him. There she was, the love of his life, sitting inches away from him, so deeply in love with him that they could talk about a future together like it was just a thing that was on the way.

"Draco, what is it?" She asked, starting to feel nervous with his demeanor.

"Granger," he finally choked out, trying to find where to start, "This… this has to end. You and me. It's always had to."

She stared at him, unbelieving of what she was hearing, "But we just… we just talked about this last night."

"If we continue forward, if I marry you, if we start a life together, I'll never forgive myself for bringing my burdens into your life."

"Draco, I don't care," she said, louder than she'd meant to, but needing to get the point across to him, "I love you and you love me. Why can't that be enough?"

"Because it's not enough," he said, "It's selfish of me and I won't do it to you."

She was silent which was almost worse than her being angry.

"Granger, never in my life did I think I'd fall in love with someone the way I've fallen in love with you," he needed her to understand, "But if I let you share your life with me, I will bring a darkness to it that will overshadow everything. Because that's what it is in my life. The happy times will always be encapsulated by this shadow of all of the times you watched me throw bottles at walls and yell at you when you're the closest thing to me when my temper wins out. You are good. You can have a happy life that isn't constantly shrouded in darkness."

There was a tear falling down Hermione's cheek as he talked and his throat felt tight, "There is nothing that would make me reconsider being with you," she said, shaking her head sadly, "I know
you, Draco. I know who are you and I want to be there to remind you of that every time you slip into the dark. I want to support you through those times and live life with you when times are light. I want... to read books in the den of the Germany house," another tear fell from the other side, "I want to explore the world by your side. And I want to watch tiny, curly haired blondes rampage around my dining room," she could feel her chest tightening as she realized the impact of why he was there. He was taking from her everything he'd just put in her head. She watched as a tear fell from the corner of Draco's eye and her heart dropped; he was serious.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I want those things more than you can imagine," he was barely whispering but any more and he'd lose it, "But it's not my reality. I can't let you take on my mistakes. I'd never forgive myself and I would spend the rest of my life regretting taking away the chance at a normal life for you."

"I think you're making a brash decision right now. How could you have gone so one-eighty from our conversation yesterday?" He could hear the frustration in her voice now.

"Perspective," he said, "Realizing what I'd be condemning you to," they were both quiet as they stared into the others' eyes, "Granger, you don't know how close I was to letting go with you. But I can't, and I was never supposed to."

"Why can't you?" She pushed, "I hate that you tell yourself there was never a chance when there truly still is."

"I wanted there to be," he begged her to accept what he was saying, but she had the right to be angry with him, "I put all of me into this. But I'm not whole and it wasn't enough."

Hermione took a deep breath to realign before she responded, "What if... what if we just take a step back," she said, trying to think logically, "I know we've been talking about the future but what if we just lock all that away for now and just enjoy the relationship for what it is and let it move at its own pace. I don't need to know that you want to marry me right now, I want to enjoy being with you. Maybe we're just putting too much pressure on it."

Draco looked at her for a moment, "There's a problem with that, Granger. I already know I want that future with you. And I already know we can't have it. To let it go on at this point would just make it that much harder when it has to end later. And it would push out the timeline of you being able to move forward with your life. I couldn't just pretend our relationship wasn't there yet. It had to be all or nothing."

She was silent again, her mind feeling blank with shock still as she stared at the man next to her, trying to understand, "Do you regret being with me?"

"No," he said, "You've made me a better person. You gave me a second chance. You've been the best thing to happen to me. But you've done what you could for me and it's time that I let you go so you can find a happy ending; Continue upwards in your career, find yourself another great love."

She looked down at her lap, sadness starting to set in at his words, "I don't think that's how great love works," she said quietly, at a loss. She slowly moved her hands up to the necklace around her neck, trying to unhook it before she's remembered there was a charm to remove it, "Can you?" She gestured to it.

Draco's lip curled up half-heartedly, "No," he said, "That was a gift."

"I can't keep it if we're not together," she said, more tears begging her to let them free while she did her best to hold composure. Maybe he just needed to walk away before he realized he'd made a
"Well I'm not giving you the charm to take it off, so you'll have to keep it at least until you find it yourself," he said, "I don't want it back, it was for you. Put it somewhere you can accidentally come across it in the future, so I can have some hope that you won't block me from your memory completely."

"Draco, don't do this," she couldn't help the words from spilling out of her mouth. The thought that she'd remove Draco from her memory was absurd. She didn't think she'd ever be able to remove these feelings she had towards him completely. And frankly, she didn't want to.

Draco stood, his body moving against the wishes of what he really wanted, "I have to go," he said.

Hermione felt the tears in her eyes pushing past and streaming down her face as she willed her voice to talk sense into him.

"Draco," it came out with her breath and she didn't have anywhere she was going with it, but he understood. He knew he'd caught her so off guard that she hadn't even prepared a defense. Hermione Granger was speechless for the first time in her life.

"I hope you'll understand, somewhere down the road, that this was for you. I hope when you're settled into a life with the person you love that you'll know that it's more than I could have given you and that's why I had to walk away," he said, his eyes pleading with her, "I will always love you."

"You talk like we're never going to see each other again," she wiped her cheeks off with her sleeve as new tears replaced the dried ones.

"We can't, for a long time at least," he said sadly, "We can't heal if we don't have space. I need you to move on."

"I don't want to," she said fiercely, "I think what you're doing isn't fair and it isn't necessary."

"It's the right thing," his voice was soft, but definitive.

More potential arguments tried to form in her head but it wasn't anything better than what she'd already said and she felt the heaviness of acceptance in her stomach. If he wanted to break up with her, she had to let him. She couldn't force him to change his mind so she had to let him walk away and hope he'd come back — to his senses and to her. It had to be his decision at this point.

Without anything left to fight, Hermione took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she stood, their eyes on each other as she walked close to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, head coming to rest on his chest. He hesitated only for a second before he wrapped his arms tightly around her and leaned his face down against the top of her head. He felt his cheeks wet as he broke, closing his eyes tightly as he held her for what he knew had to be the last time. He ran his hand slowly up and down her arm, wanting to remember every sensation of the feel of his hands on her skin. He wanted to remember how her hair smelled when he had woken up next to her every day, wanted to map out how her body molded against his. He squeezed her tighter as he heard the soft sobs she was trying to bury in his shirt.

"You saved me, Granger," he said quietly, "Because of you I have a second chance at rebuilding my life."

She sobbed again and a new stream of tears fell from his eyes. They stood there for a good while longer, neither speaking, neither moving, outside of the soft sway their bodies had naturally found.
Eventually the sobs subsided, when the fountain had run dry, and somewhere, very deep down inside of him, Draco finally found the strength to pull himself back. He moved a strand of hair out of her face, pushing it softly behind her ear and he leaned down and kissed her. Her bottom lip trembled slightly, but she didn't break down again. Their eyes met as they opened and the heartbroken look in her chocolate brown eyes felt like a punch in the gut.

She looked back at him, wanting to see some sign of indecision, some weakness in his resolve, but she didn't. If nothing else, he'd made up his mind that this was the right decision, and the only decision, and she wasn't going to change that tonight.

He stepped back, "Goodbye, Granger," he let her hand drop from his and his heart shattered as he pulled his gaze from her. He felt like he could barely breathe as he walked to the door, turning the knob and pulling it open. He looked back once more, against his better judgment.

"Draco…" she whispered again, in the same pleading tone, arms moving up to cross over her chest.

He swallowed hard, taking a deliberate step out the door, closing it behind him and walking down the stairs shakily before he turned on the spot and disappeared.

Hermione didn't move for another minute, her head still reeling with what had just happened. When she finally did, she walked to the door, pulling it open, not knowing what in the world she'd expected. That maybe he hadn't left? That maybe he'd come back? It didn't matter, he was gone. She shut the door and made it two steps back to the couch before she collapsed, head in her hands, sobbing once again as reality crashed down. *He was gone.*

O-o-o-o-o-o-o
Chapter Notes

(47) CHAPTER WARNINGS:

This version of the ending is not a happy Dramione ending.

The epilogue in ALT Chapter 45 (posted 47) is RW/HG as it is completely Deathly Hallows Epilogue compliant.

If this doesn't interest you, or if you are totally against reading anything even remotely RW/HG, please don't feel you have to read it, this was meant to be the ending showing the tragically beautiful love story of Dramione that follows them through the years, even after they've moved on in life, as opposed to a happily ever after.

My goal for this ending was to end the story so it could fit perfectly in between the last chapter of Deathly Hallows and the Epilogue in Deathly Hallows and feel Canon for Dramione shippers. That said, it is sad and it does still end RW/HG and dips into that relationship. You are free to ignore that these chapters exist if you wish!

For our happy Dramione ending, please return to posted chapters 44 & 45. For our not-so-happy alternate ending, proceed:

Spring/Summer 2002 - Four Years After the Battle of Hogwarts

The months following their breakup had been some of the hardest she could remember. When Harry had heard what happened, he'd gone to the Manor and had a long talk with Draco. He'd almost understood, in a small way. It'd been like when he broke up with Ginny after sixth year; To protect her. He had loved Ginny and he hadn't doubted that she would have been strong enough to handle what would come if they had stayed together, but it wouldn't have been fair to her. He had needed to deal with the burdens that had been put on him in his life before he could bring someone else into it.

The difference was, Harry had defeated his burdens and Draco didn't think he ever would because they were a part of him. He'd tried to reason with him, tried to remind him that Hermione didn't care, that she would never hold anything against him, but he didn't waiver. Harry could tell he was devastated at the loss of Hermione, even though he'd been the one to leave. He looked tired and empty behind the eyes, like he was just going through the motions of conversation because he knew he had to, but he wasn't fully there. It didn't change the fact that he would stick to his decision, reiterating that it was the only option for her sake, no matter what he wanted. Harry had collected Hermione's things from the Manor and returned to her apartment, where Ginny was sitting with her, just being there for whatever she needed.

It took days for the numbness to subside and the weight of substantial loss to hit her. The love of her life had left and he wasn't coming back; He loved her, but they couldn't be together. It was weeks before she felt like she could focus again, a month or two before she could have normal conversation with the people around her. She could work, of course, that was ingrained in her. Zoning into cases and files was the only release she had from the emptiness she felt inside. It was
like something had been taken from her, some piece of the light within. Smiling took all of her
effort some days. Thoughts of Draco, things that reminded her of him, mentions of his name, they
set off a kind of deafening silence in her mind. Eventually the impact lessened into a tight pull in
her chest. It never got better than that, but she could handle it.

She'd reached out via owl a month after he left, asking if they could talk. He'd responded with a
short, but blatant note:

Granger,

I hope you are doing well. I don't think it would help or change anything for us to see each other.

Best to you, always,

Draco

She hadn't reached out again. She knew Harry and Draco were still seeing each other, not quite as
often as before, but they would get drinks once a month. Harry told her after their second hangout
that Draco had applied to Gringotts in the finance department, like Theo. She'd nodded slowly at
the information. He didn't want to be in the spotlight. He was never going to go into a Healer
program. But at least he'd be around a friend; around others and not sitting alone in the Manor.
Hermione had stopped asking about their hangouts after that, because it hurt to hear about him
living his life without her. Of course she wanted him to be happy, but the wounds were still too
fresh to know how he was moving forward from her. But she would never ask Harry to stop seeing
Draco, knowing they were probably good outlets for each other.

By mid-summer she was able to hold it together. It'd been three or four months, but who was
counting. She spent a lot of time with Harry and Ron, as Ginny had been busy with Cannons
practices and matches again, as well as wedding planning that she dragged Harry along on.

She'd been in a good place with Ron. He had comforted her as a friend, and given her some
additional space, not feeling it was totally his place to insert his thoughts or his shoulder to cry on
with their history. But it was always comfortable when he was there, an extra security blanket in a
life that felt very haphazard.

Harry had been insisting that Draco still come to the wedding, as a friend of his, but Draco wouldn't
put himself into a room with Hermione. He said it would undo all of their progress and he wouldn't
do that to her. In exchange, he'd sent them the keys to the house in Germany for a honeymoon,
telling them to stay as long as they wanted before they returned to reality.

The wedding had been beautiful. A large tent was set up outside the burrow, the ceiling lined with
glimmering fairies and candles floating about ten feet overhead. Hermione was overjoyed for her
friends, but couldn't quite shake the knot in her stomach as she put on the biggest smile she could
for the evening. Ron sat with her for most of it as Neville and Luna and the rest of the Weasleys
popped in and out. They'd talked for a long time that night, Ron making her laugh like he always
did when she needed it. As the last song was announced, a ballad by Celestina Warbeck, he held
out his hand, "Would you care to dance once tonight?" He asked with a grin, "Ginny would be livid
if she heard I'd let you sit all night."

Hermione sighed, "Alright," she took his hand with an appreciative crooked smile and he led her
onto the dancefloor. He placed a hand around her waist and she rested her hand on his shoulder as
he swayed her back and forth. He'd never been much of a dancer, so it was for the best that they
stayed in one spot.
They'd continued to spend more time together after the wedding and she could tell Ron had probably never lost his feelings for her, which made her heart swell with appreciation at how much he must care for her to have been in love with her and to have supported her relationship with someone else. The more time she spent with him, the more she remembered the things she found so wonderful about him. He had always been caring and funny and sweet. Two months later, Ron had asked her on the first of many future dates and she'd accepted. She hadn't heard from Draco since that short message he'd responded to her with and it had been over six months since he'd walked out her door. It didn't matter if she still loved him, he wasn't coming back and she needed to move forward. Ron was her best friend, she had loved him before and she probably would again.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

April 2004 - Six Years after the Battle of Hogwarts

After a year and a half of dating, Ron had proposed; In Australia, on a visit with the Grangers, outside the house they'd found her parents at all those years ago, he had gotten down on one knee and asked her to be his. She'd said yes with a smile, convincing herself to put all of her effort into it. She knew they would have a good life together. They'd been happy and being together had been easy. She knew he loved her very much and she loved him, too. A different love than what she'd had with Draco, but still love.

The year they'd gotten married, Harry and Ginny had welcomed their first child, James Sirius. During the wedding he'd slept soundly, wrapped in a blanket in Ginny's arms.

A year and a half later, in the spring of 2006, Hermione and Ron had welcomed Rose Granger-Weasley into their growing family of three, and Harry and Ginny had welcomed their second child, Albus Severus Potter.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

July 2007 — Nine years after the Battle of Hogwarts

Hermione still stopped into that cafe in Diagon Alley, from time to time, the one Draco had shown her. Maybe she hoped she'd run into him one day, but even if she did, what would she say? She'd dropped Rose off with Mrs. Weasley that morning as her and Ron had left for work. Rose had just turned one and she was starting to get the hang of standing up and walking a few steps, which was exciting and, admittedly, terrifying.

Today was one of those days that the Department for Magical Law Enforcement was quiet, while the Auror Department had an afternoon of trainings, so she decided to take a nice lunch break out by herself. She'd been promoted to Head Detective as Alden Northcott had taken over as Minister for Magic earlier that year. As odd as it was to be in charge of delegating work, and as difficult as it was for her to let work out of her own hands, it had been a wonderful learning experience. One of the main things she'd learned was that it was okay to step away for a few minutes because there would always be someone else who could help out.

She sipped her coffee, skimming the Prophet mindlessly in front of her. She heard the bell over the door jingle, but didn't look up. And then she heard his voice at the counter. Ordering himself a coffee. A sound followed by the clinging of galleons on the counter. Her head whipped up as the man took the cup from the owner and turned. It was immediate. Their eyes met and he paused, mouth halfway to his cup, frozen in place for a split second before he recovered, lowering the cup slowly and putting his hand in his pocket. She stood and he walked over.

"Granger," he nodded.
"Draco," she said back. There was a moment of silence as her thoughts were flooded with memories of the man in front of her before she snapped back to her senses, "Sorry, where are my manners, would you like to sit?"

"Sure, just for a minute," he said a little breathlessly, taking the seat across from her, "How are you?"

"Alright," she said, shaking her head, "Sorry, I'm well. It's just… it's been a long time."

"Five years," he said without thinking, his lip curling up, "And you're still coming to my hole-in-the-wall cafe."

"Well, someone once told me they had the best coffee in town," she returned the look.

"I heard you married Weasley," he said and she nodded, "I'm happy for you. He's a good man."

"Thank you. We have a good life together," she meant it and she wanted him to know she was happy. She knew it was what he wanted to hear, "How have you been?"

"Well," he said, "I got married a couple of years ago as well, to Astoria Greengrass, I'm not sure if you remember her."

"I've got a little one named Rose, same age, just like Harry's son Albus," Hermione told him, "Congratulations, I'm glad you found someone to be happy with."

"I've got a little one named Rose, same age, just like Harry's son Albus," Hermione told him, "Congratulations, I'm glad you found someone to be happy with."

"You don't need to explain," she replied quickly, mentally kicking herself, "I'm sorry if that came off rude."

"It didn't, just wanted you to know. I think I've had a lot of things I've wished I could say to you for a long time. Seeing you here now, it's hard not to just let them run wild," his eyes still entranced her, "I meant what I said that night. I didn't want to bring the burden of my name onto you when you could have a better life, an easier one, like the one you have now."

Hermione gave him a small smile, not knowing what to say to that.

"I didn't sleep for weeks, you know," he quipped, "After I left your apartment. It took me a long time to recover, to want to move again. Theo and Blaise would stop over and try to kick me into gear. Eventually Theo got me to apply for the position at Gringotts."

"I heard," she said, "From Harry."

Draco nodded, "He's still a good friend."

"I know. We don't talk about you, but he's got mysterious plans once a month, I just assume it's with you."

Draco allowed himself a laugh, "Yes, I'm his mystery date."
"Has Astoria's... condition improved?" Hermione asked, genuinely concerned as she remembered the blood curse the girl had told her about. Something that had stuck with Hermione.

"No," he said with a sigh, "It's one of the other reasons she told me to get over myself and stop worrying about how the Malfoy name would impact her. We don't know how long she'll have, but she's doing well right now. We just know we don't have forever."

"That's got to be hard," Hermione looked at him sadly, "To know that already."

"Incredibly," he said, "But it puts things in perspective. I try to make her life as good as I can while I can. She insisted we have a child so I wouldn't be alone. I fought that too, told her my father regretted bringing a son into the world with his last name. She wouldn't hear it."

"I'm sorry, I know it's going to be difficult," Hermione said, reaching her hand across the table and squeezing his. It wasn't inappropriate, just a genuine gesture.

He squeezed hers back and she let go, sitting back as she felt her cheeks burn from the electricity that flowed through her at the feel of his hand under hers.

"It's still difficult seeing you," he told her, "I feel the same. I wish it wasn't so I could pretend maybe we could have some part in each other's lives."

"I wish we could too," he said, "I'm just glad you're happy."

"I am," she smiled but it didn't meet her eyes, "It's just..." she paused, she didn't need to say what she was thinking, but when would she ever have the chance again, "It's just, every once in a while, I still find myself wondering..." she broke off, she couldn't finish that sentence, it wasn't fair to either of them, or their significant others.

"I know," his voice was quiet as she shared a glance that gave her some kind of closure that she'd never had. He'd always wondered too, if they would have been happy together.

"I should get back to Astoria," Draco said after a moment, "We're heading to Germany later tonight."

She felt her chest pull again at the mention of the Germany house they'd been redecorating, "You didn't end up moving there?" She couldn't help but ask.

"No," he gave her a crooked smile, "That house already had the vision of another life planned there. I couldn't replace that with something else."

Hermione swallowed hard, nodding so her voice didn't betray her.

"We bought another estate close by the manor to live in until the manor passes onto me one day. Hopefully not any time soon."

She nodded, "That sounds very nice."

Draco stood, noticing again that he had to mentally tell his legs to move because every force in his body wanted him to stay. Hermione mirrored him, "It was... good to see you, Draco."

He stepped closer to pull her into a hug. It lasted a few seconds longer than it should have, but it
had been so long; years, since they'd been in the same room. Watching him walk away again, away
from her, and out the door of the cafe, it still hurt. She didn't want it to, but it did.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

August 2008 - Ten Years After the Battle of Hogwarts

Two years after Rose was born, Hermione and Ron welcomed another child, a boy they'd named 
Hugo, who was the same age as Harry and Ginny's youngest, Lily. Work at the Ministry had been 
rewarding, and Alden had already started taking her under his wing to get some experience with
the political side of the Ministry. It would be years before she'd be ready to take over for him, but
he was convinced she would be his successor.

Harry had taken over as Head Auror when Bones' successor retired, and Ron was promoted to Lead
Auror over the Field Mission group. Ginny had been traded to the Holyhead Harpies for the
upcoming season, they had an open Chaser position and a Seeker looking to retire in the next
couple of years, so the opportunity was there for a future transition.

Ron had been a good husband to her, sharing the late shifts of waking up to tend to Rose and Hugo,
learning how to make the perfect morning pick-me-up tea for Hermione when she was the one to
get up for the kids. When she worked late, he made dinner, when he was out on missions, she'd
take care of things at home. It was a partnership and it worked seamlessly for them. He'd surprise
her every once in a while by dropping the kids with his mother and taking her out for a nice night
at the Three Broomsticks, or a quiet night on the couch together with a glass of butterbeer while he
read Quidditch magazines and she read novels about great love.

Rose was getting quite the personality, keeping them both occupied and amused. She'd babble all
through dinner and swoop around the house on her hovering broom. Hugo was a good baby, he
didn't cry much and he loved to cuddle as the evening set in. At some point each night Ron would
look over at her with his goofy smile and tell her some story of what had happened at work that day
and she'd laugh. They'd put the kids to bed and finally collapse in their own bed. He'd hold her
hand as they fell asleep, a little space between them so they didn't get too warm during the night.
Life was good with Ron and Rose and Hugo.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

May 2013 — Fifteen Years After the Battle of Hogwarts

Hermione had been doing a lot of spring cleaning while the kids played Exploding Snaps in the
yard with Ron. She moved aside a few towels from the top shelf of the closet, her hand hitting
something solid behind them. After placing the towels into their newly organized cupboard, she
returned to the closet and reached around on the shelf until she hit the object again, pulling down a
dusty box that must have been hiding there a long time. She sat down on the floor next to the half-
full trash bag and a bunch of items that were in her "maybe" pile. Brushing off the box, she pulled
the top off to reveal the diamond necklace Draco had given her, which was laying on top of the
photographs from their trip to Hogwarts. She felt herself freeze, tears beginning to well behind her
eyes, before she blinked them away. She'd finally figured out the charm to get the necklace off a
few weeks after they'd broken up and she'd throw it in the closest jewelry box she could find,
pulling the photographs from her nightstand to throw in as well. She'd closed the box and hid it in a
bag. A bag that had been haphazardly unpacked during their move, the box chucked at the top of
the closet, contents forgotten.

She set down the cover and picked it up out of the box, watching how the light caught it. He'd
hoped she would come across it one day and think back on him, and here she was. She was
thinking about that night he'd given it to her. With the green lace dress and the shoes. The night they'd really been together for the first time, with him finally free from the charges against him. She closed her fingers around the diamond in her palm and held it against her chest for a moment while she allowed herself to feel what she was feeling. Allowed herself to think about the memory. After a minute she set the necklace in the box and pulled the photographs out. The first was of her and Draco laughing as he threw his Slytherin scarf over her head, the second of him smirking and her looking amusingly defeated as she tied it properly, and the third of them smiling at the camera. Even now she could see the indecision in his eyes as they smiled. The other two photographs he looked genuinely happy and relaxed as they interacted like no one was watching. The third, posing for the camera, aware of the world watching, that's the one he looked uncomfortable in. It made all the sense in the world now.

She took a deep breath, laying the photographs back in the box with the necklace and replacing the cover before she stood up slowly and slipped it back onto the top shelf of the closet, to be discovered again another day. She returned to her cleaning halfheartedly, trying to shake the memories from her head. The sound of little footsteps running into the house finally broke her out of her thoughts and she smiled to herself, tying up the trash bag and going to spend some time with her kids and her husband.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

September 2017 — Nineteen Years After the Battle of Hogwarts

Hermione hugged Rose tightly, pulling back with a smile, "You're going to love Hogwarts, sweetheart. You'll have Albus there with you and I have no doubt you'll make some great friends, whichever house you end up in."

"Thanks mum," Rose looked around, a little embarrassed.

"Don't forget to write and if you need anyone to talk to, you've got Professor Longbottom, you know he's a good friend of ours. And Headmistress McGonagall might seem a little strict, but she was a wonderful mentor to us all."

"I know, I know," Rose said, "I'll tell Professor Longbottom that you all say hi."

"Alright, off you go," she stood up and Ron gave Rose a quick hug before they ushered her off towards the train with a wave.

"She's almost too independent for her own good," Ron grinned at her as Hugo tugged at his arm next to him.

Harry and Ginny walked over to them with Lily in tow, finished with getting Albus and James on the train as well, "Just two more left," Harry said, ruffling Hugo's hair, who laughed, batting the hand away.

Hermione looked up and something caught her eye over Harry's shoulder. She saw a boy, around Rose's age with platinum blond hair looking around excitedly and her eyes scanned the platform as a man with blond hair and a beautiful brunette woman pushed through the crowd to catch up to him. Her heart felt like it stopped in her chest. It was Draco. It had been years since she'd seen him. Harry and Ron noticed Hermione's gaze and Harry turned around to see what was behind him. She felt Ron grasp her hand firmly beside her. Draco looked up, almost sensing the attention and his eyes immediately locked with Hermione's. She looked surprised and almost sad and his breath caught in his throat for a moment before he broke their eye contact and acknowledged the stares of Harry and Ron beside her. Harry waved and Astoria grabbed his arm gently, saying something to
him quietly in his ear, but his mind wasn't quite grasping it. He gave a curt nod to the golden trio and turned back to his family.

"What was that?" he said to Astoria, "I'm sorry, I just zoned out for a moment."

"You didn't zone out," she laughed knowingly and gave him a sweet smile, "I saw the Minister for Magic over there. I know your history; I'm sure it's difficult to see her, even now. Every person we love becomes a part of us."

He smiled down at her, she was much wiser than he could ever hope to be, "I love you, Astoria."

"I know you do," she leaned up and kissed him before bending down to tend to Scorpius, who was trying to shove a bit more candy into his overstuffed backpack, "Sweets, they always help you make friends," he heard her say to Scorpius in a sing-song voice.

Draco looked back over absently, putting his hands in his pockets. Hermione was listening to something Ginny was saying, but almost on cue she looked over and caught his glance. She gave him a small smile and even though they couldn't speak, something in her eyes told him she missed him like he missed her. He didn't think it would ever get easier to see her, but it brought some peace to his mind. He was glad they both found their own happiness, even if it couldn't have been together.

Hermione only allowed a small smile at Draco before she turned back to her friends, trying to stay involved in the conversation, knowing Ron would be paying attention to her reaction to Draco's presence. Of course Ron accepted that she had dated Malfoy years ago, but she knew some part of him would always be jealous of what she had with him. It had been high highs and low lows dating Malfoy, but he had brought a passionate love to her life that couldn't be recreated.

She knew now that you could love someone with your whole heart in different ways. She loved Ron because he was her best friend. They took care of each other, raised a beautiful family together and she enjoyed every day with him. He was kind and sweet and funny. He was her partner in life.

She had loved Draco because he had challenged her, wanted her, filled her with these absolute emotions and sparked a magnetic connection. Of course she loved Ron and their life together, but something about Draco would always affect her in a way she couldn't explain. She couldn't look at him without remembering how his words made her blush, his touch made her shiver and his eyes pierced through her with a single glance. It was a feeling where even now, 15 years later in a place where she was happy with her life, his presence made it difficult to remember to breathe or concentrate. It would never get easier to walk away.

She tore her thoughts from him with a shake of her head and took a deep breath. It was time for them to leave, to go home and return to normal life. Her heart pulled tight as she turned and lost sight of Draco in her peripherals. He was the love of her past and she had to focus on her future. She grabbed Hugo's hand and smiled at Ron reassuringly. He threw his arm over her shoulder, kissing the top of her head as they walked back to exit the barrier between platforms 9 and 10 in King's Cross Station.

Draco watched as she walked away with her family. It could have been him and he knew it. She would have done anything in the world to make him stay all those years ago. But she was happy and safe. She could walk the streets of Diagon Alley without the stares of passersby whispering to each other at her choice of partner. Without the stigma of an ex-Death Eater holding her down, she had been offered the position of Minister for Magic. And she could raise her children without the plagued last name of Malfoy.
He looked back down at Scorpius, who was hugging Astoria goodbye. He smiled, bending down and hugging his son. He would never have an easy life and Draco would always feel guilt for the name he had to bear, but Astoria had refused the idea of leaving Draco alone when she had to say goodbye to this world and he couldn't have been more thankful to her for that. He stood back up as Scorpius ran off towards the train and Astoria wrapped her arms around him, "He'll be okay," she said, seeing the worried look on his face, "He's a strong boy."

"I know," he smiled down at her, looking back up to see Scorpius waving from a compartment with another boy and he gave an ironic laugh, "And it looks like he's taken a seat with Potter's son."

They waved back before turning and taking their leave from the platform as well. He knew it would take a little while to shake thoughts of Hermione from his mind, but life had been as good as it could have to him and he knew that. He didn't deserve Astoria or Scorpius, but here he was. And it was all possible because Hermione believed in him. Because she fought for him to have a chance at this life and although it couldn't be with her, he would keep working all his life to be the person she had seen in him.

O-o-o-o-o-o-o

The End

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