A new term in a new place offers unexpected surprises and challenges.

This story is the first in a series. Following AWOF are Second Chapter, Baby Days, Baby Days 2: The Turning of the Wheel, and my new WIP, Family Album, in that order.
Runner-Up, *Best Post-DH* and *Most Romantic*.

Runner-Up, *Best Epic* and *Best Romance*
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Beta Readers: mister_otter and kazfeist, and floorcoaster, too, in the early chapters

See the end of the work for more notes.
"I am a writer, writer of fictions,
I am the heart that you call home
I've written pages upon pages
trying to rid you from my bones..."

--"The Engine Driver"
The Decemberists

The sun-dappled leaves had begun to turn and the air was growing crisp in the early mornings and evenings. It was the first week of October and the first, or Michaelmas, term had just begun. Hermione clutched several rather heavy books to her chest and strode across the quad, deep in thought. But it wasn’t her classes she was ruminating about, nor the very long paper she was about to begin researching, nor the fact that she was here, at Oxford, finally realising a dream she’d had since she was ten.

It was the year that ought to have been her final year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry that she was thinking about so intently. It had been a year from hell, not the purposeful, quiet, orderly, academically rigorous experience she had always anticipated. Her NEWTs had been set aside, as she’d spent the better part of the term on the run with Harry and Ron. That is, until everything had come to an insane, explosive end, and Harry had finally done it—finally ended the life of the creature, for that is what Tom Riddle had become ultimately, who had terrorised the entire wizarding world for far too many years, wreaking havoc and death on the Muggle world as well before being brought to his ignominious end.

After that, they’d all begun to pick up the pieces of their lives very slowly and painstakingly. She’d thought the rest of hers would be spent with Ron. They’d grown closer gradually, during those crazy months of living in hiding; there had been stretches of time when they never knew from one day to
the next where they’d sleep that night or where their next meal might come from. Being together had seemed to be what they both wanted and had been meant for.

Funny thing about that. Destiny, fate, call it what you will. It can play tricks, fool your heart into believing even when the vital piece is still missing. In this case, the vital piece had been small. But she’d felt its absence even when she couldn’t put a name to what was missing.

She and Ron had lasted for three months following the death of Voldemort and then had called it a day. It was, she believed, just as much a relief for him as it had been for her. Painful, yes, certainly. It had been wrenching at the time, but surprisingly easy to get over once the initial break had been made. She realised afterwards that it was because the bond, while strong, hadn’t been the right sort and never had been, no matter how much they and others might have wished it so.

So now here she was, at the university she’d dreamt of attending for as long as she could remember. The wizarding and Muggle worlds were still very separate, but attitudes of the former were being forced to change towards the latter, now that the virulent racism of Voldemort’s regime had been discredited and rejected once and for all. The re-formed Ministry of Magic had even encouraged young witches and wizards to go out into the wider Muggle world and explore a bit, get their proverbial feet a bit wet, and bring back what they learned so as to help cement positive attitudes within the community towards those outside it who did not live intimately with magic. Attending university and doing it non-magically was one excellent way, the Minister felt, to accomplish this. Special, intensive classes had been offered in the parts of the castle that had sustained the least damage, in order to prepare interested students for their university entrance exams. The course had lasted an entire term, a sort of unofficial “eighth” year for those who stayed, beginning with a chance to review for NEWTs and get those out of the way. Once that was done and everyone had qualified as fully fledged wizards, it was time to begin preparing for academic life in the Muggle world, and for this class of young wizards and witches, this was completely outside the realm of their experience. Specially qualified faculty had been hired to help prepare the students for the vast areas of knowledge they’d never touched on previously.

Admissions procedures would be gently bent in many institutions of higher learning across the UK, so that magical and Muggle relations could be further improved by the inclusion of young wizards and witches—the same philosophy as that which informed Muggle Studies at Hogwarts, but at a much higher level. Nevertheless, the prep course gave them all a window through which to see the rigours that awaited them, and they were formidable.

They’d sat their entrance exams in June of that next year. Everyone who qualified was admitted to the university of his or her choice. For Hermione, the letter from Oxford indicating that they were holding a place for her was every bit as momentous, in its own way, as the letter she’d received from Hogwarts eight years earlier.

On this golden afternoon, Hermione’s thoughts were swirling around those last days of the war when chaos had defined her life hour to hour. She sat down on a bench and closed her eyes, almost oblivious to where she was, her expression pensive. A light breeze, fragrant with the sweet, seasonal perfume of brightly coloured falling leaves, ruffled her hair, lifting her spirits. She was unaware at first when somebody stopped right in front of her. When she did open her eyes, whoever it was had already gone, leaving only a flurry of scarlet and gold leaves swirling in his or her wake. Squinting, she could make out a figure in a dark, fleece pullover and jeans, the hood pulled up over his head, hurrying away. For a split second, the hood slipped a little, and there was a flash of bright hair before its owner yanked it back up again.

Three days later, Hermione slipped into her seat for her Mediaeval Lit lecture. It was the first meeting
of the term and the students, still coming in and milling about, waited patiently for the lecturer to arrive.

At three minutes before the hour, a small clutch of last-minute students burst in and hurriedly found seats. One in particular, a tall boy with a coiled, sinewy grace about him, sat down directly in front of Hermione, casually resting his arm across the back of the empty seat next to him. She glanced up to see, and realised, with a start, that it was the same boy she’d seen three days earlier. He was wearing the same dark blue pullover, its hood pulled up against the chill.

She still hadn’t seen his face, but Hermione found herself inadvertently staring at the back of his head. For the better part of an hour, as the lecturer droned on, she watched as he bent to scribble notes, then looked up to listen. Down, up, down, up, bend, straighten. Once—once—he turned his head ever so slightly and she caught a very brief glimpse of his face, partly obscured by the hood of his pullover. But it was so fleeting that she couldn’t really get a sense of his features.

That is, until he turned his head all the way around to look right at her, the hood slipping down.

A pair of all-too-familiar grey eyes opened very wide in a flash of genuine surprise, then regarded her speculatively, and finally, one eyebrow rose in an amused question. They looked at each other for what felt to Hermione like an hour. In reality, it was closer to thirty seconds—an agonising thirty seconds. When finally she found herself too dumbstruck to do anything more than stare, her mouth slightly open like a guppy, he grinned and turned back around.

Oh, this was not good. She’d already wasted too much time being distracted by the back of his head before she’d realised who it was. Now she found herself obsessing about the number of minutes left before the end of the lecture and what she’d say and do when it did end. Merlin above! Draco Malfoy! And then Focus, Hermione. Your first class. Pay attention.

Instead of which, all she could think about was how funny and out of place it was to see Malfoy using a Biro for the first time, and writing in a spiral-bound notebook, instead of the traditional quill and parchment.

All right, to be fair, she supposed she really ought not be all that surprised. After all, she had been peripherally aware of him in that intensive prep course; she remembered being taken aback on that first day a year before, wondering what had led Draco Malfoy, of all people, to seek a path outside the boundaries of the wizarding world, and then she promptly forgot about him, given that the class was fairly large and the work both constant and demanding. It was easy to lose oneself in it, putting blinders on everything but the most immediate goals. Still. To find him here…

Hermione had been fortunate in that she had been a lifelong reader, and even after Hogwarts became the whole of her education, she’d always read widely in Muggle literature. She found that this voracity stood her in good stead now, but only went so far – she knew she would have to work twice as hard as everyone else in order just to keep up. She wondered now, still gazing thoughtfully at the back of Malfoy’s blond head, how he was faring.

At last the lecture was over. The lecturer, Dr. Ponsonby, directed their attention to a list of suggested readings and then strode out a side exit. Hermione busied herself packing up her books, studiously checking that everything was in place three times over. Hoping he might have left by this time, she raised her eyes for a tentative glance and found him leaning against the seat backs in the row in front of his own, his arms folded over his chest, patiently watching her with a faint, somewhat enigmatic smile.

“Have you quite finished? Because I’m starved, and the half hour I had for eating something is now down to twenty minutes. Coming?”
All Hermione could do was nod and grab her rucksack, because he’d already turned and was heading out the door into St Cross Road, up Longwall and into the nearby High Street.

“Coffee okay?” Draco muttered distractedly, fishing his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans. She nodded absently, thinking all the while how strange it was to see him dressed like this, as if he’d been born to it. She had to admit, he certainly did the jeans justice. Or was it the other way round? Either way, he looked damned good.

“And two lemon raspberry squares, please. Thanks!” she heard him say, coming out of her reverie. Hmm. Arrogant as ever, not even asking what she might like, just assuming she’d want the same as he.

“That’ll be four pounds ten,” the woman at the register of the Rose Cafe said crisply.

“Right,” Draco muttered, pulling out some money.

“Do you need some hel–“ Hermione began, only to have her offer waved away. She watched, slightly incredulous, as he quite competently counted out the proper amount and handed it over, pocketing the change. His facility with Muggle money was startling. Well, his apparent facility with everything Muggle was startling, so far.

Hermione was intrigued.

They sat at a nearby table, dropping their rucksacks to the floor. Shortly afterwards, the waiter brought their food over, carefully setting coffees and plates of cake between them. Plumes of aromatic steam rose from the china cups.

Hermione took a small, careful sip and then looked curiously at Draco.

“What–?” she began.

He held up his hand.

“You’re wondering what in Merlin’s name I’m doing here.” He lifted the coffee cup to his lips, letting his acknowledgment hang rather dramatically in the air.

Hermione nodded expectantly.

“Same as you, I expect. Reading for my degree.”

“Well, obviously. But…” She couldn’t help herself. “I don’t mean to be rude, but…why?”
He raised an eyebrow. “Is it so difficult to imagine that I’d want to further my education at one of the finest institutions in the world?”

“Frankly,” Hermione replied, “yes! I don’t get it. I mean, I remember you being in the prep class, but, well… seeing you here…”

“It’s the best place for me to study what I love most. Simple as that.” He stirred his coffee to cool it a bit, and took a forkful of the cake. A curl of creamy lemon curd remained on his lip, and before she realised what she was doing, Hermione had reached over to wipe it off. Suddenly embarrassed at her own presumption, she withdrew her hand.

“You… uh… had some… on your…” She pointed, blushing.

He touched his lip and found the remains of the lemon curd, drew a fingertip over the area and then popped his finger into his mouth.

“Thanks,” he said, absently licking its tip.

Hermione was thinking back to what he’d just said. Simple as what? Malfoy studying at Muggle Oxford simply because he wanted to? There had to be more to it. She knew that he’d joined the Death Eaters their seventh year, but there was some question regarding whether he’d been forced. The general consensus was that he probably hadn’t had much stomach for any of it, because at the end of sixth year, he hadn’t been able to complete the dreadful task Voldemort had forced upon him he hadn’t killed Dumbledore. And he’d become increasingly withdrawn at school the following year when everything was gradually going straight to hell for all of them. She’d heard that from Neville and Luna and others. He hadn’t even been able to positively identify her and Harry to his father with any great conviction or relish before the final battle, even knowing that if he had done, he and his family would have got back into Voldemort’s good graces. There had seemed to be a reluctance, a hesitancy. She remembered that distinctly. She also remembered her amazement. Then again, he had tried to capture Harry and deliver him to Voldemort—but it had been a rather half-hearted attempt that had come to naught, ending with Harry saving his life. After that, until the prep classes had begun several months later, she had heard nothing of him. And then he had kept pretty much to himself that entire next year. He’d been a walking enigma.

Even now, he wasn’t offering anything more than a stock reply to her question, and something told her not to push.

“So then…” she began again. “What will you be reading?”

“History and English. You?”

“English too.” She pushed the last bit of cake around on her plate and then looked up at him again, smiling shyly. “I love literature!”

Draco laid his fork down, an answering smile briefly lighting his face.

“Me too,” he nodded. “I--”

He looked away for a moment, a faint flush colouring his cheeks.

“I suppose I may as well tell you. It’s been three years after all. What got me reading Muggle literature was… you. Well, not knowingly. But it all started when… well, when I borrowed one of your books.”

Hermione’s head snapped up. “What?”
“Yeah, I… uh… it was in sixth year. You probably won’t remember this. You were in the library one night after dinner and I passed your table. You had a copy of Lord of the Flies along with a bunch of other books. The cover… it caught my eye. I was curious. So… well… I said something and then knocked some of your stuff off the table. And then, whilst you were collecting everything from the floor, I… uh… took it.” He shook his head, a tiny smile on his face as he recalled this.

The memory of a night years ago came back to Hermione too. She’d had a long evening studying in the library: a tedious Arithmancy assignment had kept her swamped with work for the better part of two hours, but she’d finally finished it.

As she was putting the final touches on her work, Malfoy had sauntered past, his two flunkies in tow. He’d stopped at her table and glanced down for a long moment, then casually rested his hand on her pile of books.

“Well, well, Granger. In your usual spot, I see. You have read all of these at least twice tonight, have you not? No?” He clucked his tongue. “You disappoint me.”

And then his hand had moved, inscribing a casual arc as he swept most of her belongings off the table. He looked at her in mock horror.

“Oh! So sorry. Clumsy of me. It seems I’ve knocked your things to the floor.” And then he’d stood there, arms folded across his chest, waiting, the look of wide-eyed innocence on his face turning to a sardonic smile moments later.

Seething, biting back a righteous retort—It just wasn’t worth it! It was Malfoy, after all! What else could one expect?-- Hermione had dropped into a crouch, silently retrieving all of her things. The ink bottle had rolled into a table leg and opened, and a swath of black was soaking into her newly finished Arithmancy homework. It was ruined. Unless there was a way she could clean it thoroughly enough, she would have to do it all over again.

It wasn’t until much later that she discovered her copy of Lord of the Flies had gone missing.

Now she looked at him and found that little smile of his suddenly infuriating.

“Think that was funny, do you, stealing my property? ‘Borrowed’ indeed!” she huffed. “I’ll have you know I nearly had to recopy an entire assignment because of you! Two hours’ work close to being ruined and all because you wanted my book?”

“I wasn’t smiling because of that. I was just thinking what a complete arse I’d been.”

Surprised but mollified, Hermione gave him a grudging smile. “Couldn’t you just have asked to borrow it?” Even as the words came out of her mouth, she knew how silly they were under the circumstances.


She had to admit she couldn’t. “Well…after all that, did you like it, at least?”

Draco rocked back in his seat, gesturing expansively. “It was brilliant! I’d never read anything like it! Scared the living shit out of me though. That scene with Simon…” He shuddered involuntarily, wrapping his arms around himself.

“I know!” Hermione nodded. “I cried. Poor Simon! What they did to him was so brutal! And mindless. They totally lost their humanity, didn’t they. It was horrifying!”
Draco toyed with the remainder of his cake, his expression somber. He appeared to be on the verge of saying more. Suddenly he glanced at his watch, his eyes widening, and jumped up.

“Oh, shit! Sorry, Granger, must go! I’m about to be late!” His voice came back to her as he sprinted away. “See you!”

Hermione was left sitting there and feeling rather as if she’d just been caught up in a small, passing hurricane. A hurricane that had just treated her to coffee, cake, and conversation, and it had actually been not only civil, but pleasant. Enjoyable, even. Not to mention enlightening on more than one front. She had plenty of food for thought now, to accompany what was left of her coffee.

*

At a sprawling university with a population the size of Oxford’s, one might suppose that students could fade fairly easily into the venerable, old woodwork if they chose, that anonymity might be something of an issue even for those who didn’t seek it. In the short time Hermione had been here, this sense of isolation had proven both a blessing at times and a curse, as she struggled to find her own niche. She was about to discover that she wasn’t nearly as invisible as she had supposed.

Two days later, on her way to the library, Hermione had just stopped at the porter’s lodge at Hertford, her assigned college, to check the “pigeon holes” for any messages or mail. No mail—nothing much at all, really, except for an advert from Blackwell’s that she could see was in everyone’s pigeon hole. No, wait, hang on… there was something…

Reaching in, she extracted a piece of blue stationery folded into a tiny, intricate shape that looked like a bird in flight. Carefully, she opened it. The handwriting was very neat and precise, the message to the point.

_Holywell staircase 5. Tonight, 8 pm. DM_

TBC

*Note added, 17 October 2011: This is the second time that life has imitated art in a wonderfully serendipitous way involving this story. (The other time involves Tom Felton and touches on a part of this story far in advance of this first chapter, so no spoilers from me!) Today was Emma Watson’s first day as a student at Oxford, where she will be studying for a year before returning to Brown. Not only that, but she will be reading English at Oxford, just like Hermione! I couldn’t resist including a photo of her taken today, as she begins her studies there.*
Hermione on the first day of Michaelmas term, Oxford

Glossary:

Blackwell’s—the bookshop students at Oxford frequent.

Porter’s lodge—each college at Oxford has a porter’s lodge at the entrance. Students nowadays have keys to get in, but in the past, that wasn’t the case. It helped to be friends with the porter if you were out very late at night!

Pigeon holes—each college has what are known as “pigeon holes” in the area of the porter’s lodge, where mail and notes from friends are delivered for each student. The inter-campus “pigeon post” delivers such notes.

The system at Oxford is different to that of American universities and even that of most English ones, except for Cambridge. In the case of Draco's chosen area of study, it is not precisely what we in the States would call a "double major." "History and English" is a specific, established degree program with requirements in both departments.

And now a tour of Oxford and specifically, Hertford College:
View of Hertford College and the Bridge of Sighs from Catte Street

The Bridge of Sighs:
Overhead view of Catte Street and Hertford College, photo by Stuart Yeates

Hertford College Quad:
Hermione stood stock still. This note could mean only one thing: not only was Malfoy a student at Oxford, but he’d been placed in Hertford, the very same college as she—and so, not surprisingly, in Holywell Quad as well, where all first-years were housed. Either this was an utterly bizarre coincidence or strings had been pulled. As far as she was aware, they were the only two from the prep class at Hogwarts to have been admitted to this university. It would stand to reason that they’d be placed together to help make the transition easier for both of them, the fact that she’d been raised a Muggle notwithstanding. She was willing to bet that wherever more than one Hogwarts student had been accepted, there would have been a special request to house them together.

She glanced at her watch. 5:30. Enough time to have some dinner and do a bit of reading before… Butterflies flitted through her stomach momentarily as she slipped the folded paper into her pocket.

The next two hours crawled by. If there were a Guinness World’s Record for the number of times one looked at a wristwatch within a certain time span, Hermione was certain she’d already beaten it by a mile.

Dinner might as well have been sawdust. She wasn’t even sure what she was eating, just that it was there on the plate, and it was green and brown and rather ghastly.

Retreating to her room at Staircase 2, she made certain that both the inner door and the outer one
were firmly shut. Then she flopped down on her bed, burying her face in the pillows. The butterflies in her stomach had grown into Thestrals, and now there was an entire herd of them rampaging through. She clutched a pillow to her stomach to quell her nerves.

Really, this was silly. What had she to be nervous about, after all? It was just Malfoy. Just Malfoy…

She’d had every intention of reading, but her book remained untouched in her lap as she snuggled back against the comfy armchair pillow, thinking. What in Merlin’s name could he possibly want? They’d had a nice time at the café, granted, but he was probably just being polite in asking her along—fellow Hogwarts student, somebody familiar from their world, and she’d been sitting right there, he couldn’t exactly ignore her, could he—although, come to think of it, when had Malfoy ever been polite because it was the right thing to do? Such an idea went against eight years of experience, against everything she knew of him since the age of eleven.

So… if he weren’t simply being polite, then… No, that was ridiculous! The very idea… he couldn’t possibly…

She turned resolutely to her assignment: Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. But productive reading was not on the cards for tonight, apparently, because the next thing Hermione knew, she was waking from a nap and the bedside clock read a baleful 7:40 pm.

She stared fuzzily at the display for one frozen moment and then shot off the bed, galvanised into panicked action. What was she going to wear? Stupid, stupid, it doesn’t matter, what’s the difference, it’s not as if it’s a date or anything! Yes, but still. Right, the red one or the teal? She kept up the internal debate as she hurriedly scavenged through her drawers to find the right top and then the right jeans. Or what about that cute little denim skirt with the embroidery on the back pocket… Perfect!

*Teal top with the three-quarter sleeves, first three buttons left undone. Good. Her cheeks pinking up, she bit back a giggle at her own daring. Denim skirt, black Capri leggings, black ballet flats. Yes. Silver hoops. Check. A quick sweep of mascara, just a hint of blush and a drop of raspberry lip gloss for shine. She assessed herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the door and nodded."

Now—what to do about her hair! She tugged at it impatiently, wishing for the thousandth time that it was sleek and straight as a pin instead of the unruly mass of waves and ringlets she had to try and tame every single morning. Half up and half down? No, that made her look as if part of her head were exploding. She tried scrunching the waves with dampened fingers and that was okay, she supposed, but not wonderful. Finally, frustrated, impatient, and out of time, she twisted it into a messy bun, a few errant tendrils escaping here and there, and took one final look at herself. It would have to do.

Running her hands down her sides, she took a breath, turned and walked out the door, heading out to the quad to find the separate entrance for Staircase 5.

There it was, the wooden doorway framed all around in thick trails of ivy. Now—which floor out of the four? Quickly she scanned the board with all the nameplates. Ah. Malfoy, D. Room 12. Right, ground floor for the lecturer’s rooms and then three more floors, four rooms to a floor. That would make it the third floor.

By the time she got there, it was 8:07 pm. Draco stood at the head of the stairs, waiting for her. He pointedly tapped the face of his wristwatch.

“Late! I expected better of you, Granger,” he sighed, shaking his head in an amused reproach. “Come in.”
Pushing open the two doors, he beckoned her inside and then followed, making sure to shut them both behind him.

Like her own, his room was small. The furnishings were... minimalist, Hermione decided. Practically spartan, in fact. The bed was decorated with a simple, navy-blue duvet and a pair of soft pillows. The desk was extraordinarily neat and spare-looking—just a lamp, a blotter, a mug filled with pens and pencils, a phone, a laptop and a printer, which they’d learned to use in their prep class. A cork board was on the wall above it, but thus far, it was empty. A wardrobe stood in one corner. Apart from that, there was a chest of drawers, its top bare except for a brush, comb and shaving kit. The one exception to the overall asceticism of the room was the bookcase, which was crammed. Intrigued, Hermione made a mental note to have a closer look at his books later.

The only wall decoration was a poster above the bed, depicting a thin shingle of beach below an endless vista of sea and sky that shimmered in shades of pale blue, ivory, beige and a hint of lavender.

Draco had noticed her staring at the poster. “Like it?” he asked. “It’s a Wolf Kahn.”

“Who?” Hermione asked, feeling suddenly very ignorant. Clearly, Malfoy knew something about Muggle art, yet another surprise.

“Wolf Kahn. He’s an American painter. Does these nature scenes that are very nearly abstract, but you can still tell what it is he’s painting.” He regarded the print for a long moment and then turned back to Hermione. “How does it make you feel when you look at it?” The expression in his eyes was completely without guile and genuinely curious.

“Well…” she began, studying the picture for a moment, “what I like about it is... the sea and the sky seem to blend together. You almost can’t tell where one ends and the other begins. It’s all one. It makes me feel... calm.”

“Right!” Draco said excitedly. “That’s it exactly! That’s the whole point. Makes me feel that way too. Sometimes…”

He paused.

“Sometimes…?” Hermione repeated.

“Well, it’s just... sometimes I’d like to just disappear into the picture, that’s all.” Draco gave a small, embarrassed laugh. “Stupid, really!”

“No, it isn’t the least bit stupid. I know exactly what you mean. It would be lovely to be on that tranquil beach,” she said softly, nodding. For a very brief moment, there was real warmth in his eyes as he looked at her, and then the moment was over and an awkward pause took its place.

Then he brightened.

“Would you like something? Coffee, maybe, or tea? Hang on—” He grinned suddenly. “I’ve got something really good!” He disappeared for a moment and then returned with a slender-necked bottle of crimson liquid, a small, plastic jug of chilled Perrier, two slices of lemon and a packet of shortbread. “Elderberry wine. I like it with a twist of lemon and a little bit of sparkling water.” He pulled out the cork and poured some wine into a pair of glasses he’d fetched from the larger desk drawer. Adding just a splash of Perrier and the lemon slice, he handed one glass to Hermione along with the plate of shortbread. “These are very good too. Try one.”

“Thank you!” Hermione smiled and took a small bite of shortbread, followed by a sip of the wine. It
was really quite nice, very refreshing. “Mmm, lovely!”

Suddenly Draco seemed to notice that she was still standing.

“Please,” he said apologetically. “Sit!”

And then, as Hermione went to sit down at the end of the bed, he moved to pull out his desk chair for her, and the two of them collided.

“Sorry!” they said together, stepping back, and Hermione blushed.

“Thanks,” she added sheepishly, sitting down in the chair while he perched on the bed.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, enjoying their wine and biscuits. By the time her glass was empty, she still had no idea why he’d asked her to come, and he didn’t seem in any hurry to tell her.

He seemed to sense the question in her mind. “I suppose you’re wondering why I asked you here. More wine?”

Hermione nodded absently. “Yes, thanks.” She held out her glass, and he refilled it along with his own, topping them up with a little of the effervescent water.

“I can’t deny I was surprised to get your note.” She brushed a loose tendril of hair out of her eyes and smiled. “So—how come?”

“Well,” he replied, setting his glass down and going to the bookcase. “I thought I ought to give this back to you.” He pulled a paperback book off a high shelf and turned. “Sorry for pinching it. Here.” He held out his hand.

In it was her copy of *Lord of the Flies*. It had been relatively new when he’d taken it. But now it had the appearance of a book that had been read too many times to count. The cover was bent at the corners, and there was a distinct crease bisecting the centre. Tops of some pages were turned down slightly.

Hermione moved to take the book but then stopped, retracting her hand.

“No,” she said quietly. “It’s yours now. Keep it.”

Draco stared at her for a moment and then sat down on the edge of the bed, the book still in his hand, gently running his fingertips over the crease.

“Thank you,” he murmured. “It’s meant a lot to me these last three years, you know.”

“No, I don’t know, not really. Why don’t you tell me?” Curiosity had got the better of her, and the wine had relaxed her natural reserve.

His face was slightly flushed as he leaned back against the pillows, resting his wine glass against the top of one bent knee. Silence hung between them for just a moment before he began to speak.

“The first time I read it, I didn’t really get what Golding was doing. It seemed to me that Jack and Roger were right to insist on hunting and running things. They were strong, and they were natural leaders, and most everyone fell into line behind them. No matter what. They knew if they didn’t hunt, they would starve. It seemed to me that whatever they had to do was justified. Ralph and Piggy just seemed weak and foolish and not able to deal with the reality of the situation they were in. And I
thought that Simon was stupid for crashing out of the woods the way he did. Of course they were going to mistake him for a wild beast and attack him! He ought to have known better!”

He spoke to her, but at the same time, seemed oddly unaware of her presence now, almost as if he were conducting a monologue in her earshot. His eyes flicked over her briefly as he tossed back the dregs of his second glass.

“Several months later, I… well, you probably know about the cabinet. And all the rest too. I didn’t… I didn’t want to do it, you know. But I was given no choice. Voldemort was going to hurt my family if I failed. I wanted to blot out what I was doing whenever and however I could. So I read. A lot. Whatever I could get my hands on. Anything to escape my own head for a while. I found myself drawn back to this book.”

He closed his eyes for a minute, remembering.

“When I read it again, what Jack and Roger were doing seemed… I don’t know… just wrong, somehow. Childish. They were playing at being tough warriors, but they were kids. They were in over their heads. They couldn’t control it anymore. None of them could. And nobody was listening anymore. Nobody was thinking. They just followed. I knew what that felt like. It’s as if they weren’t human anymore; they were like animals, except animals are better than that. Animals aren’t deliberately cruel like people can be.

“I was scared shitless, Granger. I felt like I was losing myself a little more every day. I felt like Simon. Except that he had no clue what he was walking into. I knew. I fucking knew.”

He sighed explosively and covered his eyes, momentarily a bit dizzy. Hermione’s own eyes had filled with tears. She turned away, wiping her wet cheeks with the back of her hand.

There was more, though, and there was no stopping it now.

“Have you any idea what it feels like to be trapped that way? Chained to a fucking psycho! But the scariest thing was how nobody seemed to question any of it. Me, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, Parkinson, Nott… we all just bought into it, swallowed all that shite with a bloody please and thank you.” He sat up and looked at her, his face blotchy and his eyes red. “We were being played, Granger. And I don’t know about anybody else, but I was scared out of my fucking mind!”

He was hunched over now, his face in his hands. She could hear him taking gulps of air to steady himself. Impulsively, she sat down next to him on the bed, reaching a hesitant hand out to rub slow, gentle circles on his back. Finally, he raised his head and looked at her.

“I’m sorry. You didn’t need to hear all that.” He swallowed hard, looking away again. What the bloody hell had just come over him, spilling like that? He hadn’t intended the evening to go like this.

“No, no, it’s okay. Really! I’m glad you told me.” Hermione shook her head, blinking back a stray tear. She paused and then added softly, “I understand.”

Her hand was still warm on his back when he turned his head. His eyes were huge and very dark as they regarded her, never breaking contact; she knew, suddenly, that he was going to kiss her, and what’s more, that she was going to let him.

His mouth was soft and cool and sweet like rain, his kiss gentle and fleeting, light as a moth’s wing. And then he sighed and put his arms around her, drawing her close and resting his forehead against hers.

“Stay with me for a while,” he whispered against her skin. He felt so very tired all of a sudden.
“Please. I... I don’t want to be alone.”

“All right,” she said quietly.

Slowly, carefully, they lay down together on his narrow bed, Draco on his side and Hermione curled around him, her arm looped about his waist. He twined his fingers in hers, and she could feel his shuddering breaths gradually slowing and steadying and falling into a regular rhythm. His sleep was fitful, and he would wake many times before morning, always finding her hand again before dropping back off.

She lay awake for a long time as he slept, and then she finally slept too, her dreams haunted by images of him with Ralph, Piggy, Jack, and poor, sad, lost Simon.

At 5:45 am, Hermione awoke and for a moment, had no idea where she was.

She was fully dressed, her shirt rumpled and her skirt hiked up; she had a headache and the world’s worst taste in her dry mouth—and her arm was wrapped firmly around Draco Malfoy, of all people. His arm was flung over hers, her hand sandwiched between both of his and his fingertips moving lightly on her skin as he slept.

“Malfoy,” she whispered, and then, “Malfoy!”

When she got no response, she tried again. “Draco!”

She knew he’d awakened because for just a second, his hands tightened convulsively around hers. He rolled over to face her, his eyes widening in momentary surprise. Then he remembered.

“Hey,” he whispered. His head felt terribly heavy and his eyes began to slide shut once again.

“Hey.” Her voice was soft. “It’s morning.”

“I know,” he murmured, burrowing into his pillow. A sleepy smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “Fancy that.”

“Shall... shall we get up, then?” Hermione suddenly felt very awkward indeed.

Draco opened his eyes, raising himself up on one elbow to look at her. “I don’t know about you, Granger, but 5:45 in the morning is not what I call a civilised hour for human beings to be awake. Go back to sleep!” He flopped back onto his pillow and with a muffled groan, rolled over again.

Hermione was utterly nonplussed. Good job she wasn’t a betting person because the odds of finding herself in this particular situation with this particular person were long, to say the least.

A small giggle bubbled up and burst out of her. Just as her eyes were closing again, she heard laughter, soft and husky, in reply.
A/N: Thanks, hugs, and bouquets of flowers to my trio of marvelous and devoted betas, whom I’m proud to call my friends as well: kazfeist, floorcoaster, and mister_otter. You guys are the best, bar none!

What we in the US refer to as the “first” floor of a building is known as the “ground” floor in Britain. Therefore, Draco’s room at Hertford is on the fourth floor for Americans, but the third for Brits.

In the oldest Oxford colleges, there are two doors for every student’s room, an outer and an inner door. If you want privacy, you make sure both are shut. If you don’t mind people stopping in, you leave the outer door open and just close the inner one.

The poster that Draco has hung on the wall above his bed is a print of Wolf Kahn’s “The Gulf,” painted in 1998.
Thankfully, things hadn’t been nearly as strange as they might have been when, an hour and fifteen minutes later, the alarm clock went off, jolting the two of them out of the heavy sleep they’d finally dropped into after such a restless night. Nevertheless, it had been awkward.

They’d been stiff and achy, and in sore need of a shower, a toothbrush, and a fresh change of clothes. Hermione had flown around the room collecting her shoes, shoulder bag and jacket, and had been on the verge of running out the door when she noticed Draco standing by the desk, quietly watching her, a bemused smile on his face. He held out a mug of instant coffee he’d just made with water from a small electric kettle.

“Here. Sorry I haven’t any milk at the moment.”

Gratefully, she’d taken the steaming mug from him and together, they’d sipped their coffee in silence, neither of them quite sure what to say or where to look.

The coffee finished, Hermione had picked up her things once again and turned to go. What did one say under such circumstances? She hadn’t stayed over as a girlfriend, but neither had it been entirely platonic. She wasn’t sure what it had been, really, or what he expected of her now. In the end, she’d simply stuck out her hand and he’d taken it, giving it a brief squeeze.
“See you later?” she’d asked, hefting her over-sized hobo bag onto her shoulder.

Their Mediaeval Lit lecture was that morning at ten. He’d nodded and a moment later, she was gone.

Draco sank down on his bed, then, the mug of coffee in his hands momentarily forgotten as he reflected on the past twelve hours.

* Buggering hell. What had he done? Acted like a total wanker, that’s what. Said things he’d never meant to say, to the last girl on earth he’d ever meant to say them. What must she think? That he was a sniveling, whinging, pathetic little twat who couldn’t stop himself laying his heart bare after only two glasses of wine!

And he’d had such a different evening in mind too. It had been quite an inspired idea, really—the return of her book. Not that he hadn’t been sincere in his intention to give it back, but what a perfect reason to invite her over in the first place! And then, once she was here, he’d offer her something to drink in order to break the ice, give her the book, and then trust to luck for the rest. He’d sent her the note on an impulse, shoving it into her “pigeon hole” before he’d had a chance to change his mind.

Merlin, he’d only been fantasising about her since bloody fourth year and the Yule Ball! No—even longer than that, if he were going to be honest with himself. But until now -- until this place -- he’d never felt truly free to do anything about it.

And now he’d made a right bollocks of everything. She’d never want to see him now.

Miserably, he slammed the mug down on the desk, lukewarm coffee slopping over the rim onto the blotter.

“FUCK!” he muttered, and gave the leg of the desk a vicious kick.

Meanwhile, in the dining hall under the watchful eyes of all the old masters’ portraits, Hermione was having thoughts of her own about the previous evening. She sipped her orange juice and methodically put forkfuls of scrambled egg and bacon into her mouth, but her mind was a million miles away—or rather, across the quad… in room 12, Staircase 5.

More than anything, she was still stunned that he’d opened himself up the way he had. She hadn’t expected such candour, and it was shocking. She wondered how he must be feeling about his revelations now, the morning after. Did he regret them? He must do—any bloke would, she supposed. All that male ego rubbish. She smiled ruefully. Malfoy would probably feel that even more than most. For all she knew, he might even be hating himself now for taking her into his confidence in a moment of wine-induced weakness. The possibility of that made her heart sink a bit. But then her thoughts turned back to what he’d actually said. Even now, she was amazed whenever she replayed his words in her head:

Scared shitless… we were being played… fucking psycho… nobody was thinking… didn’t want to… losing myself… SCARED…

He’d been through far more than she’d ever imagined. Her ordeal whilst on the run with Harry and Ron was only a different sort to Draco’s back at school, but it was no greater. She imagined that in some respects, his during sixth and seventh years was far worse than anything she’d experienced,
because it was an inexorable torture that gradually ate away at his insides, tearing him apart without relief or escape. And he’d borne it in near silence and all alone.

A surge of horror and pity closed Hermione’s throat, tears pricking at her lashes. Her heart went out to him, even though she’d only just come to know the smallest part of who he was now. Suddenly, she had a strong desire to see him again. There was apparently far more to him than she could have guessed from the arrogant, disdainful, public face he’d always worn in the past.

And yes, that was it, wasn’t it? She hadn’t been able to quite put her finger on it before, but there was something different about him, and now she knew what it was. He didn’t wear that face here, at least not that she’d seen. It was almost as if, in coming to Oxford, he’d shed an old skin, leaving the blackened, ugly one behind.

If Hermione had been intrigued and curious before, now she was doubly so. She realised that she very much wanted to get to know this new Draco Malfoy. One way or another, she’d find a way to make that happen.

“…Your essays will be due at the end of term. I need not remind you that strictest adherence to proper documentation procedures is required and the consequences will be severe if anything unorthodox or improper is discovered. I will expect a well-written précis describing your project ideas by Thursday next.”

Their tutor, Mr. Allen, gathered his papers and notes, bringing them together in a neat pile and depositing them in a folder. “Very well. If you will excuse me, I have another appointment I’m already slightly late for.” He nodded formally. “Good day, Mr. Malfoy… Ms. Granger.”

They stood politely, waiting as he collected his things, and then walked out of his rooms ahead of him, turning to watch as he locked the door and then took his leave, his coattails flapping behind him.

“Remind you of anyone?” said a dryly amused voice in Hermione’s ear.

She turned her head slightly and grinned. “Oh, no… can’t imagine who you mean…” And then her voice and the grin died away, as the memory of Severus Snape’s death came back to her.

It was just a few months more than a year now. He had made a sacrifice beyond anyone’s knowledge or imagining, with the exception of Albus Dumbledore, whose own sacrifice—and Snape’s part in it—had been unknown until the very end of the war. It was so very difficult to imagine the two of them—and Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Tonks, Fred Weasley, Dobby, and so many others—dead and gone. But they were.

Hermione shook herself and turned to face Draco, whose own expression had sobered when he realised what he’d inadvertently said.

“I miss him,” he murmured. “I know he was something of a bastard to you and Potter and Weasley, all you lot, but he was important to me. He was … well… he was a friend.” More than you can possibly know.

There was a well of pain in his eyes that he quickly turned away to hide, and when he faced her once
again, his face was composed. “Any idea what you might be doing for your project?” he asked with studied casualness.

“Nope, not yet,” Hermione replied, keeping her own tone light as she stuffed her note cards into her bag. “I need to look the question over again.” Suddenly, an idea occurred to her and on impulse, she blurted it out. “Look, um… I was just thinking… what would you say to us working together on this thing? I mean,” she rushed on, not wanting to give him a chance to turn her down. “You know, the question does have an historical slant as well as a literary one. That’s one of your areas, history, and between us, I bet we could do a really good job! What do you think?”

She chanced a look at him now, hoping to gauge his reaction. His expression was thoughtful as he considered her suggestion. Hermione waited, busying herself with poking around in her rucksack. She hoped she didn’t look too eager.

“Well… okay,” he said slowly, nodding. “It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve worked together…” He turned to Hermione, a sly grin quirking his mouth. “Though the last time, I believe I remember a certain ingredient of mine, a rather slimy one, going missing at a key stage in our potion and later winding up on my shoes.” He paused. “Would you happen to recall that little incident?”

Hermione flushed and tried not to laugh. “Me?” she asked with exaggerated innocence. “You must be thinking of somebody else, Malfoy. Why ever would I do that to you?”

“Oh, possibly because twenty minutes earlier I had slipped a bit of powdered Hellebore in your sample of the potion and you disappeared completely for five minutes just as Snape was about to question you on your work.” His lazy grin held just a ghost of the old malicious glee as he recalled that particular class.

“Yes, and you might also remember I reappeared just in time to hear him take fifty points from my house to teach me a lesson about pranks! Me!”

Draco laughed, a real, full-out laugh that came from his belly.

“Well, at least you missed the rant the rest of us were subjected to because of your sudden absence!”

“Not that YOU minded, of course, seeing as you caused it!” she huffed, trying to be irate and failing miserably.

“True, true, I must admit to taking a certain pleasure in a job well done. By the way, Granger--” He paused as they neared the exit door which would take them out into the sunlit quad, and looked at her, utterly straight-faced, his voice low. “I’ve always wondered—what does it feel like to be totally invisible?”

Laughing, Hermione gave him a playful cuff on the arm as they walked out into the October sunshine. “The truth? A bit creepy, if you must know! Thanks for that singular experience, Malfoy!”

Draco grinned. “Pleasure. And… I suppose that was you tripping me as I was going to the supply closet? To thank me for all those new sensations?”

Hermione shrugged, a teasing smile in her eyes. “Well… it seemed the very least I could do in return!”

They’d stopped directly under the graceful, over-arching Bridge of Sighs, an oasis of deep shade on the sun-filled street. Hermione’s heavy rucksack had begun sliding down her arm and she struggled to hoist it back into place on her shoulder. Without thinking, Draco reached out to help.
“Thanks,” she murmured.

“S’okay,” he replied, suddenly absorbed in the sight of a bird perched on the wrought-iron gate leading out of Hertford College and into the street beyond.

“Well,” Hermione began, “I suppose we ought to put together a schedule of regular meetings so we can stay on top of this assignment.”

“Right,” Draco agreed, his attention back on her now that those mutinously chivalrous urges had passed. He considered for a moment. “A one-off won’t do it. We’ll need to spend quite a lot of time together, researching and then writing.”

“But first we need to choose the primary work we want to write about. Are you free later this afternoon? Say, around four?”

He nodded. “Where?”

Hermione didn’t hesitate. “My room,” she said firmly. “Holywell of course, Staircase 2, room number five. Four o’clock, then. See you!” She flashed him a quick smile and turned, hurrying away into Catte Street, her smile growing with every step.

Still standing under the arch of the bridge, Draco watched her go, and gradually a tiny smile of his own appeared.

Four o’clock then.

* 

That afternoon, 3:55 pm

Draco climbed the stairs, his satchel lightly packed with pens and a small spiral notebook. He found he preferred note-taking by hand to using his laptop, reserving that for writing the actual assignments. He was still rather slow and clumsy with the keys. More than that, he found that he missed the grace and elegance of a quill, but he was determined not to approach this university experience halfway. It was important – no, necessary – to fully immerse himself in the traditional life of the university and do it without magic, that his time here represent a complete break with his other life. It was in large part why he had chosen to come.

Second floor. Right, okay. Now… room five… ah, there. The outer door stood open, an invitation without the need for words.

Just as he raised his hand to knock on the inner door, it opened.

Hermione stood there, a shy smile on her face. “Hi. Please… come in,” she said, gesturing. “I… um… thought we might get hungry whilst working. I hope you like cheese!”

Behind her on the desk, there was a sturdy paper plate with two fresh cheeses and a pair of small knives. Fanned out around the cheeses was an assortment of biscuits. Beside it there was another paper plate, this one filled with sliced apples and grapes artfully arranged.
“Oh, and... I brought us some special coffee from the Rose. I hope you like café mocha. I’ve just warmed them up. Thought we might need something to keep us going. This could take a while.” A pair of tall, white, porcelain coffee cups waited on the desk. She slanted a quick look at Draco and found him looking faintly incredulous.

She had shopped-- had gone out of her way-- for him.

“You didn’t have to do this,” he began and then saw the beginnings of a crestfallen expression on her face. “But it’s... it’s great. Thanks, Granger-- really!”

Hermione relaxed into a smile and beckoned him to sit. Now, for the first time, he had a really good look around her room. Structurally, it was much the same as his own. Bed, desk, chest of drawers, wardrobe, sink, window looking out on the quad. But where his room was spare and plain, hers was alive with pieces of herself everywhere one looked. Her corkboard above the desk was crammed with notes to herself, clipped articles, photos—Muggle and therefore non-moving, of course—and saved ticket stubs. A cheery bedspread and throw pillows made her bed an inviting place, and a soft rug invited luxuriating with bare feet. There was a folding butterfly chair next to the desk, near the lamp. On all four walls, posters had been hung, but hers were mostly prints of lush Impressionist paintings. She favoured Monet’s garden paintings most of all; there were two depicting his garden at Giverny and another pair from the Waterlilies series. Altogether, it gave her room the feel of a garden at the height of summer—tranquil, but yet very vibrantly alive. It reminded him powerfully of his mother’s garden at the Manor, and suddenly he missed her very much.

“Please…” she said quickly, and indicated the fruit, cheese and biscuits. “Help yourself. Coffee?”

* *

Hermione sat in the butterfly chair, one leg draped over the side. A notebook was in her lap, and Draco noticed that now she was chewing absently on the end of her pen just as she had always done with her quills.

“Right,” she muttered, looking at her notes. “We’re supposed to choose one major work that falls within the time frame we’re studying and discuss its significance, both to its own time and to contemporary readers, culturally, intellectually, religiously, and socially. Oh, plus its importance to modern scholars as an historical document. In other words, both a literary and an historical analysis. That’s the general gist of what Allen wants.”

“Not too bloody much to deal with, is it!” Draco snorted, shaking his head. “Holy shit, Granger, could he possibly have made the topic any broader, do you suppose?”

Hermione laughed ruefully. “Probably using us for the preliminary research for a book or something! Don’t forget, we’ll have to narrow it down to something far more specific within that context.”

“Right.” Draco set his mouth in a determined line. “Well, let’s get cracking then.”

*
An hour later, the cheeses, a creamy Brie and a Stilton, had been decimated. Only a few biscuits remained amidst the scattered crumbs. Four apple slices and seven grapes sat forlornly on their paper plate.

Hermione and Draco had managed to narrow their choices down to two possibilities after slogging through a long list of suggested readings and secondary sources attached to the course syllabus. It would either be “Gawain and the Green Knight” or “Beowulf.”

Taking his turn lounging in the butterfly chair, Draco had been arguing vociferously in favour of “Beowulf” for the past ten minutes.

“Come on, Granger! It’ll be loads more fun! Dragons, trolls, serpents, swordplay, lots of blood and gore!” He laughed.

“Oh, you!” Hermione giggled. “I’m positive you’d like ‘Gawain’! Hey, there’s a really good beheading in it! Oh, and what about that knight who’s all over green? He’s definitely magical.”

Draco reached for a grape and tossed it into the air, deftly catching it in his mouth.

“Look,” he said, chewing, “I think I probably would like it, actually. But Old Norse mythology really interests me, and early Scandinavian paganism and the Vikings and their influences and all. Ever since I read Tolkien, really.”

Hermione looked up, startled. “You know Tolkien?”

Draco popped another grape into his mouth and nodded. “I read everything of his that I could get my hands on, starting a couple of years ago. Had to sneak the books in at home during the summers and hide them. My father would not have approved. But they… they kept me going. Pure escapism at first, but it turned into a lot more.” He glanced over at Hermione briefly. “Tolkien’s part of the reason I wanted to come to Oxford, you know.”

“Because he taught here, you mean?”

Draco nodded again. “Yes. Imagine! Right here! For many years. C.S. Lewis too. They were mates as well as colleagues, used to hang out at one of the pubs—”

“The Eagle and Child.”

“Otherwise known as The Bird and Baby, yes. Every Tuesday, I think it was. With a bunch of other dons who wrote as well. Mostly fantasy, I believe. I read that E.R. Eddison used to join them sometimes.”

“The Inklings—yes, I know! I love it that these amazing writers were actually here and were friends and talked about writing and read their stuff to each other. Really, how exciting is that!” Hermione rocked back on the bed, hugging her knees.

They grinned at each other, both caught up in the pure pleasure of the idea.

“So—‘Beowulf,’ then? Right?” He winked at her.

She let out a sigh and rolled her eyes. “‘Okay, okay, Malfoy, I give up! ‘Beowulf’!”

He smiled to himself, and then said briskly, “Right, so what’s next then? Got a copy to hand? Or do you need to buy one?”
“Got one, thanks. I assume you do as well?”

“Naturally, Granger. But we’ll need to use the same edition—or better yet, let’s have two or three in front of us, and then we can compare the way language is used in the translations. Let’s go to Blackwell’s tomorrow and see what we can find.”

Hermione nodded distractedly, momentarily brought up short as she listened to Draco. As much as she understood intellectually how it was that he came to be here, and she knew, at least in part, how he had prepared to study here, it was all beginning to seem rather surreal: his being here at all, his ease with the transition to living in the Muggle world, his knowledge of and facility with Muggle literature—the lot. He continued to surprise and intrigue her.

“Draco,” she said quietly, “I was wondering… what you said before… you know… about sneaking books into your house and your father not approving… What was that like?”

His stomach clenched into a small knot. He hadn’t been expecting that question. In fact, after last night, he’d rather hoped to avoid any real mention of the past and all it had contained for him. But he’d slipped again and now she was asking, and that meant he had to deal with it somehow.

He stood and stretched and then walked to the window, peering out. It was close to six now, and the sun had just set. He shivered slightly. It would be Samhain in only a week and a half. He continued to gaze out the window at the blackening night.

“It was… depressing. That first summer when I began reading outside of acceptable wizarding books, sixth year had just ended.”

Instantly, the death of Dumbledore flashed through her mind and she knew that was the unspoken but vital factor of this conversation.

“I went home—well, Snape brought me home, really. And basically I was under house arrest. Not literally, you understand -- but I wasn’t allowed to go anywhere or see anybody. My mother was frantic to protect me. My father—well, he wasn’t there. As you know.”

Hermione nodded. “But… how did you stand being so cooped up all the time?”

Draco smiled faintly. “I managed to sneak out of the house a few times that summer, and I went down into the village just to walk around a bit. Funny, I hadn’t been there more than a handful of times before that. There’s a very old wizarding pub hidden away there. The White Hart, it’s called. I’d heard Father mention it in passing and I’d known for years that he and his cronies went there now and then.”

“Did you go there? You were of age by then. You were seventeen.” Hermione sat, her arms wrapped round her knees, listening intently.

“Yeah. I’d been a couple of times before that as well. Over the winter hols in sixth year. Got myself properly shitfaced. Reckon I thought that would make it all go away.” Draco raised his eyes for a quick, tentative glance at Hermione. She nodded slightly, her own eyes large.

He sighed and continued. “After the war, well… Father was relieved I hadn’t died, I suppose, but… once again, I had the feeling I’d failed him. He barely spoke to me the entire summer. The look in his eyes whenever he saw me… well…” Draco suppressed a shudder. “It would have made things that much worse if he’d found me with Muggle books. He would not have understood.

“Anyway, by the end of sixth year, I’d already read The Hobbit. Did you know there are copies of all his works in the library at Hogwarts? Seems there’s a lot of speculation that Tolkien was a
closeted wizard. And even if he wasn’t, he portrayed our world in a very favourable and respectful light, so his books are there, though I had to hunt for them. And... well... you weren’t the only one I nicked a book from..."

The implicit meaning of his words suddenly struck Hermione and she clapped a hand over her mouth. “Malfoy, you didn’t!”

Draco smiled ruefully. “I’m afraid I did. Not all at once, of course. Madame Pince never even missed them.”

“Them?”

“Think, Granger. I couldn’t very well take only one and not the other two, now could I? Anyway,” he went on, turning away from the window and sitting down opposite her on the bed, “I spent the whole summer after sixth year in Middle-earth. You’ve read it, haven’t you?”

Hermione nodded somberly.

“Then you understand the irony of it. Could I possibly have chosen anything more appropriate, do you suppose?” He laughed, but it was a mirthless sound. “The parallels were uncanny. For me, it was a lesson in what to get away from as far and as fast as possible. Except I couldn’t. I couldn’t. And there was fuck-all I could do about it.”

Hermione had listened quietly, nodding her head from time to time. What he was telling her was appalling, a very human story from somebody to whom she had spent years denying any real humanity. Of course, she reasoned, that hadn’t been her fault, really—to a large extent, she’d only responded to what she’d seen. But then, she’d never given too much thought to what might have been behind the exterior, not until sixth year, and even then, only briefly. A pang struck her as she remembered hearing about the distraught boy weeping in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom.

“Oh, Draco,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.” And she was, but not just for the fear and isolation she now knew he must have experienced. She was sorry, so sorry, for not stopping a moment longer, three years before, to really consider why that boy might have been weeping.

He looked intently at her. “Are you?” he asked softly.

She nodded, unable to say anything.

Powerful twin urges suddenly swept over him—one, to take her hand and just hold onto it and not let go, and the other, to remove himself from this scrutiny altogether. He found himself curiously touched by her compassion, but the intensity of it was a bit scary too. This was the very stuff he’d wanted so desperately to get away from, and now, here he was, with the very girl with whom he’d had such a history of mutual antagonism, drawn right back in somehow and finding himself blathering away about it. Again. And why her? None of this made any sense!

Heaving himself off the bed, he made a show of looking at his watch.

“Merlin, will you look at the time! Better get going, studying to do!” Swiftly, he gathered his books, dumping them into his bag, and then walked back to the bed where she still sat. Because, well, he couldn’t just leave.

“See you tomorrow? We’ll go to Blackwell’s, yeah?”

She nodded, her smile belied by the confusion and disappointment in her eyes.
He hesitated just a fraction of a second, and then, dropping a quick kiss on the top of her head, he disappeared out the door, leaving Hermione to wonder what had just happened. She racked her brain. Had she done something wrong? Was it something she’d said?

Outside, a lone figure yanked the hood of his fleece pullover over his pale hair and shoved his hands in the front pocket as he looked up at the window he knew was hers, bright against the dark, ivied facade of the old building.

“Bugger!”

You’ve seen what Draco has put up on his wall. Here are Hermione’s Monet posters:
“Waterlilies”
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks and bunches of summer flowers to my wonderful betas-- mister_otter, kazfeist, and floorcoaster, for their careful and thorough reads and very helpful feedback! *Hugs to all!*

Many thanks and a perpetual stash of Godiva Dark Chocolate Pearls to moonjameskitten, who has gifted me with yet another brilliant and beautiful banner that is so very right for this story, it’s just uncanny! I love its ethereal quality!

Ongoing thanks to everyone at HP Britglish who has helped me so much! You guys are absolutely wonderful, a treasure trove of fantastic information, including some really great minutiae that will surely find its way into my fic at some point or other.
The excursion to Blackwell’s the next afternoon had been productive, though again, a trifle awkward at first for both of them. Draco had decided to take the never-happened-just-forget-it route, and although Hermione was dying to question him about the reason he’d left so abruptly the night before, she sensed it was better to leave it alone. There was always the possibility that in asking, she might get an answer she didn’t really want.

Arriving at the main branch of the bookshop, a large retail space located quite near Hertford on Broad Street, they’d been directed upstairs. Hermione had looked longingly towards the staircase that led down to the Norrington Room, the cavernous basement area holding thousands upon thousands of books, but Draco had pulled her away.

“Control yourself, Granger,” he had teased. “We’ll get there, don’t worry. First things first!” And he’d taken her firmly by the arm and steered her upstairs, where all the English and history offerings were housed.

The section on “Beowulf” was enormous; there was a mind-boggling array of editions, both in prose and poem form, and even more critical works. The two of them stood there gawking, until Hermione
shook herself out of her initial surprise and began rummaging in her bag.

“Look,” she said firmly, still rooting around. “I did a bit of research last night on the various translations available and I’ve got it down to a small list of the most recommended ones. I think we should go for those. As far as critical texts, we can get those in the college library. Unless there’s something here we feel we absolutely must have. Plus, of course, there are some important critical essays included in some of the texts, so we’ll already have a head start. What do you think?”

Draco shrugged. “Fine with me. What’s on your list then?”

Hermione had finally extracted a small notebook from her shoulder bag and now she thumbed through it. “Ah, here. Okay. Seamus Heaney, for starters. Supposed to be brilliant. That’s in poem form. And so is the one by Rebsamen, though from what I’ve read about that one, you really have to know the poem well first before tackling that particular translation. That one’ll help us more with getting a feel for how the original sounded. Same for the one by Porter. There’s also a good one by Ruth Lehmann.” She glanced up at Draco. He was gazing around him, mesmerised by the bustle and noise and sheer size of the massive shop.

She gave his arm a poke. “Pay attention, Malfoy!”

He turned back to her, surprised. “Sorry. You were saying?”

Hermione rolled her eyes, sighing noisily. “Well, I was about to say that there are several good prose translations as well. Donaldson’s is one, Rebsamen’s is another, and the one by Bertha Rogers is supposed to be excellent too.”

Draco grinned. “Well, let’s get them all!”

Her eyebrows shot up. “I can’t afford that, not on my allowance! Not if we’re going to buy some criticism as well!”

“Ah yes,” Draco replied smoothly, placing his hand at the small of her back and propelling her gently towards the shelves. “But I can afford it. Sod the expense. I’ll take care of it.”

“Well, will you… will you mind if I write in the books, though? Because I always write in the margins. I have to, I can’t help it!”

He smirked, and gave a short laugh. “I won’t mind. Reading your margin notes will provide a fascinating insight into the way your overactive little brain works!”

“Hmm!” Hermione huffed, pushing against him playfully. Funny how his teasing was so much less… irritating than it always used to be when he’d merely been bloody Malfoy to her and she’d so often been the butt of his mean jokes. And then she wondered if what he said was less the issue than how she’d perceived his intent then, compared to the way it was coming across now. Perception and intent: one fed off the other and in turn, influenced it. And then there was misperception and the rush to judgement, which often bollocksed everything up, intentions be damned. It was complicated!

In the end, they bought eight translations to compare against the original – four each of poetry and prose -- and decided to hold off on the criticism, opting to begin instead with the essays already included in the texts. Hermione was amazed when she saw Draco matter-of-factly withdraw a credit card from his wallet and hand it to the sales clerk.

She bit her tongue, however, managing to wait until they’d got outside, well away from anyone else, to ask about it.
“Don’t look quite so shocked, Granger,” he’d replied, shrugging. “Once I knew I’d be coming to study here, I had money from Gringotts changed into Muggle currency and deposited in a local bank. They gave me this card when I opened the account. It makes life a lot simpler, don’t you think?”

“Does that mean you take care of battels yourself?” Hermione was wide-eyed.

“Of course. Don’t you?” Now it was Draco’s turn to be surprised.

“No, I… my parents pay the bills. I mean, they’re sent home, not to me.”

“Well, it’s different for me. My parents neither understand nor support my decision to do this. I think my mother is less adamantly opposed to it than my father, but even she doesn’t really get it. I am of age, however, and certain funds have become available to me, so I can finally do what I want.” Draco smiled grimly. “Making the decision to move that money was very satisfying.”

“I bet,” Hermione murmured. She couldn’t imagine being at such odds with her own parents, who had always supported her in what she had wanted to do, even when her magical gifts had come to light and she’d chosen to leave her Muggle life behind to attend Hogwarts. Now Draco was describing essentially the same sort of situation in reverse. She understood that she’d had it easy by comparison, and suddenly she was very grateful for her parents’ sensitivity and support, something she’d always rather taken for granted.

A sudden tug at her jacket sleeve brought her back to the present. Draco was looking at her expectantly, an amused glint in his eyes.

“Earth to Granger,” he drawled. “Merlin, woman, now who’s not paying attention?”

“Oh, sorry!” she said sheepishly, colouring. “What is it?”

“Well, I was going to ask if you wanted to go back inside and explore a bit, just for fun. I know I would.”

A very enticing vision of miles and miles of books on every conceivable subject came to mind, and Hermione couldn’t resist.

She nodded happily. “Yes, please!”

Impulsively she grabbed his hand and led the way back inside the bookshop.
The following Thursday they met with their tutor, Mr. Allen, and presented the précis for their essays. He found both their idea for the proposal and the rationale for the project being a joint one to be sufficiently sound, and gave them the go-ahead to proceed with it. And so the work began in earnest.

They had decided to do a comparative study of several translations of the original text, and see if they could uncover possible cultural, philosophical, gender-related or historical biases that might have influenced the use of language in each one, and what such biases might mean for the legitimacy of the text in translation as well as what they might reveal about the time periods in which the translations were done. Now it was time to get down to cases and begin the intensive reading phase of the assignment.

They split the translations between them, each of them taking two poetic and two prose versions. They agreed that both would prepare notes and commentary on one translation per week, and that a month should suffice to get the work done and keep them on schedule, leaving them enough time to actually write the essay well before the due date. After each work session, they’d swap notes and translations, check everything, and append their own notes for the next meeting. Mr. Allen would monitor their progress closely in the weekly tutorials.

Halfway through the week, late on Monday night, there was a soft but insistent knock on Hermione’s door.

Struggling up out of sleep, she made her way there, her heart pounding.

“Who is it?” she hissed, her ear to the door.

“It’s me, Granger. Needed to get out for a bit, get some fresh air. Fancy a walk?”

“Malfoy, have you totally lost the plot? It’s three o’clock in the morning!” Hermione exclaimed, trying to keep her voice down.

“It’s beautiful outside now! Come and see!” He sounded excited.

Pulling on a pair of jeans, shoes, and a warm jumper over her sleep shirt, Hermione grabbed her jacket and opened the double doors.
Draco wore his fleece pullover over a knitted turtleneck jumper and jeans. He flashed a quick smile at her as they slipped silently down the stairs and out the door to the quad, trying not to wake anyone.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered, taking her hand and pulling her along. “Don’t be afraid. I’ve got you. I just want to show you something!” They walked until they stood in the centre of the quad.

“Right, now look up!”

She did, and a breathtaking sight met her eyes: against the backdrop of an inky sky, clouds like tattered lace scudded across a nearly full, silver-gold moon, their shredded ends flying behind, backlit in the halo of its light.

Hermione stood transfixed. “Oh…” she sighed finally. “It’s… it’s just… amazing! It looks like something out of a dream… or fairy land…”

“Three days to Samhain, you know,” Draco said quietly. “Remember the Hallowe’en feast at Hogwarts every year?” He was standing very close, just behind her, and his breath rustled her hair, tickling her cheek as she turned her head slightly.

As she turned the rest of the way, he stepped back a bit.

“I remember,” she replied softly, and then studied his face for a moment. “What’s wrong -- couldn’t sleep?”

Draco looked away from her and back up at the moon, now completely shrouded once again in clouds. “No. I… this happens to me sometimes. Don’t worry, I’m okay. Come on,” he urged, “let’s walk for a bit.”

And so they did, in companionable silence, for several minutes. The streets slumbered in an almost unearthly quiet, their footfalls nearly the only sounds. An occasional car passed, and even more rarely, a small knot of students on their way home. They were virtually alone.

Suddenly, Hermione stopped.

“Look,” she said, pointing at the sky. The clouds had begun to disperse, leaving a small swath of sky surrounding the moon completely clear. “There’s a star!”

She stood quite still and closed her eyes.

“What are you doing?” Draco wanted to know.

Hermione waved her hand, her eyes still shut. “Sshh… making a wish!”

Finally she squeezed her eyes a bit more tightly as if for emphasis and then opened them, giving Draco a shy smile. “I always make a wish on the first star I see at night. My mum taught me the rhyme when I was little.”

Suppressing a grin, he asked, “How does it go?”

“‘Starlight, star bright, first star I see tonight. Wish I may, wish I might have the wish I wish tonight!’ Silly, really, but I’ve been doing it practically all my life, and I can’t seem to break the habit!”

They walked on in silence once again.

After a few moments, Draco looked at her. “What did you wish for?” he asked softly.
“Hey, don’t you know you’re not supposed to tell a wish?” she teased. “No, seriously, I can’t tell you. It’s bad luck.”

“I know what I would wish for,” he murmured.

She glanced at him curiously, but he was already looking straight ahead again as they walked.

By the time they returned to the college, it was well past four. They sat together on the steps outside the entrance to Staircase 2, neither one saying anything much. Hermione yawned, resting her head on the pillow of her arms and closed her eyes. Before very long, her breathing became deeper and more rhythmic, and he knew she’d fallen asleep.

Draco studied her. She seemed so fragile suddenly, so small. He reached a tentative hand out. It hovered above her hair, which had come undone from the bun she’d hurriedly pulled it into when she’d dressed. Suddenly, he wanted to bury his hand in the soft, springy curls, to lift them to his face and sniff their perfume. He could smell it faintly even now: apricots.

Holding his breath, he let his fingertips and then the whole of his hand rest lightly on her hair. It was just as soft as he’d imagined. Bending his head, he breathed in its scent, and then suddenly, she stirred and he drew back, snatching his hand away.

Opening her eyes, she smiled up at him sleepily.

“Come on, Granger, up you get,” he sighed, and held out his arms. Obediently, she placed her hands in his and he pulled her to her feet, slipping an arm around her waist to steady her as they walked up the stairs to her room.

She handed him her key and he fiddled with it in the lock for a moment before the inner door swung open; then he walked her to the bed, whereupon she lay down immediately, curling up with a small sigh. The temptation to lie down beside her and gather her very close was strong. Instead, tucking the quilt around her, he leaned over and finally gave in to another of several impulses that had been dogging him for the past hour and a half. Her cheek felt so smooth as he pressed a soft, lingering kiss there.

She sighed again in her sleep and smiled, snuggling more deeply under her quilt.

Then, as he straightened up, he spotted something he hadn’t noticed when they first came into the room. On the wall above her bed, the posters had been rearranged and a new one had been added. It was a copy of the very same Wolf Kahn he loved so much, the one that hung on the wall over his own bed.

Surprised and oddly elated, he lost himself in it for a moment, the dim light of the small bedside lamp casting a flickering, golden sheen on the water and sky. As always, their ineffable serenity spoke to him, moved something inside him.

“Night, Hermione,” he whispered finally, and then turned out the light and slipped away. The door closed behind him with a quiet click.

At the sound, she opened her eyes, her fingertips finding the spot his lips had touched only moments before. Smiling into the darkness, she turned over and went to sleep.
The following Thursday arrived, bringing their first working meeting for the project. They had arranged to have the session in Draco’s room at four.

Four o’clock found Hermione hurrying along the rain-darkened pavement leading to the entrance to Staircase 5. Her oversized bag, crammed with books and several folders of carefully organised notes, was slung over her shoulder.

When she knocked at three minutes past four, Draco was ready for her. His own notes had been meticulously arranged on the desk in neat piles next to the texts he’d read and prepared the notes on. Two mugs waited alongside a jar of instant coffee, a container of milk, and an assortment of tea bags and sugar packets in a small bowl. A box of iced, chocolate biscuits had already been pillaged, from the looks of it, but there were still a number of them left.

She swept in, dumping her book bag on his bed and plopping herself down next to it with a huge sigh.

“Hello to you too, Granger,” Draco said amiably. “And what’s got your knickers in such a twist, if I might ask?”

She looked up, rolled her eyes, and gave a quick, embarrassed laugh. “Oh, don’t mind me! I’m just being stupid, I suppose.” She ran a hand through her hair, the curls springy from the steady drizzle. Draco noticed that tiny droplets still clung to them.

“What’s happened?” He dropped into the nearby desk chair, straddling it backwards and leaning his chin on the chair back.

“It’s nothing, really. just the whole day going wrong right from the off! Overslept this morning, and then I was late to my tutorial with Bates—I actually had to throw my clothes on over my pyjamas, I was running so late!— and then I realised that in my rush, I’d forgotten to bring my rough draft to discuss with him and I had to apologise for wasting his time and run all the way back to my room to get it, which left practically no time to really talk to him, which was awful, you know, because there were simply loads of questions that I didn’t get to ask! And then this absolute plonker kept bothering me at lunch; he wouldn’t leave me alone! He just didn’t get it that I wasn’t interested; he kept sticking his spotty nose in my face and asking personal questions and trying to get me to say I’d go out with him. Which I won’t. Ever. Ugh!”

Draco snorted. “What did you do then?” I’ll warrant it was something good.

Hermione huffed, blowing a stray curl out of her eyes. “Well, I… um… had a small accident with my pasta. I can be terribly clumsy at times!” She gave him a wayward little grin. “The plate was a bit too close to the edge of the table, and… well… my elbow must have bumped it and… it was awful, really, pasta and sauce all over the silly git’s lap. At least it wasn’t hot anymore. But you should have seen him jump!”

They laughed together at the very thought.

“Oh! And then, on my way over here, I was running because I didn’t want to be late, and I caught my heel in a crack in the pavement and it broke right off!” She reached into her pocket and extracted the heel of her shoe. “See? And of course, I went flying! Naturally about two hundred people saw me fall. Luckily I didn’t get hurt. But-- definitely not one of my more spectacular moments.” She caught his eye and grinned again, ruefully.

Draco covered his efforts not to laugh with an elaborate sigh and a shake of his head. “Whatever am I going to do with you, darling?”
That last word seemed to hang on the air in blazing letters, and there followed a moment of acute awkwardness. Then, recovering himself, he continued quickly, “Here, let’s have some tea, you look like you could really use a cup!”

The endearment hadn’t been lost on Hermione. It had taken her aback for just a moment, but then she’d dismissed it. It’s just Malfoy. He’s always been an impossible flirt. It means nothing.

Meanwhile, Draco turned away, busying himself with boiling the water and putting tea bags into the cups, hoping to hide the flush he felt suffusing his face. ‘Darling’?? Where did that come from? It certainly wasn’t the first time he’d used the word when talking to a girl, but somehow, it felt different this time, in a way he wasn’t sure he understood or even felt comfortable trying to understand.

Turning back to Hermione, he held out a steaming mug to her.

“Tea?”

An hour later, there were papers spread out all over the floor, and the texts they’d bought lay scattered and open between them. To a casual observer, it would have appeared that the room was in total chaos, but nothing could have been further from the truth.

Hermione was partly buried under the stacks of notes she’d taken on the first of two versions of the poem she’d chosen. Tapping the end of her pen against her cheek, she scanned several index cards with an expression of deepest concentration.

“Right. The Lehmann translation came out in 1988 and the one by Heaney only eleven years later. So we’ve got a minimal amount of time to account for, probably of no real consequence in terms of the cultural or historical influences that could have affected the translations. Of course, there are still the questions of gender and personal philosophy.”

Draco nodded, fishing his own index cards from the mess on the floor and giving them a quick glance. “And let’s not forget the artistic sensibilities of each writer. Heaney is a poet in his own right. What about Lehmann?”

“She is as well, and a university professor for many years.”

“Right, same for Heaney,” Draco answered. “Then we’ll want to be thinking about how they use language in light of their backgrounds, and how they might be bringing their own take on writing to the translation. Let’s look at a couple of passages to see how they differ.”

Hermione was all business. “Good idea. Okay, which ones?”

“What about…” he mused and looked at the text again. “Okay, what about the lines in the opening section, the ones describing Beowulf’s voyage to Denmark. Here’s Heaney:

‘Over the waves, with the wind behind her
and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird
until her curved prow had covered the distance

*
His voice was richly expressive as he read, and Hermione found herself listening with great pleasure, wishing he wouldn’t stop. Even after he did, she sat there, still lost in the words he’d spoken.

“Uh… Hermione?”

Draco sat with his book in his lap, grinning.

“What? Oh! Sorry!”

Chagrined, she ran her finger down the page of her text until she found the equivalent lines in her text.

“Okay, here’s Lehmann on the same section:

‘Off across the ocean, urged by breezes,
foamy fore-stem flew like a bird,
till by the set season of the second day
the craft with curved prow had covered the distance,
and those sailing men saw land ahead,
shorecliffs shining, sheer escarpments,
wide seashorelands; waters were traversed,
travel ended.’”

Hermione thought for a minute. “Hmm. Did you notice the way she uses a part of the boat to mean the whole, when she says ‘foamy fore-stem flew like a bird’? Heaney refers to the ‘foam at her neck,’ and then just cuts to the chase and says ‘she,’ which is far more direct. So he sacrifices the alliteration there. We need to be thinking about which approach is more effective in terms of telling the story as well as the poetic use of language, and of course which one is closer to the spirit of the original. Another thing: Lehmann refers to the men as ‘those sailing men’—what was it Heaney said there?” She glanced up at Draco.

“ ‘Those seafarers.’ And he’s got ‘looming headlands’ compared to Lehmann’s ‘wide seashorelands.’ Bit of a mouthful, that. And it doesn’t really get across the idea of these gigantic cliffs coming up at you suddenly as you’re sailing. You know, Heaney’s image reminds me of that bit in Lord of the Rings where they’re sailing and they see those huge stone statues of the kings looming ahead in the water. Remember that?”

Hermione nodded, excitement in her eyes.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I really prefer Heaney’s version. I think he’s far more accessible, overall, in terms of language, even if sometimes he sacrifices some of the poetic devices. What do you think?”
“Yes, definitely. I like his better too, from what I’ve seen of it. She’s far more abrupt at times. Look at the end of that section, where she just says, ‘travel ended.’”

“Yes!” Draco nodded, reaching for the last biscuit. “Want half?”

She shook her head.

He grinned and took a bite. “And did you notice the tone itself in that last bit? She says ‘waters were traversed, travel ended.’ Abrupt as you say, but more too, I think. Because— listen to Heaney there: ‘those seafarers sighted land, sunlit cliffs, sheer crags and looming headlands, the landfall they sought. It was the end of their voyage.’ I think he’s personalised it much more, so that we feel what they’re feeling at the end of the voyage. That one line ‘the landfall they sought’ says it all, really. There’s real feeling there, a wish, you know? A desire for something that’s finally been fulfilled. Makes me think about what it must have been like for the Vikings, sailing all over the place, so much of their lives spent on the sea -- how they must have longed for those times they could finally set foot on dry land and feel the earth after so long away. Just as they probably really missed the open sea after too long ashore.”

Hermione nodded, a tiny smile lighting her eyes. She’d been mesmerised both by his words and by the rapt expression on his face as he spoke. That he was so keenly aware of language and had ideas as perceptive and impassioned as these were twin surprises. She’d never seen the introspective side of him in all the years she’d known him at Hogwarts -- only the more abrasive side. Now she wondered how much had been covered up by that caustic behaviour; it was apparently far more than she’d ever given him credit for.

“Oh, yes…” she said quietly, looking at him. “That was beautiful… what you said, I mean. You’ve thought about this quite a lot, haven’t you?”

Draco looked away for a moment. Suddenly he felt shy and a bit exposed. “I… yes, actually, I have. All those times when I would read to escape—well, you know, I told you about all that. I was always fascinated by the life of pirates and adventurers like the Vikings, people who could just up and go, be free, get away from the rules and the mundane conventions, all the daft shite that keeps people down in life. They were a law unto themselves.”

“Aren’t you romanticising them just a bit, though?” Hermione asked thoughtfully, propping her chin on bent knees. “I mean, they were pretty brutal, weren’t they, plundering and razing villages and all that, raping and killing. And were they really all that free? As you say, they made their own laws, but amongst themselves, there were some pretty harsh punishments if those rules were broken.”

Draco sighed. “That’s true. But it wasn’t their brutality that attracted me, despite what you might think.” He looked at her pointedly for a moment.

At this, Hermione flushed. “I didn’t mean--” she began.

He shook his head. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I know you didn’t, though I suppose many would think that of me. Look, it wasn’t that they could take what they wanted and rape and kill. That was the bit I always found really disturbing. It was just the freedom of the open sea-- the romance of it, yes, I’ll grant you that—having nothing around you but open sky and ocean and birds and fish, a horizon that never seems to end, blankets of stars at night…”

He closed his eyes for a moment and she could see that he was picturing it once again. “A man could really breathe, living that life…”

It was only too clear what the elliptical ending of that sentence was. Hermione nodded silently. After
a moment, she reached over and touched his hand.

“Let’s go on, yeah?”

They continued, going through passages and breaking them down, sharing the notes they’d already gleaned from their separate readings, discussing, until suddenly, the sky outside the window was dark. It was already past six.

Draco stretched luxuriantly, lying back and resting his head on a pillow he’d dragged to the floor from his bed.

“That’s it, I’m knackered!” He yawned, folding his arms above his head, and promptly closed his eyes.

Hermione leaned back against the desk, wriggling a bit to make herself comfortable with the knobs from the drawers digging into her back. She watched Draco as he lay there, loose-limbed and relaxed, his eyes shut and his expression completely unguarded. A sudden urge had her stealthily moving herself over so that she was sitting right next to him and could study his face more closely.

It was a striking face. Clean, spare lines, high cheekbones, a fine, straight nose, dark eyebrows and lashes beneath the palest, softest blond hair imaginable, a mouth that was sensual and expressive, a strong, clean jaw line and chin, skin like porcelain. And his eyes -- they were closed now, but she had noticed them for quite some time. Smoke-grey, darkening nearly to charcoal at times, alternately soft and piercing, truly mercurial.

She wanted to touch him. She’d wanted to ever since that night he’d kissed her. Would it be so wrong, really?

Hesitantly, she reached out, letting the tips of her fingers rest lightly on his hair -- Merlin, it was so soft! -- and then down to his left cheekbone, his jaw… gossamer touches so delicate that they must be nearly imperceptible… his mouth, his chin…

And… would a small kiss really be amiss? It would be a simple token of affection. And after all, he’d given her one just the other night when he’d thought she was asleep. It would be a kiss like that one, no more. Friends did things like that, didn’t they?

Leaning over, she closed her eyes, dropping a light kiss on his cheek, and had begun to move away when she felt a hand at the nape of her neck, pulling her back. His eyes were open now and they were dark and lustrous. He gazed at her for a heartbeat or two, and then drew her mouth down to his -- and this time, it was not the chaste kiss he’d given her three weeks before. This time, the desire was unmistakable. His lips moved sensually under hers, and their warmth and softness were sweetly intoxicating. She could taste a trace of chocolate on his tongue, as it caressed her lips and then slowly, delicately, searched her mouth.

They broke apart, finally, flushed and breathless. Draco gazed up at her, his eyes holding hers, not allowing her to look away.

“Do you know how long I’ve wanted to do that?” he whispered.

She shook her head, her heart hammering.

He sighed, his head dropping back onto the pillow. “Ages. Since the beginning of term -- since that night. You know.”

Hermione nodded. She did know.
“But… is this okay?” she whispered. “I mean… I like you. I really do. You’re my friend. What does this mean? Are things going to be different now?” Hermione looked away, scared suddenly. “I really don’t want things to change. Well, I mean, I do, but—”

She blushed at her own admission, and looked away.

Draco leaned back on one elbow, rolling his eyes. “Merlin, Granger, you do talk an awful lot! And here all I wanted was a simple snog.”

He looked her straight in the eye, and they both burst out laughing.

“Tell you what,” he said briskly, getting to his feet and pulling her up after him. “Let’s go outside and look at the moon. It’s full tonight, you know. Perfect for Hallowe’en!”


“Come on, then. We can have dinner after that. And I hear there’s a party later tonight in the bar. Costumes optional. Think I’d make a convincing wizard?” Draco grinned, tossing Hermione’s jacket over to her, and then grabbed his own.

“Not in a million years, Malfoy!” she joked, and they laughed as they clattered down the stairs and out the door into the quad.

The moon was huge and full, still fairly low in the sky in its ascendancy this Samhain night. It was a rich, burnished gold, a true harvest moon, looking for all the world like a gigantic, golden lozenge suspended in a vast, dark sea. Stars surrounded it in countless strands of tiny, glittering gems.

As they stood looking up at the sky, he found her hand and gave it a quick squeeze.

“Have you made your wish, then?” he teased.

“Not tonight.” She smiled to herself. “I don’t need to. Come on, Malfoy, I’m famished!”
A/N: Concerning the depiction of the tutorials at Oxford and the way essays are assigned: there is a lecturer for the course, Mr. Ponsonby, and then the tutor Draco and Hermione have been assigned to work under, Mr. Allen. They have been assigned to the same tutor for the reason they were both put in Hertford College—to make their transition to a Muggle university community easier.

Battels—the term used at Oxford referring to bills for tuition, housing and meals fees.

Talking of HP Britglish, I musn’t forget to offer up profuse thanks to everyone over there. You all are superb!
As ever, many thanks and hugs to my three lovely betas, kazfeist, mister_otter, and floorcoaster, for all that you do!

Ongoing thanks and props to moonjameskitten for her exquisite banner and also for the beautiful manip of Draco and Hermione at the close of the story. Both are just the way I picture them as beginning university students!

The texts Hermione and Draco are studying are:


Rogers, Bertha. *Beowulf*. Birch Book Press, Delhi, NY, 2000. (In using this text, I’m fudging the publication date ever so slightly, moving it up a few months to autumn 1999.)

Disclaimer: Only this plot, Mr. Ponsonby and Mr. Allen are mine. Everything else belongs to JKR. Well, except for Oxford, which belongs to the ages!
Harrowing the Heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
They were into the second half of term, four intensely busy weeks of reading, writing essays and
gearing up for final exams. Hermione couldn’t believe it was already November. Before she knew
what she was about, the term would be over. She’d learned the secret of the dreaded Essay Crisis
and reckoned she was lucky that she’d only had two so far. It could have been a lot worse. Essay
crises and upcoming finals notwithstanding, the end of term was something she really did not want to
think about.

So she didn’t. Instead she focused on the here and now, and on her studies. And increasingly, on a
certain blond tutorial partner, former bane of her existence and now, somebody who was insinuating
himself ever more comfortably into the central fabric of her life day by day.

He crept into her thoughts unbidden even more often than when she conjured him there deliberately.
Malfoy. No—Draco. It was really “Draco” in her thoughts now, even when “Malfoy” was what
came out of her mouth.

It was a crush, right? A really adolescent one, too, because what else could possibly explain the fact
that it was his face she often woke up thinking about -- that pale, silky hair, those smoky eyes, and
the enigmatic smile that would flash suddenly, invariably causing a strange but pleasing little flutter
in her stomach. And again, his face was often what saw her off to dreams at night, and then had the
effrontery to star in those dreams! And this was only mornings and bedtime. Then there were all
those times in between, when she’d be reading or studying and find herself drifting off into a
daydream about him—what he smelled like, the feel of his skin, what he’d tasted like when he’d
kissed her, lovely little fantasies of rubbing up against his soft, brushed-flannel shirt or knitted jumper
and simply breathing him in, feeling his arms around her…and how nice it was to just be together,
whether they were discussing a book over coffee-- arguing over it, even-- or talking about nothing
special at all, having a walk, quietly watching the stars together… his dry sense of humour, those
very acerbic observations he’d make, that dulcet voice when he’d read aloud to her…

Well, this just had to stop. Morgana, it was seven o’clock in the morning! She’d set her alarm clock
extra early so she could get a bit of extra reading time in before her tutorial with Parsons at ten. It just
wouldn’t do to be fixating on what a very lovely, soft, eminently kissable mouth Malfoy had…

Focus, Hermione. George Eliot. Not Draco Malfoy!

On the other side of the quad, a certain tall blond was in the final throes of a very pleasant dream.
Just how delightful was evident from the little smile that lifted the corners of his mouth and the
restless movements of his limbs, culminating in the clutching of one of the pillows to his chest with a
husky cry of “Hermione!”

Draco’s eyes opened into two narrowed slits and he yawned, covering them against the bright
sunshine of this November morning. It was a wet and sticky awakening yet again. Fourth time this
week, for a total of fourteen in the last month. The rate of frequency seemed to be on the rise, in fact.

It just wasn’t normal for a healthy, nineteen-year-old man to be this horny without a satisfying outlet
for release! He’d had more desperation wanks in the last month than he could remember since the
age of twelve. (He’d nearly laughed out loud when it dawned on him that they were over the same
girl now as back then.) It was no wonder he was having to launder his sheets so frequently, sorely
tempting him to break his own self-imposed rule of no magic whilst at uni. He’d finally mastered the
temperamental contraption in the basement launderette that generally did a fairly rubbish job of
cleaning his clothes. It was small consolation.
Theoretically, of course, he should be able to solve his little problem simply enough. There was no shortage of attractive girls here at Oxford. He’d noticed a number of them in lectures and just in passing— in the library, the dining hall, the JCR. There was one who’d smiled at him the other day when he’d nipped into the Swift Room for a quick coffee. But somehow, he just didn’t have the heart for the pursuit.

It was all just so pointless, really. It certainly wouldn’t be for the company. He wasn’t really that much of a people person. The common perception was simply that he was aloof and even unfriendly, because most often, he kept to himself and just went about his business efficiently and quietly. He had made a couple of friends, but they were still more in the category of friendly acquaintances at this point. And the simple fact was, he’d grown rather comfortably and happily used to the company of one fellow student in particular, and he found himself quite content with that, not wanting or requiring anything or anyone more.

So much time would be wasted with the preliminaries, when all he needed was some simple relief. But all of that was moot anyway, because whenever he so much as contemplated the hypothetical notion of asking somebody out, She kept popping into his head, and he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

All in all, it was a predicament, and he could see only one solution. And that—well, that was possibly a long way off at best, despite the very nice kiss they’d recently shared. If it happens at all, the more skeptical bit of his brain—the bit that was still fairly incredulous that this friendship, relationship, whatever it was, with Granger of all people, had begun, considering their very rocky past history—reminded him.

He held his hand up, flexing his fingers, and sighed deeply. *You and me, mate.*

An hour later, the phone in Hermione’s room shrilled, startling her out of her intense concentration on *The Mill on the Floss.*

It was Draco.

“Granger!” His voice was chipper. “Been to breakfast yet?”

“No,” Hermione replied, the corners of her mouth twitching into a smile. “Not yet. You?”

“Oh-uh. Fancy something now? I’m starved! And we need to talk about the essay.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “Dining hall in fifteen minutes?”

“Great, yeah. See you there.”

Hermione found Draco waiting for her just outside the entrance to her staircase instead, his foot
tapping impatiently. When she appeared, he broke into a big smile, which he quickly calmed into a
nonchalant little grin.

“Morning, Granger!” he said sunnily. *You are definitely a sight for sore eyes, darling.*

“Hi,” she smiled. “You’re here, I see.” *Brilliant, Hermione. Of course he is, you silly cow! Stop gibbering like an idiot…*

“Yes, well…come on, we can talk inside.” He grabbed her arm and they set off towards the dining
room.

The building in Old Quad that housed the dining hall was one of the most unusual either Draco or
Hermione had ever seen. They agreed that its curious, rather eccentric, wrap-around design would in
fact be quite at home at Hogwarts.

Up the spiral staircase and they were there. It was busy at this hour, students milling about with trays,
conversation welling up from the tables and the food queue.

Ten minutes later, they found a corner table and sat down with bowls of porridge, fruit juice, toast,
and steaming cups of hot chocolate, its rich fragrance wafting invitingly about their heads. A cheery
fire blazed in the tiled fireplace. All around the warm, wood-panelled walls, portraits of earlier
masters of the college looked sternly down at them, joined by William Tyndale, first translator of the
New Testament into English, and King James II. It wouldn’t have taken much imagination to believe
that any minute, they would turn their heads and begin conversing with each other, much as the
portraits at Hogwarts did. But the subjects of these portraits remained stubbornly frozen in time.

Hermione took a sip of orange juice and stirred her porridge to cool it. “We’ve got Allen the day
after tomorrow. I’ve done Rebsamen and Rogers. Have you finished your notes on Donaldson and
Draco nodded, chewing a bite of toast and marmalade. “Ready,” he said thickly, swallowing the last bite of it and giving his mouth a quick swipe with a napkin. He took a sip of cocoa, licking the froth off his upper lip. “You available later?”

“Mmm. Where?”

“Well… um… my room’s a bit of a mess. I’ve got stuff all over my bed… laundry…”

“Oh, don’t worry about that! We can do your laundry and work at the same time.”

Draco shook his head, suddenly panicked. The last thing he wanted her to catch sight of was his sheet, stiff with this morning’s jizz. “No, no, that’s okay, you don’t--”

Hermione took a quick sip of her cocoa, holding up her hand. “It’s perfectly all right, I insist! What time?”

There was clearly no arguing with her. Defeated, Draco considered for a moment. “Three good for you?”

“Perfect. I’m totally free then.” She smiled happily and dug into her oatmeal.

End of discussion.

Promptly at three, Hermione stood at Draco’s door. He opened it on the second knock. From where she stood, she could see a well-stuffed laundry basket sitting in the centre of the bed.

“Ready to go, then?” she asked brightly.

He nodded, shoving a small bottle of detergent in amongst the clothes, plus two slim volumes and a folder with his papers and notes alongside it.

They made their way to the basement of New Quad 6, where the laundry room was located. Draco dug into his back pocket for the 20p-coins he’d been hoarding for this purpose, laying them down on a rickety card table.

Hermione smiled expectantly at him and nodded towards his laundry basket.

“Oh… er… right, then,” he said lamely. “I’ll… uh… load up the machine, shall I… you don’t want to touch my dirty stuff…”

Hermione bit her lip, the giggle bubbling up in her throat. “No, no, that’s fine, you go right ahead!”

Turning his back to her so that his body blocked most of her view (he hoped), he dragged the laundry basket over to the nearest washing machine and began pulling out its contents, which included a couple of mildewed towels and some well-aged and somewhat skanky socks he’d discovered that morning under the bed. Finally he reached the sheet in question. Closing his eyes momentarily, he thanked the gods that this time at least, his duvet had been spared.
Sitting in a folding chair next to the table, Hermione watched all this avidly, fascinated not only by the contents of the typical male laundry basket, but also the oddly crab-like body language of this particular male as he emptied said contents out of it. She stood up and moved closer, stopping right behind Draco, who was still hunched over as he hauled his sheet out and it disappeared, snake-like, into the washing machine.

“Can I help?” she asked sweetly.

The last bit of offending sheet in his hands, Draco whipped around to face her.

“No! I mean…” he swallowed, “no, thanks. I’ve just about finished, see?” Grinning foolishly, he pushed the remainder over the rim of the washing machine, hurriedly tossed in a capful of liquid detergent, and slammed down the lid. His body seemed to sag with relief as he leaned back against the broad front of the washer.

“Um… don’t you need to put the money in, Malfoy?” Hermione was that close to losing it now and she clapped her hand over her mouth to stop her laughter spilling out.

A moment before, Draco had thought it impossible to feel any more embarrassed than he already did, but apparently he’d been mistaken. Cheeks burning, he strolled to the table as casually as he could manage it, scooped up four coins, and plunked them down in the coin slot one at a time,ramming the metal sliding piece in as hard as he could. Twice, the coin slot stuck and he wound up having to deliver a couple of swift kicks to the machine before it would accept his money. Finally, it shuddered to life and began an undulating, grinding sort of stationary dance as the clothes and linens agitated inside.

He turned, visibly relieved, and sauntered back to the table where he pulled up a chair opposite a very pink-faced Hermione.

“Ready?” he asked coolly, and opened his folder, spreading his notes out in a fan.

Blinking back tears of mirth, Hermione nodded and reached for her own notes.

*They spent the next half hour reading over each other’s notes while the washer rumbled and shook. Finally, the wash cycle ended and Draco sprang up to move the wet laundry to the closest dryer. When he opened the door, a thick wad of lint fell out, loose particles of it wafting up into his face. Brushing it away and shaking his head, he heaved his damp stuff into the circular basket of the dryer and shut the door, dropping five twenty-pence coins into the slot in succession and turning the dial after each one.

“Right, fifty minutes ought to do it, I expect. Now—where were we?” he muttered, brushing off his hands and dropping back down into the folding chair.

Hermione looked up from the index cards she’d been perusing, pencil in hand.

“Okay, basically, what we’re looking into boils down to this: first, the way women are portrayed in the various translations. Have the gender and time period of the translator influenced the translation in any way? Second: how the hero deals with his role. Is there any ambivalence or remorse? Does he identify at all with his enemies? Does he feel any compassion or understanding?”*
“In other words,” Draco interrupted, “can we find a hint of a modern sensibility anywhere in the translations?”

“Exactly!” Hermione nodded. “Of course, there are three enemies and each one is in a very different circumstance, so we’ll have to deal with them separately. And last, there’s the portrayal of the three monsters, starting with Grendel of course. And each one of them is so different to the other two.”

“Well, the time frame goes from 1966 to 1999,” Draco mused. “Thirty-three years. I don’t know, Granger… so far we haven’t really found much to support the idea that the time period of the translations will factor in very substantially.”

“Except,” Hermione grinned, her eyes sparkling with the challenge, “I wonder if we might find a slight shading of difference between the way Grendel’s mother is portrayed in Rogers and Lehmann and what we find in, say, Donaldson and Rebsamen. If so, the difference in time period could tie in to a possible influence of gender! Let’s have a look!”

Draco felt laughter bubbling up in his chest, but it was laughter that signaled the pure pleasure he found in her excitement. Her enthusiasm was so entirely infectious, he couldn’t help grinning. And that warmth lit him up inside whenever he was around her.

Several other students had come in whilst they were working and moved around them with their own laundry, basically ignoring them completely. Before long, all three washing machines were whirring along with the dryer containing Draco’s laundry, and the pungent odours of fabric softener, detergent, and lint filled their nostrils as they worked.

“Oh!” Hermione exclaimed abruptly. “I’ve found something, I think! Come and see!” She motioned to Draco excitedly, and without thinking, he rose and moved around to her side of the table, leaning over her to peer at the book into which she was pointing.

Hermione was beaming. “See here! Rogers says, ‘Up she came; she smote him with her nailed hand, an awful blow; she hugged him to her breast; then the foot warrior, of champions the strongest, stumbled. Tired in his soul, he fell to the ground.’ Malfoy, what does ‘she hugged him to her breast’ suggest to you?”

Now that was a novel question, innocently though it had been posed. He swallowed a smirk and tried to think, but instead, found himself distracted by the fragrance of her hair, now so close. “Um… it’s… well, it sounds as if…” His voice trailed off as he fought the desire to bury his face in that cloud of apricot-scented hair.

Hermione had turned to look at him when he fell silent, and now found herself gazing straight into those very eyes she’d been daydreaming about earlier: now their silvered irises were darkening to smoke, and his dark-fringed lids were slipping shut as he drew imperceptibly nearer. Morgana, it was happening again.

“We… we can’t… we’re supposed to be…” she began weakly, and then gave up, closing her eyes and giving herself over to the sensation he always seemed to provoke in her of being swept out to sea and yet being completely at peace with just letting go.

His hand was in her hair, closing over a clutch of curls at the back of her head. And then he pressed his cheek against the top of her head; she could feel him inhaling and then letting the breath out in a soft sigh that warmed the skin of her scalp. It felt to her almost like a sigh of…relief, if that were possible.
And then her head was being gently tilted up just a bit, and finally, finally, his warm, tender mouth was on hers. He kissed her slowly and thoroughly, and she sat very still, her hands falling slack in her lap, the sweet sensation of this sudden intimacy washing over her in gentle waves.

Suddenly one of the other students doing a load of laundry walked back in, and they broke apart, Hermione pink with embarrassment as she stared down at her book.

“Carry on, don’t mind me!” the student said cheerfully, turning his back and busying himself with putting his wet clothes into the other dryer.

Draco grinned as he sat back down on his side of the table. “I think we’d best get back to work, eh? What was that you were saying about somebody being hugged?” He winked at her, laughing softly.

Hermione blushed. “I didn’t realise I was issuing an invitation when I said that!”

“Do you mind?” he asked quietly, gazing at her.

The shy smile she gave in reply was like a thousand candles.

Getting back to work after that was virtually impossible. As it happened, the dryer stopped just then, and Draco had to collect his laundry so that somebody else could use the machine. It was almost a relief to have the busywork of unloading and folding all the clothes, simply to take his mind off what had just happened between them again. He really couldn’t take much more of this. It was becoming a torture to him—sweet, delicious, but torture just the same. He wondered if it were the same delightful agony for her.

There and then, he resolved to find out. They worked together for a while, sorting and folding and carefully laying the clothing in the basket. Hermione judiciously avoided Draco’s underwear, feeling she might just incinerate if she had to handle his boxers after that smoldering kiss.

Deftly catching a sock she’d tossed him, the match to one he held, he said nonchalantly, “You know, we really didn’t finish here. And we’ve got to be ready for Allen pretty soon. What about getting some sort of take-away instead of eating in hall, and knocking out the rest of this lot tonight?”

Hermione looked up from the shirt she’d been folding. What a very good idea. “Okay. My room? It’s my turn, I think. I’ve actually got a bunch of menus we can look at.”

“Great.” Excellent. Bloody, fucking marvelous! Containing his elation, he allowed himself a casual grin and returned to folding.

The clothing and linens were all properly folded at last, and stacked neatly in the basket. Resting his chin against a towel at the top of the pile to steady the contents as he walked, Draco carried his laundry through New Quad back to Holywell, Hermione carrying their books and papers in her own bag.

They parted once they’d reached the centre of their quad, Draco agreeing to come over a bit later. Hermione was itching to get away, a sudden desire for a shower and a change of clothes having
overcome her. The same urge had struck him, and he flashed a smile at her and took off across the quad as fast as a heavy laundry basket would permit. She fairly ran the rest of the way to Staircase 2.

A scant thirty-five minutes later, just as Hermione was rather frantically putting her other earring on, there was a soft knock at her door. Looking at her reflection one last time, makeup notwithstanding, she bit her lip for a bit of colour, pinched her cheeks, gave her hair one final scrunch to set the curls, and opened the door.

Draco stood there, his hands shoved in his pockets, a boyish little smile on his face. Hermione felt suddenly shy as she stepped back to let him in. This wasn’t an actual date…was it? A study date maybe. A working dinner. But she did notice, as he moved past her to slip off his jacket and sit down at the foot of her bed, that he had just showered as well. There was a fresh, soapy scent about him, and his hair was still faintly damp as he ran a hand through it to push it out of his eyes. He’d shaved too—a tiny, telltale nick on his jaw gave that away, along with a hint of sandalwood aftershave. That, and he’d changed into a soft grey, crewneck pullover and close-fitting black jeans. Very nice indeed.

As she was assessing him, so he was making his own detailed observations. Cute little top, nice bit of cleavage. Sweet. He approved of the jeans too—low-slung and stove-pipe, they made her slim legs seem to go on forever. And what was that delicious scent? It complemented the fresh apricot of her hair, now more intense for having just been shampooed, stray tendrils curling damply around her face. Honey and almond, was that it? Whatever it was, he was captivated.

If all the trouble she’d just gone to were any indication, he supposed he had the answer to his earlier question. Smiling to himself, he looked up.

“What about those menus, then, eh? I’m starved!”

Five minutes later, they sat opposite each other, Indian-style, on the bed, a colourful array of menus fanned out between them.

“What are you in the mood for tonight?” Hermione asked, picking up a couple of menus. “I think I’ve got a bit of everything: Chinese, Indian, Italian, Lebanese, pizza, fish and chips, French, Thai…”

Draco’s head snapped up. “Thai, did you say? I’ve never had that. Come to think of it, I’ve never had a lot of the things you mentioned.” He chuckled. “Do you like Thai food?”

Hermione leaned back against her pillows and stretched, closing her eyes and smiling as she nodded. “I love it! It’s just about my favourite.”

“Right, well, let’s have a look at the menu then, and you can tell me what’s good.” He pulled her back into a sitting position.

“Okay…let’s see…” She opened the menu and scanned it quickly. “This one’s Oxford Thai, in Cowley Road. They’re supposed to be pretty good, I hear. And they deliver. Have a look.” She handed the menu over to him and he studied it for a moment, his brow furrowed.

Then he looked up and grinned sheepishly. “I really don’t know one thing from another, Granger. I’ll just leave it to you.”

“Well, do you fancy plain or spicy?”

“Oh, spicy-ish, I suppose. I don’t know. Look, whatever it is, if you like it, I’ll try it.”
“Feeling pretty brave, aren’t you?” Hermione laughed. “I could decide to poison you or at the very least, make you very, very ill! You know, revenge and all that, for all those times when—”

“Right, I get it, I get it!” He threw his arms up in surrender and then leaned in close, grinning smugly. “But… you won’t, will you, Granger? You like me too much.”

He sat back, his arms folded– looking rather like the Cheshire Cat, Hermione found herself thinking. “Cheeky,” she muttered, but she couldn’t help a small giggle. “Just how hungry are you, anyway?”

“Famished.”

“Then let’s have the Prawns Pad Thai— oh, do you like prawns?” She glanced over at him quickly and he shrugged. “Hmm, better make that chicken then, just in case. And ooh, some Thai salad with peanut sauce. That’ll be perfect. Sound good?”

Draco nodded, his mouth beginning to water. This evening promised to be an adventure in more ways than one, he felt sure.

From the telephone where she had begun to dial to place to order, Hermione looked back at Draco as he lounged on her bed. He looked so completely natural and relaxed there. Catching her looking, he smiled and winked. Odd. If anyone had told her even as little as a year ago that she’d become friends with Draco Malfoy of all people in the world, she’d have laughed herself sick. And yet…

“May I help you?” the voice said on the other end of the line, jarring her out of her reverie.

“Oh yes,” she began, and listed their order. “Malfoy! Fancy trying some Thai beer? It’s rather nice.” Draco gave her a thumbs-up and she added a couple of bottles of Singha to the order. “Right, £14.00. Very good. Thanks!”

She hung up the phone and turned to Draco. “All done. The food should be here in about forty minutes. Can you wait? I might have some biscuits to tide you over if you’re really ravenous.”

A corner of his mouth quirked up. Only for one thing, love, and it doesn’t come in a tin. “No, no, I’m fine, I can certainly wait. We can get some work done in the meantime. Come here.” He patted the bed.

Obediently, she returned, books and notes in hand, and plopped herself down against the pillows at the head of the bed.

“Suppose we should start where we left off in the laundry room,” she murmured, turning pages of notes until she found the spot. “Right, here. I had been about to make the point that Rogers’ wording suggests—to me, anyway—a sort of weirdly skewed, ironic, maternal response to Beowulf, at least in terms of imagery. Listen: ‘she hugged him to her breast, then the foot warrior, of champions the strongest, stumbled. Tired in his soul, he fell to the ground.’ If you look at that passage in all the other translations, nothing else comes quite as close as that one.”

Despite his earlier, very pleasant preoccupation, Draco was curious, and began flipping through the other texts spread out on the bed, to find the equivalent lines. “Rebsamen puts it like this: ‘she grappled my arms and slipped me over, pinned me down…’ Not even close, you’re right. And his poem version says…hang on, let me find it…okay, right: ‘She clamped his arms in her cold fiend-grip.’ Same basic idea. Okay, let’s look at Donaldson: ‘she… clutched at him.’ Not the same thing, is it. Sounds desperate and fairly violent. And Porter: ‘…and him against her clasped…’ That comes about the closest to Rogers of any of them so far. What about Heaney and Lehmann?”
Hermione was already ahead of him, looking quickly through various piles of sorted index cards. “Ah!” she said triumphantly, holding up the sought-after notes. “Heaney’s goes like this: ‘she… grappled him tightly in her grim embrace. The sure-footed fighter felt daunted, the strongest of warriors stumbled and fell.’ That’s a bit closer, isn’t it, because you’ve got the notion of an embrace of some sort, which always carries associations of love, and then he falls down because he feels overcome. His emotions cause a physical reaction. We see that in the Rogers version as well, don’t we, where she says, ‘tired in his soul, he fell to the ground.’ Pretty powerful stuff, that. All the others have him falling down but only because she was so strong and knocked him off his feet and then sat on him. Lehmann doesn’t go quite that far. She says, ‘with her grievous grip, she grasped the fighter,’ and then, the hero, disheartened… stumbled, falling.’ So she’s got a bit of that same element, but not to the same degree at all. Conclusion?”

Draco sat back. “Seems to me,” he began slowly, thinking aloud, “that the only common thread between Rogers and Heaney is the period in which they published, virtually the same time exactly. So-- can we posit, perhaps, that a more modern sensibility would see the shades of grey in the situation, and interpret the lines so that we feel just a shred of sympathy for the mother who has lost her child? And that in a strange, twisted way, we are almost seeing her holding Beowulf as a substitute for her dead child just before she tries to kill him to avenge her child’s death?”

“That’s just what I was thinking too,” Hermione said with quiet satisfaction. “Exactly.”

Just then, the phone rang. It was the delivery man, waiting outside the entrance to the college on Cattæ Street. Draco stood up, shrugging on his jacket.

“Oh—hang on, here’s my £7.00,” Hermione muttered, digging into her purse for her money. But before she’d had a chance to extract her portion of the bill, Draco had disappeared, returning before very long with a paper sack of aromatic food and a big smile. He set it down on her desk.

“Mmm, smells fantastic,” he pronounced, poking his head inside it for a moment. “My treat, Granger. You can pay next time.”

She smiled and shook her head in wonderment as she put away her purse, and began setting out the contents of the sack on the desk.

Half an hour later, two nearly empty containers and four chopsticks lay abandoned on the desk, alongside two balled-up napkins. Draco lay recumbent on the soft rug, his legs stretched all the way out, two large, squishy pillows behind his head. Hermione sat with her back to the bed, his legs stretched out as well, crossed at the ankle. They’d had most of their beer, still taking periodic swigs of the remains, and already it was making them both a bit woozy.

She glanced at Draco and giggled. “What?” he asked, pretending injured feelings. “Laughing at me again, are you, Granger? What is it this time?”

“I was just thinking about you and those ridiculous chopsticks!” She giggled again, this time letting out a pronounced snort.

He snickered. “Tsk. Not terribly ladylike. And what about me and the chopsticks?!”

“Oh, nothing,” she answered, tears of laughter beginning to leak from her eyes. “It’s just… I keep remembering how your chopsticks kept opening every time you tried to pick up a bit of food. I lost count of how many mouthfuls wound up in your lap or on the floor!”

He laughed too, despite himself. It had been his first attempt with the damnable things and he’d decided that they were simply too primitive and uncivilised to bother with in future. Dodgy little
twigs, how could anybody get a decent mouthful using them? But it had been an experience. And
the food itself had been amazing, what he’d managed to get into his mouth, anyway.

“You know,” he mused, “I am still a bit hungry. And I see that there’s still a little bit of the food left. But all that effort really tired me out. Perhaps you could tutor me in the use of chopsticks—you know, show me again. Maybe I’ll get the hang of it eventually.” He looked up at her, a mischievous
glint in his eyes.

Hermione looked at him, one eyebrow quirked, and then a slow smile spread over her face.

“All right,” she replied, picking up the remains of salad and Pad Thai and a pair of chopsticks and sliding over to sit next to him. “First, Malfoy, you let the bottom chopstick rest here, like so—” She indicated the fleshy area between her thumb and pointer finger. “And grip it between your middle and ring fingers. It stays stationary. Now, the top chopstick…” She held out her hand to show him, moving a bit closer. “The top one is held in place between the thumb and the pointer finger. That’s the one that moves and controls how you pick up a piece of chicken…” She reached into the dish and snagged a juicy slice of chicken. “And bring it to your mouth…”

Leaning in, she deposited the morsel in Draco’s open mouth. He promptly closed it, chewed and swallowed, nodding.

“Again, please. Still hungry, and I’m not sure I’ve quite got the hang of it.” He opened his mouth and waited patiently.

Hermione speared a curlicued cucumber, dipping it into some peanut sauce, and brought it to Draco’s mouth. This time, he closed his lips around the tips of the chopsticks and his hand around her wrist, slowly extracting the food and chewing it languidly.

“Delicious,” he said, his voice low and husky. “More, please.” His glance was trained directly on her face, his eyes meeting and holding hers.

Hermione began to feel a prickling sensation traveling up her back and over her scalp, and a clenching in the pit of her stomach. He was doing it again, making her all edgy and fluttery. She took a breath and reached down for some noodles, neatly grasping them between the two points of the chopsticks.

“Here,” she whispered, placing the food in his mouth. Now, one hand closed around her wrist again, while the other slipped to the small of her back. He chewed the food carefully, slowly, keeping his gaze on her face the entire time. When he’d swallowed, he squeezed her wrist just enough that she opened her fingers and the chopsticks dropped away.

“Thank you,” he replied softly, a faint smile on his lips. “That was… exquisite.” He paused for a heartbeat. “Hermione.”

Her name sounded like music when he said it.

There was a sudden roaring in her ears and her heart banged wildly in her chest. This time she didn’t wait. He was too near, his presence too overwhelming. Breathlessly cupping his face in her hands, she kissed him.

Smiling against her mouth, he returned her kiss immediately, sucking lightly at her bottom lip, running his tongue over it, thrusting it into her mouth and finding hers eager and ready. The exotic taste of spices and coconut lingered in their mouths as he drew her closer still, pressing her to his chest as if his very life’s breath depended on drinking in hers.
“Oh,” she murmured, “OH!” and kissed him again. Suddenly, it seemed she couldn’t get enough of him. “Oh, Draco!”

Before she knew it, she was lying on her side, cradled in his arms against the pillows. She looked up at him. His expression, partly in shadows, was briefly cryptic, several emotions warring in his eyes. And then there was only one as he leaned down and kissed her ardently.

But this time he wasn’t content with kisses alone, lovely and breathtaking as they were.

His head dropped to her shoulder and he began pressing his lips to her neck, breathing in the scent of her skin, his mouth learning the silken feel of it. His fingertips followed, skimming her neck, her collarbone, and the warm valley between her breasts with glancing caresses, and for a moment, he rested them there, as her breath caught in her throat and she arched her back, asking, wanting…

And then they moved again, lightly traversing the hills of her breasts to their peaks.

“May I?” he asked huskily, a fingertip coming to rest gently on one nipple, which firmed immediately under the cotton of her shirt.

“Yes,” she said, her voice hushed, and she covered his hand with her own, pressing his fingers to her breast and finding the contact not nearly enough. Reaching for him, she slipped cool hands beneath the hem of his shirt and slid them up the smooth skin of his chest.

He needed more too. Burying his hand in her hair, he lifted it away, moving the neckline of her shirt aside to drop a kiss on her right shoulder. And then his hand disappeared inside her shirt at the back, inching higher until it reached the clasp of her bra.

“May I?” he whispered again, nuzzling her ear and sending delicious shivers over her body.

He could feel her nod. With fingers that trembled slightly, he unfastened the clasp and found his way beneath the loosened cups to her breasts, covering them with his warm hands. They were a perfect fit, not too big or small, and as he gently brushed his thumbs over her raised nipples, finally feeling the tender flesh bared for the first time, he heard her sigh softly. He caressed them again and again, finally lifting her shirt and dipping his head to take one into his mouth.

“Mmm…” he breathed, and something in him felt like it was breaking just a little. “Oh, Hermione…”

She lowered her gaze, smiling shyly, one small hand stealing to the back of his head and stroking his hair as he kissed and fondled her breasts.

He was so caught up in her fragrance and softness and beauty that at first, he didn’t hear her when she spoke.


He raised his head from the breast he’d been so pleasurably suckling, his mouth coming away from it with a pop, and looked at her.

“I’m sorry… what?” he said, somewhat dazed. “What’s wrong?”

“I… no, it’s just… well… I’ve never done this before. I don’t think I’m quite ready to… you know…” Hermione looked away self-consciously. “I mean, I want to… with you… honestly, I do…” She looked up at him, almost afraid to meet his eyes, and then glanced away briefly.
All the many moments he had spent fantasising and dreaming about this girl had abruptly telescoped down to this one moment, and he knew with sudden, absolute clarity that whatever might come in the days ahead rode on it as well.

He looked down at her. If he had thought her beautiful before, now—lying there, looking at him with huge, troubled eyes, her face flushed —now, she took his breath away.

He tried to smile reassuringly. “It’s okay, love. Really. We can just… there are other things we can do. If you want to, I mean,” he added hastily, catching her chin and turning her head so he could really look her in the eye. Suddenly he felt unaccountably scared, though of what he wasn’t certain.

What he saw in her eyes put his fears to rest. Relief and happiness shone there, but more than that—there was trust. She trusted him. That was absolutely everything.

“Stay with me tonight?” she asked softly, taking his hand.

He nodded. In that moment, he knew he’d have done anything she asked.

* 

They spent the next several hours lying on Hermione’s bed, talking quietly about anything and nothing at all, their work utterly forgotten. Hands continually sought each other for small touches. Fingertips met fingertips, one palm found another, hands clasped, as if something new and fragile had been birthed and now it needed the sustenance of contact. Neither of them could have put a name to it. But when at last sleep overtook them and they lay wrapped in each other’s arms, it was something more than simple comfort and desire that drew them together.

TBC
Glossary of Terms:

**JCR**--Junior Common Room. Each college at Oxford has one for undergrads, as well as separate common rooms for upperclassmen and graduate students.

**Swift Room**—a small room containing a microwave and supplies for making hot drinks. Named, I’m assuming, for Jonathan Swift, one of the many illustrious alumni of Hertford College. Others include John Donne, Thomas Hobbs and Evelyn Waugh.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Heartfelt thanks and hugs to kazfeist, mister_otter, and floorcoaster for their support, friendship, and excellent beta skills! Each one offers me something unique and very special.

Thanks and bouquets to all the lovely folk at HP Britglish for answers to the pickiest questions possible, right down to how many 20-p coins it takes to do a load of wash in the Oxford laundry rooms!

Thank you and highest praise to moonjameskitten for her extraordinary art work! I love this banner and *everything* you do, Sathy!
24 November
Saturday afternoon

It didn’t seem possible that there was only one week left of term, but there it was.

One week—such a short time in which to finish up essays and finally pack up, preparatory to bringing virtually all one’s belongings home for the 6-week vacation between Michaelmas and Hilary terms. Rooms in the colleges were only let to students for the duration of each term and used between times to house people attending conferences or prospective students being interviewed at the university.

Like many other parents, Richard and Claire Granger would arrive in their car the following Saturday to collect Hermione and the contents of her room. She had no idea how Draco would manage to transport his stuff home except by dragging his large, soft-sided canvas trunk onto a train. She could just imagine Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy turning up along with the other parents for the kerbside loading ritual. And in what? A Thestral-drawn carriage? Alternatively, the very thought of the two of them suddenly Apparating into Holywell Quad-- their dark cloaks and long, blond hair
whipping round in the late-autumn wind—was enough to make her blanch when she wasn’t laughing at the sheer absurdity of the image. In any case, that would be the last thing Draco would want, she felt sure.

Now that there was only a week remaining, it was impossible to ignore the fact that a huge block of time loomed in which very possibly, she would not see him at all. Suddenly, that month and a half seemed an endless stretch of time, empty and amorphous, bereft of the routines she’d come to depend on to delineate and inform her daily life. And she couldn’t deny that those routines very much included Draco.

This next week would be devoted to finishing up all projects that were due. Best to focus on all of that and not on what she was powerless to change.

All these thoughts were percolating in Hermione’s head as she walked, apparently oblivious to everything around her, from the library back to Holywell. Hunched down against the chill wind, she was so wrapped up in thought that she failed to notice the very solid body directly in her path as she neared her staircase entrance.

Two hands braced themselves against her upper arms suddenly, halting her progress forward. Annoyed, she sputtered, “Just what are you…” and saw a pair of grey eyes laughing down at her. “Oh,” she huffed, nettled, but secretly glad, too. “It’s you.”

“Well spotted, my dear Granger. Your powers of observation stagger me sometimes. Where are you off to, anyway?” His eyes bright, he gave her a cocky grin as he stood back, hands shoved once again into his pockets against the cold, his red, white and maroon scarf wound around his neck. His nose and cheeks were quite rosy.

“Back to my room actually. Been at the library for the last three hours. I’m all in!” Hermione sighed. “What about you then?”

“Oh, I’ve been reading in my room all day. Hodges’ Dark Age Economics. Began to feel rather like a mole finally. Had to get out for a bit or I’d have gone completely round the bend and cross-eyed.” He paused, thinking. “You do know,” he said suddenly, “that Allen wants our essay Thursday morning. That gives us—”

“Four days, yes, I know,” Hermione groaned. “I’ve written a fair bit of my half, but we still have one major section to go over.”

They walked on in silence for a couple of minutes, stopping at the entrance to Staircase 2.

“Look,” he said suddenly, perking up. “What about this: we could walk for a while and then stop somewhere along the way for a coffee and do a bit of work. It’d make a nice change from being stuck in our rooms. Run upstairs and get your books and meet me here in five minutes, yeah?”

Hermione thought for a moment and decided that a brisk walk combined with a working coffee break was precisely what she needed just then. She nodded brightly, disappearing inside just long enough to gather up several books and her notes. Then she happily looped her arm through his proffered one, and they headed out of Hertford and south, towards Radcliffe Square.

They stopped for a minute in front of the famed Radcliffe Camera, a round, Palladian-style building that dated back to 1749. Currently it housed collections from the Bodleian in English, History and Theology. Both Hermione and Draco had had occasion to utilise its resources, as much of the recommended secondary source material for their courses was to be found there.
Now they gazed up at the remarkable building, shading their eyes as they squinted against the sun.

“Fantastic, isn’t it?” Hermione murmured. “That’s the thing, really—nearly every building here has a history all its own. And many of them are quite a lot older, even, than this one.”

The Radcliffe Camera and St. Mary’s Church, Radcliffe Square

Draco gave the building an appraising look and nodded. “Did you know that the Camera was Tolkien’s model for Sauron’s temple to Morgoth at Númenor?”

Hermione turned to look at him in astonishment. “Really?”

“The gods’ truth. There’s probably all sorts of stuff in Lord of the Rings modelled on places or even people he knew here. Intriguing, don’t you think?” He kicked a pebble idly and then held out his arm once again. “Shall we?”
They continued, turning into the High Street and eventually finding themselves at The Rose. Hermione smiled to herself as they turned in automatically, both of one mind, to get out of the cold. She remembered that day the first week of term—seemed like ages ago, though it was a matter of mere weeks—when they’d first come here together.

Draco must have been remembering it too. “Two café au laits and two lemon raspberry squares, please,” he told the waitress.

“Just what I wanted. However did you know?” Hermione teased.

“You wound me, Granger,” he replied melodramatically. “I am a very sentimental man where food is concerned.”

“Touching,” she muttered, and they laughed as they sat down together with their food and hot drinks, and for a few minutes, refreshed themselves silently, the heat of the tall, porcelain cups bringing feeling back to their chilled fingertips.

Eventually, Hermione put down her fork, licking her upper lip delicately. “Mmm.” She gazed around at the cheery interior of the café and then at the busy street beyond the plate-glass window in front. “This is nice. I really needed to get out for a bit. Thanks, Malfoy.”

He grinned, replying airily, “Don’t thank me. I was being entirely selfish.”

At her questioning glance, he explained. “Well, it stands to reason, doesn’t it. A bracing walk and refreshments in the company of a beautiful and brainy girl—the pleasure is mine, I assure you.” She blushed, and he gave her hand a quick squeeze, letting his own rest there for just a moment beyond that before withdrawing it again.

“And now, Granger,” he announced, “I rather think we’ve skived off this project long enough. Sooner we get to it, the sooner we’re bloody well finished. And as much as I’ve savoured the intellectual challenges you’ve set me—and believe me, love, I have—” He leaned in a bit closer, his breath warming her ear. “I can think of other ways we could be spending our time that might be even more fun.”

His mouth found her earlobe and he caught its tip between his teeth, giving it a small nip followed by a light, soothing flick of his tongue that caused her to shiver slightly. Then he sat back, folding his arms, just a hint of a smirk on his face.

“Um…” Hermione murmured absently, still preoccupied with the tingling sensation his mouth had left on her ear. Her fingers wandered there of their own volition and she touched her earlobe briefly. He was leaning back in his chair and watching her, still smiling lazily, his eyes hooded.

“Right!” she said, just a bit too briskly as she tried vainly to collect her thoughts.

He laughed out loud then.

“I… um… shut up, Malfoy!… Oh, bugger it!”

And with that, she leaned suddenly across the table, grasped his face between her palms, and planted a firm, prolonged, and decidedly passionate kiss directly on his mouth. Caught unawares, his eyes opened very wide for a moment before drifting closed.

Pulling away, she sat back down, dusted her hands off and smiled, satisfied.

“Right! Now that’s out of the way, maybe we can finally get
down to work!

She busied herself opening her books and sorting through her notes, leaving her tutorial partner pleasantly gobsmacked, his mouth slightly open like a guppy.

Well, fuck me, Granger! Didn’t know you had it in you!

It was hungry work. A round of frothy cappuccinos, one apple tart and a slice of cherry cake later, they were in the thick of a very productive discussion. Notes and texts were arranged in small piles all over the table, making a small sea of paper around the islands of crockery.

“I think,” Draco was saying, “that we can make an excellent case for certain translations allowing a more sympathetic view of Grendel. I noticed something very interesting in Rebsamen, did you? His earlier prose version shows a lot more compassion than his later verse translation.”

“Yes, I saw that as well!” Hermione said excitedly, and began rapidly thumbing through her index cards. “He says… here it is: ‘he hissed and tugged, yearning towards the dark fens and meres beyond the world of men, afraid now that he might never return to that region.’ This is Beowulf talking, of course, so clearly, he’s very aware of Grendel’s fear. And a word like ‘yearning’ humanises him, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely,” Draco agreed. “But in his later version, there’s no indication at all that Beowulf or the poet as narrator has any awareness of Grendel’s feelings. And just look at the ways Grendel’s referred to in Rebsamen’s poem translation: ‘that monster,’ ‘fiend-soul,’ ‘hell’s messenger,’ ‘giant ravager,’ ‘his damned hell-soul,’ ‘his fiend’s mindthoughts,’ ‘his loathsome body,’ ‘that sinful life.’”

Draco shook his head. “This is a clear portrait of Grendel as an irredeemable monster, damned for all time. It’s very harsh and unforgiving. I wonder why his reading of the poem changed so radically over twenty years? Unless he feels justified in showing a very different point of view, depending on who’s narrating?”

Hermione had been looking down at her notes and had not noticed the momentary change in his expression. “I can’t imagine,” she replied, pulling out several index cards. “But what you’ve said is spot on. I mean, look at Heaney in contrast. Right here, for instance: ‘they kept striking out on every side, seeking to cut straight to the soul.’ Lehmann’s version has it ‘seeking his soul,’ and Porter’s, which is supposedly the closest to the original, is ‘Grendel’s soul to seek.’ So—what does all this talk of Grendel’s soul suggest, anyway? I think,” she finished, leaning towards Draco, her expression animated, “it presumes that Grendel has a soul to begin with, which is a lot more than monsters who are supposedly evil incarnate are generally granted, especially in works written with a heavily Christian slant, like this one was.”

“So—if Grendel has a soul, then there’s always the possibility of redemption, isn’t there,” Draco said slowly. “But—we don’t see that at all in Rebsamen’s verse translation, do we. There, Grendel is ‘rejected by God,’ ‘measured by his sins.’”

He sat back, thinking. “Compare that to Heaney: ‘he who had harrowed the hearts of men with pain and affliction in former times and had given offence to God…’ Very different take, isn’t it! ‘Rejected’ is so much more final. Lehmann has it that Grendel was ‘foe to God,’ Porter says, ‘he clashed with God,’ and Rogers’ version is ‘in contention with God,’ very much like the other two.
God isn’t even mentioned in Rebsamen’s prose version, strangely. And Donaldson—he writes, ‘at war with God.’ So four out of seven set Grendel up as an adversary to this Muggle god, one of those putting Grendel in the position of having offended, which sort of hints at a wrong that could possibly be forgiven under the right circumstances. Being at war with a deity doesn’t theoretically preclude the possibility of redemption, does it. The poem in most of the translations seems to present Grendel as evil, yes, but sadly so, and damned for making such a complete bollocks of everything.” He tapped his pen against his cheek thoughtfully. “No, wait…hang on a minute. That’s not all of it. We’re forgetting something important here. Grendel is the way he is because—”

“That’s not all of it. We’re forgetting something important here. Grendel is the way he is because—” Hermione chimed, in, her eyes alight with sudden understanding. “He was born doomed, wasn’t he! Gods, you’re right, Malfoy! He was from a race of so-called ‘bad breeds’—trolls and elves and monsters,” the ‘kin of Cain,’ Donaldson says. Heaney writes…” Hurriedly she thumbed through her text, flipping back to the beginning pages. “…‘He had dwelt for a time in misery among the banished monsters, Cain’s clan…out of the curse of his, Cain’s, exile, there sprang phantoms…’” And look at these: ‘a powerful demon nursed a hard grievance,’ ‘waged his lonely war.’ And then Donaldson: ‘the fierce spirit painfully endured hardship for a time, ‘unhappy creature,’ ‘the terrible walker-alone.’ I mean, look at the implications of that language! He’s alienated, he’s exiled, and he’s miserable. And he’s born to a race of monsters. So yes, Grendel is a demon, but he’s in a situation not of his own making. He has no choice…”

“…but to be who he is and do what he does,” Draco finished quietly.

She laid her hands down on the table and looked solemnly at Draco, her eyes huge.

“No,” Draco mused, “but here’s where a modern sensibility could be shifting the poet’s intent. Because even though we see the inherent unfairness of the situation, I don’t think it would have seemed at all unfair or even particularly tragic a thousand years ago when the poem was written. Whether or not Grendel had a choice, I mean.” He paused a moment, leaning in closer to Hermione, whose expression was as intent on the idea being worked out as his own. “What happens to him would have seemed…inevitable. A necessary and natural and quite satisfactory consequence. He was damned, whether his behaviour was pre-destined or not! Which doesn’t say much either for the notion of forgiveness or free will, does it,” he concluded, a bit sourly.

“No, that’s true,” Hermione agreed. “But I think those were sort of murky issues back then, weren’t they?”

He nodded. “History tells us that early Christianity was very hard-line. No grey areas. Look at the Crusades and the Inquisition, not to mention the massive witch hunts all over Europe and then in America as late as the 1690s. Look at what happened to pagan Britain two thousand years ago. Over
time, the Old Ways were wiped out in forced conversions, or remade in the new religion’s image. I’ve been reading a lot about all that this term.”

Hermione smiled grimly. “Yes. Exactly. Based on this point alone, I think it’s fair to say that Rebsamen’s poem translation probably comes closest in spirit to the original. Because contrary to the way the original poem would most likely have been received, it really seems that all the other modern translations we’ve looked at mean us to view this monster with a certain degree of pity, empathy even. He’s done terrible things, true, but we feel—I did, anyway—very sad, in a way, at his end. He’s a truly tragic figure, I think, don’t you? He never really had a chance!” Hermione looked up at Draco with large, sad eyes as the power of this realisation struck her.

“Agreed,” he said finally, laying his palms on the table and looking down and away from her gaze, still stricken as the deeper implications of the poem continued to resonate. It was the conclusion he had already come to himself. It’s true. The poor bastard never had any chance at all.

They decided to spend the entire next afternoon in the final writing phase, and then proof each other’s sections for whatever edits and revisions might be needed.

The walk back to the college was a quiet, reflective one. There was much to digest.
25 November
Sunday

They had begun working just after a quick lunch in hall. Now, three hours later, they sat in Draco’s room, side by side at his desk, tapping away furiously on their laptops. They’d read through each other’s rough drafts, made suggestions and corrections, discussed changes—sometimes rather heatedly, both of them fairly stubborn and requiring strong persuasion—and now the two halves of the final version were gradually emerging.

Draco had undertaken the writing of that final section on the poet’s portrayal of Grendel and its various interpretations. As soon as they’d arrived at his room after lunch, he’d silently handed it to her, turning dogedly to the work of proofreading her pages and pointedly avoiding glancing at her face as she read.

Finally, she put down the pages and walked over to where he sat hunched over the desk, sitting down quietly on the bed beside his chair.

He looked at her finally, with eyes that were guarded and yet seemed vulnerable somehow.

“Draco.” Her voice was soft but fervent. “Draco, this is extraordinary. It’s the best part of the essay. It’s really powerful! I’m… I’m stunned.”

“It’s good, then?” he asked hesitantly, unbelieving. “It’s really all right? I was afraid I might have got off track, been too—” He stopped, checking himself. “Well, that maybe it wasn’t scholarly enough. Thought it might have lost its objectivity.”

“Oh, no!” Hermione shook her head vehemently. “The argument is just incredibly passionate, that’s all. You stayed on point the whole time. But… oh…” She stopped, feeling the beginnings of tears unaccountably pricking her lashes and blinking them away quickly. She swallowed hard. “I wouldn’t change a thing, Malfoy. Not anything. It’s bloody marvellous.”

For the first time since lunch, Draco smiled openly, and the tension that he’d worn like a cloak dissipated. From that point on, they simply worked, undistracted, for the rest of the afternoon and into the early hours of the evening.

By eight o’clock, the essay was essentially finished. It had been a marathon effort lasting seven very
intensive hours, and now Draco flopped down, exhausted, on his bed. Hermione stood and stretched, flexing her neck and shoulders to get the kinks out.

“Merlin, I’m knackered!” she sighed, and Draco groaned his agreement, an arm flung across his eyes.

Hermione went to the sink and turned on the taps, splashing her face with gouts of cold water and running wet fingers through her hair.

“This feels wonderful, so refreshing,” she sighed. “Malfoy, you ought to try it!”

“No thanks,” came the muffled reply.

“No, really, you’ll feel loads better!” Hermione insisted.

“I said no thanks, Granger!”

Hermione grinned, and, filling a cup with cold water, she moved stealthily to Draco’s bedside. His eyes were closed.

Dipping her fingers into the cup, she playfully sprinkled a few drops onto his upturned face.

No response.

So she repeated the action, this time scooping up a small handful of cold water and sending the droplets showering down over him.

Still no response.

Well, surely he’d felt that. He couldn’t possibly be asleep, not really. She tried one last time, dipping her hand well into the cup and splashing the rest of the water on Draco’s face and neck, more than she’d really meant to.

His hand shot up and grabbed her wrist, forcing the cup to clatter to the floor, and then he caught hold of her other wrist as well, yanking her flush against his chest. She went down with a surprised squeak and found herself nose to nose with a very wet Draco Malfoy, who was more than ready, now, to play her game.

“Thought I said no thanks,” he growled. “Do you know what happens to little girls who disobey?”

Teetering on the verge of a giggling fit, Hermione shook her head.

“They… get… spanked!” Holding her away from him for a moment, he sat up quickly and then she found herself suddenly sprawled across his lap, his hand hovering above her bum.

Immediately, she opened her mouth to protest but something stopped her. Curiosity, perhaps, or a sudden, careless urge to live dangerously for a change, or the fact that she found, to her own surprise, that she quite liked the sensation of being turned over Draco’s knee. Feeling faintly pervy, her skin prickling in anticipation, she decided she would play along.

Draco ran his hand through his damp hair, pushing his fringe out of his eyes and then wiping his face. She turned to look daggers at him over her shoulder and he grinned wickedly.

“Now this is what I call just desserts, Granger. Me, you, and a positively delectable view of your lovely… er… assets. How very convenient that you chose to wear this little skirt today.” He laughed softly as she wiggled a bit, all the while hiding a grin of her own.
“Now then. Five, I think. Yes, that should do it. One for each time I said no, and three more for each
time you did it anyway.”

“Malfoy! You wouldn’t dare!”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?” he drawled. “Watch me.”

His hand rose and came down on her skirt-covered bum with a firm little smack.

“One.”

She twisted around in a half-hearted attempt to free herself.

“Malfoy! Stop!” She began to laugh now, despite herself.

Again, his hand rose, descending on the rounded curve of her rear end, but just a trifle more
forcefully this time. She jumped a bit at the contact, her skin erupting in a mass of goose bumps.

“Two.”

Draco paused a moment and smiled languidly. Perhaps it was time to play just a bit more creatively.
Turnabout was such fun.

His hand came to rest on the backs of her knees, covered by black tights, and slowly, deliberately,
began an upward journey, halting just as it arrived at the boundary of her skirt’s hem. He gave her
inner thigh a small pinch and then an experimental, tickling stroke, and she shivered under his touch,
letting out a tiny gasp.

And then he returned his hand to its original position, raised it high,

And then he returned his hand to its original position, raised it high, and brought the flat of it down
just slightly harder than the last time. This time it stung a bit—but a very pleasant tingling between
her legs that had begun when he’d first touched her thighs now intensified.

Draco noted with satisfaction the way she squirmed, pressing her thighs together as she began to
breathe more shallowly. He was also aware, increasingly, of another rather pleasurable consequence
of having Granger wriggling around on his lap. He wondered if she’d noticed yet.

“Oh!”

She had.

“Two more, my very disobedient girl,” he said with mock sternness. “Here’s the first.”

And with that, his hand left her bum and returned to it with a pronounced smack, so that she felt the
sting right through the material of the skirt. Immediately, he followed it up with another languorous
stroke of her inner thighs.

That other burn was growing exponentially with every touch, and now it was accompanied by a
sudden dampness and odour that were mortifying to her. Knowing these signs for what they were, he
couldn’t resist a tiny smile of satisfaction.

“One more,” he said teasingly. “Last one, darling. You’ve been very brave.”

The final smack resounded like a shot, but the brief smarting was forgotten immediately, supplanted
by the very pleasant sensations now positively humming between her legs. She noticed, too, that the
stiffening lump she’d felt beneath her earlier was now positively jutting out and poking into her
pelvis, and seemed to be growing to match the increased arousal she felt. She fishtailed her hips a bit
and heard him draw in a quick breath as he shifted in his seat. *Ha! Two can play at that game,* darling!

Quite suddenly, he rolled her over, cradling her in his arms.

“And now, of course, I must kiss it all better,” he murmured, lowering his head to drop a light kiss on her mouth. When he pulled back, there was a moment when all she could see were his eyes, dove-grey and so soft as they regarded her, and then the moment passed and there was laughter there once again.

“Well?” he asked then, his lips twitching despite his attempt to be stern. “Have you learnt your lesson, young lady? What have you to say for yourself?”

“Sorry,” she whispered, gazing up at him with huge, limpid eyes, and then she grinned saucily. “*Not.*”

In a flash, she was off his lap and dancing lightly out of his reach, leaving him grabbing at empty air.

“Very clever,” Draco laughed, flopping back onto his pillows. “*Tie.*”

Meanwhile, Hermione had returned to the sink and mirror and was attempting to fix her tousled hair. She turned to him with a piquant smile. "I think *I* was the winner, really…"

She returned to the bed and sat down beside him. “Look, I’m very sorry I got you so wet. I didn’t mean to! That last time was an accident, honestly!”

“Hmm!” he huffed, crossing his arms and trying without success to look disgruntled. “S’okay. I *suppose.*”

“Look, let me make it up to you! There’s somewhere I’ve been wanting us to go. Tonight would be perfect. Come on!” She grabbed his hand and stood up, pulling him to his feet and surveying him critically. “You might want to tidy up a bit first though.”

“I was perfectly presentable before you dumped water all over me, Granger!” he complained good-naturedly, peering at his reflection in the mirror before giving his hair a quick combing.

Ten minutes later, they were on their way out of the college and headed along Broad Street.

“Where in Merlin’s name are we going, Granger? Are you kidnapping me?” Draco joked, quickening his pace to keep up with Hermione.

“Patience, Malfoy, we’re nearly there. I hope you’re hungry,” she replied, taking his hand and pulling him along.

Turning right on Magdalen Street East, they headed north to where the road merged with St Giles.

“Come on,” Hermione said again somewhat enigmatically, crossing the street and pointing. “It’s not far.”

They walked on a bit further, passing St John’s College on the right. Draco was still mystified about where exactly Hermione was taking him. That is, until they’d passed Pusey Street and he could see the next block of shops ahead on the left. Ah, *there.* That *had* to be it.

*Brilliant.*
“The Bird and Baby! Clever girl,” he grinned. “However did you know?”

Hermione smiled shyly, delighted at his obvious pleasure in her choice. “I knew because... well, because I’ve been wanting to come here myself and for the same reasons,” she said quietly. “Come on, let’s go in.”

The mid-17th-century pub was long and narrow, divided up into warrens of smaller rooms that opened out into a modern conservatory at the rear.

They approached the bar and waited, while the barmaid finished serving another customer.

"Well," Hermione said brightly, opening the menu as they waited. "I wonder what's good here?"
Scanning the listings, she bit her lip distractedly, and then nodded. "Mm… think I'm in the mood for the steak and ale pie. What about you?"

Draco considered for a moment, his brow drawn down in concentration, and then he looked up, raising his hand to signal the barmaid.

"What do you recommend tonight?" he asked, flashing an especially charming smile.

Hermione rolled her eyes and grinned. Typical.

The barmaid, a woman who looked to be in her early thirties, smiled back coquettishly, her hand on her hip. "Well, the lasagne's always very nice. And people seem to enjoy the bangers and mash. But if I were you, love" --she leaned in close-- "I'd go for the fish and chips tonight. Just got the fish in this afternoon. Very fresh indeed. The cook's outdone himself with it." She straightened, nodding, and winked. "I'll be back in a sec to take your orders."

"If I were you, love, I'd go for the fish and chips," Hermione simpered once they were alone, and then snorted. "Gods, Malfoy, it never fails! Have you always had such a devastating effect on women?"

Draco shrugged carelessly, smirking. "Ever since I was about two, or so my mother tells me. The first one was my nanny. Hopelessly in love with me, and me not even quite out of nappies. And then there was…"

Hermione held up her hand, rolling her eyes again and giggling. "Enough! I get the picture!"

The barmaid chose that moment to return, and taking out her pad and a pencil, stood poised to take their order. When she finished writing it all down, she looked expectantly at them.

"What can I get you to drink, then?"

Draco looked at Hermione. Firewhiskey and butterbeer were clearly not on offer, and pub crawls were not something either of them had yet indulged in, in their short time here. He didn't relish revealing his inexperience with Muggle drink. This time it was Hermione who smiled at the barmaid.

"Anything really special you can recommend?"

"Well now..." the older woman began, tapping the pencil against her bottom lip thoughtfully. "We did just get in a new line of ales, and so far some very good reports on them. Odd names, though. Dragonsmoke Stout for one. I like that one—very nice, bit chocolatey. Then there's Glutlusty and Dark Raven. Oh, and Grendel's Winter Ale. It's only available in the cold weather, apparently. That one just came in and I tasted it myself tonight. Lovely stuff."

Draco and Hermione stared at each other.

"Um… who makes those ales?" Hermione asked, poking Draco lightly with her foot.

"Oh, the uh… Beowulf Brewing Company. Out of Staffordshire, they are. Fancy giving one of 'em a try?"

*The Beowulf Brewing Company.* This was too good to be true.

"Grendel's Winter Ale," they said together, and she nudged him again, grinning.

"Right, back in a tick," the barmaid smiled.
"Can you believe this?" Hermione exclaimed. "I mean, really, what are the odds? This has to be an omen for the essay, don't you think?"

"Oh, yeah, absolutely," Draco agreed, straight-faced. "Must be."

"Prat! I was being serious!" Hermione laughed, about to give him a third little nudge with her foot when he swerved to the side and held up a hand.

"Enough! My shins are already bruised! One more of those and I shall have to put you over my knee again, woman!"

Hermione glanced at him slyly. "Promise?"

They were still laughing when the barmaid returned with their drinks. She set two tall glasses down on the old, wooden counter top and then leaned in as Hermione went to whisper something in her ear. She smiled and pointed, and then said, "Go right in and make yourselves comfy. Shouldn't be too long."

"This way," Hermione said, taking Draco's hand and leading him into one very cosy room.

"This is it," she announced. "The Rabbit Room. This is where they met every week for years and years."

Draco looked around.

TBC
A/N: The chapter is too long to fit all together. Part 2 will be up ASAP.

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It was a low-ceilinged room, just a bit dim, a cheery fire in the small hearth set into the paneled wall at one end. Above that, under a large clock, there were several framed photos of various members of the Inklings, as well as a letter from them praising the innkeeper’s excellent ham. To the right and just above them was a recessed, nearly triangular bookshelf containing a number of volumes standing upright. Several wall lamps cast strategically placed pools of warm light.

They sat near the fire with their drinks, not speaking for several minutes as its warmth thawed their fingers and toes, the hum of conversation from nearby tables rising up around them.


Her quick smile was as brilliant as the fire, and he basked in its warmth and light.

The ale was dark, rich, and full-bodied, perfect for a cold night like this.

Draco held up his glass. “To the essay!”

“To the essay!” Hermione echoed, and they clinked their glasses together and took a healthy swallow.

She was about to take another when he gestured towards her face.

“Your, uh…you’ve got a bit of stuff…on your lip…”

Hermione picked up her napkin, about to dab at her upper lip, when he leaned in closer. “Allow me.”

Expecting a quick wipe with a napkin, she closed her eyes. When his tongue brushed over her lips instead, she opened her eyes wide for a moment, and then she went very still.

“Mm,” she said faintly, touching her fingertips to the spot, as he sat back in his chair, faintly flushed.

“Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” he murmured, and immediately took a quick swallow of his own beer. Somehow she had the power to render him a bit shy and self-conscious at the oddest moments—he, who’d ordinarily never had such a problem where girls were concerned, had never before worried about whether his attentions would be welcomed or how they’d be interpreted or what his feelings might really be at any given moment.

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, enjoying the ale and the warmth of the fire. Gradually, though, Hermione noticed that Draco seemed a bit preoccupied, distant.

“Something wrong?” she asked quietly. “I thought…”

He turned his head, brought back out of the reverie he’d been lost in for the moment. “Oh, no, it’s fine. I’m having a wonderful time, honestly! It’s just…”

“Just…?” she interjected gently.

“Well,” he began, “I was just thinking about…the whole Grendel thing, actually.”
“Mmm.” Hermione nodded. “I know. His story really moved me. What were you thinking, exactly?”

Draco lifted his glass and took a small swallow. “Just about his lack of choice. It’s as if he were a pawn, really, isn’t it. You said it yourself. He was playing a part, the part he was born to play, and there was no way out for him. As if, you know, there had to be a foil for Beowulf to play off, evil against good.”

“Well, yes, that’s true.”

“But—then where’s the hope? The possibility for change? Yes, I know, I know—if he had changed, then where would the story be? Or at the very least, it would be a very different story, wouldn’t it. I understand that. It’s just…well…I know what it’s like to be born to certain expectations, to a role you get moulded into.”

Hermione looked at him closely as he, in turn, glanced quickly away. His expression remained composed, though his eyes betrayed a turmoil she could tell he was trying very hard to hold in check. A small muscle pulsed in his jaw.

"He was marked, you know? The whole mark of Cain thing. The destiny he had to live out as one of the offspring of a cursed line. How do you live with that? I'll tell you. You just throw yourself into it even more, knowing that nobody will expect anything else of you anyway, or even believe it if you try to break away. Even once you begin to doubt and have regrets. And I did."

There was a pause.

He looked pointedly at her for a long moment and then glanced away, his voice becoming very quiet. "I still do."

Her eyes opened a bit wider. She gazed speculatively at him, and he flushed before continuing.

"Anyway... you just... you just play your part to the hilt, don't you. Really relish it. Do what everyone has always expected you to do all your life. Until you just can't anymore. And then it's worse."

“How?” she whispered, almost not breathing in the stillness that seemed to have descended around their table like a curtain.

“Because then you can’t get away from what’s inside your own head. You carry it around with you all the time, waking and sleeping. Waking and sleeping…” he repeated, his voice trailing off. The nightmares that still plagued him -- could he ever tell her about those?

“And then?” she prompted gently.

“And then… and then when you do what it is they want you to do, it’s a thousand times more sickening.” He laughed, but it was a bitter, hollow sound. “I almost think Beowulf did Grendel a favour, really. Put him out of his misery.”

Hermione let out the breath she hadn’t even realised she’d been holding. Her voice trembled. “Oh, Draco...how did you deal with...with all that? What did you do?”

“I did what I was told,” he answered dully. “I had to, or it would have been the worse for me. My father and my dear Aunt Bellatrix, who I am convinced was totally insane by then—there was no dealing with them except by going along. At least…”

He paused. Now or never.
“At least to their faces.”

Hermione drew a sharp breath. “What do you mean?”

“I betrayed them. I betrayed them all. I had to, finally. I was going insane with it. The torture, the killings. I suppose it must have shown on my face. Suppose I must have looked a complete wreck after a while. Snape took me aside one day. Told me…well, he took me into his confidence. Told me something about himself that nobody else knew or even suspected. Could not be allowed to suspect, or else his life was forfeit. I think you can guess what I mean.”

She nodded.

“He offered me a chance. And I took it.”

“Draco,” she breathed, the colour draining from her face. “Are you saying…”

“Yes. I began to pass the odd bit of information to Snape whenever I could. He found his own ways of getting what I told him to the Order, unbeknownst to any of you. Nobody else knew.”

“So you…” Hermione began faintly. “You had already turned before Harry and I were held prisoner in your house… A long time before?”

He nodded.

“And… that’s why you acted the way you did, isn’t it… You didn't want to tell.”

Another nod. “I hated having to do it. But I had no choice. He…my father…couldn’t know what I’d been doing. And Auntie Bella…” He shuddered. “I don’t want to think about what would have happened to you…” What very nearly did.

“Or you!” she interjected.

He nodded wearily. “Or me, yes, if the truth had come out. I had betrayed my family, Hermione. They already despised me for my lack of enthusiasm, my reluctance, over what I had to do. If they’d known how much further I had gone… I know it would have gone that much worse for you… and Potter. And me? I’d have been dead a hundred times over.” He paused. “Even now, my father still hasn’t forgiven me. Nor will he ever, I suspect. Though I don’t know why that should still matter to me now,” he added bitterly, almost as an after-thought.

Hermione studied her hands, folded before her on the table and took a measured breath. “Draco, I was there when Snape died. I saw him give Harry his memories right before. Later, Harry told me what he’d seen in the Pensieve.” She paused. “Snape was acting on Dumbledore’s orders from the beginning.”

Draco looked at her, his face bloodless. “You mean… you mean even when…”

“Even when he killed Dumbledore, yes. Even then. Dumbledore was already dying, Draco. And somehow, he knew Voldemort was planning to use you to punish your parents. Dumbledore didn’t want that for you. So he charged Snape with protecting you. And… and he made Snape promise to kill him when the time came.” She looked stricken suddenly, a lone tear sliding down her cheek and her next words tumbling out in a rush. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before! I wanted to, I did-- but I… I didn’t know if it was my place. And I was afraid to bring it up before you were ready to talk about it. It seemed so painful for you the last time…”

“I…” Draco floundered, unable to think. The events of that awful night in the tower came flooding
back into his thoughts in a painful blur. Dumbledore had *not* been surprised to learn of Voldemort’s threats, he remembered with sudden, awful clarity. The headmaster had tried to explain, to persuade Draco to accept his help, but to no avail. Terrified and certain that there was no way out for him, Draco had not believed. And Severus… “Severus never told me any of that. I thought… I just knew he was trying to help, to give me a way out. I didn’t know…”

And now so much made sense that had not fit before. Draco had found out about his mother’s desperate request for protection from Snape, the Unbreakable Vow he’d made to her. What he hadn’t known was how—so very ironically, he now understood—that vow had played quite neatly into the larger plans in which Professor Dumbledore had apparently involved Snape so deeply. All the pins had lined up very neatly in a row, it seemed. Now he felt a sudden, painful clutching at his heart when he thought of Severus Snape, who had sacrificed so much to help him help himself— and of Albus Dumbledore, the man he’d despised for so many years in echo of his father’s sneering disdain. The man who’d wanted, to the end of his days, to protect him— to save him, really. He felt slightly ill, and buried his face in his hands.

Instantly, Hermione was at his side, dragging her chair over to his.

“I’m so sorry, so very sorry,” she murmured over and over, her arm going tightly around his shoulder, her forehead pressed against his hair. She could feel him shivering slightly. “It’s okay, it’s okay now…” She held him that way for a time, until he grew still in her arms.

Just then, their dinner arrived. Awkwardly, Hermione stood, pushing her chair back, and sat down as the plates of steaming food were set before them. She could see that Draco’s appetite had fled. Hers had gone along with it.

They sat quietly for a few minutes, until finally Draco speared a chip with his fork and brought it to his mouth, smiling at her a bit shakily.

“I’m okay, Hermione. Please. Let’s… let’s eat, all right?”

She smiled back and resolutely plunged her fork into the flaky crust of her steak and ale pie, the fissure sending up a fragrant cloud of steam from inside it.


Dinner was a subdued affair after that. There was much for both of them to think about. They remained lost in their own thoughts for much of the walk back to their college. As they approached the Bridge of Sighs, Draco caught Hermione’s hand in his and they stopped.

“Being here,” he said quietly, “well… I had to come. I *needed* this. More than anything. Nobody knows me here, except for you. To everybody else, I’m just another student, no fucked-up past dragging me down. They know nothing of all that. I feel like I can *breathe* here, you know? Start again.”

She nodded, her throat closing.

“And… well… now, there’s something else too. Something I didn’t expect. A second chance in another way.” He tipped her chin up and looked at her intently. “Do you know what I mean?”

She nodded again, swallowing hard, the tears beginning to slip from the corners of her eyes.
“Will you… will you come back to my room tonight, Hermione? Please… let me love you. I want you so badly.” In the glow of the street lamps, her dark eyes were luminous. His voice dropped to a ragged whisper. “I ache for you.”

She moved into his arms, resting her head on his chest. His heart beat wildly against her cheek, vibrating into her very skin.

“Yes,” she whispered back. “I will.”

The only light in the room came from a streetlamp shining in through the window, its yellow light diminished and softened by the curtains. Draco and Hermione stood facing each other in the darkness, and the air seemed thick, suddenly, and hard to breathe.

He reached out to smooth a stray lock of hair from her face, his fingertips brushing gently against the skin of her temple. They lingered there, soothing and calming. She stood quietly, letting him touch her, and gradually, his fingers moved from her temple down her cheek to her jaw and then to her throat, all the while feather-light and delicate.

“Come here,” he whispered, and she took a step closer, her chest rising and falling as she fought to steady her breathing.

His fingers had been resting against the hollow of her throat, and now they moved lightly down between her breasts as he bent his head and brought his mouth to hers. It was hardly their first kiss, but it seemed new in every possible way. There was a softness like velvet to his lips as they moved over hers now. One kiss, two, a third—all of them achingly tender and gentle. She sighed against his mouth, wanting more and still more, pressing against him with an increasing urgency, her own need for gentleness lessening in the face of the almost painful desire that was pushing everything else out of its way.

He felt her need. It was his need too.

Wrapping her in a swift embrace, he lifted her chin and hungrily reclaimed her mouth, all the while holding her close, wanting her not to feel embarrassed or regretful or frightened. Never, never that.

“Hermione,” he murmured raggedly, between kisses. “Hermione…”

A powerful, raw energy seemed to course through her at the sound of her name, chilling and electrifying her at the same time, and she clung to him. His hands swept up into her hair and he clutched it in both hands, greedily drinking her kisses down like a man parched for water.

Clothing suddenly seemed a small matter, an impediment easily banished. It was bare skin they craved, and somehow their clothing came away without any conscious effort or awareness of its absence. In the shadowy half-light, their nakedness was curiously innocent and beautiful to behold.

Draco drew Hermione down on the bed, and they knelt together, their bodies seemingly fused skin to skin, their hands traversing the varied pathways of arms, ribs, collarbones and spines, muscle and bone, the secrets of their flesh. No place was left unexplored.

And then he moved back for a moment and looked at her, really looked, for the first time since their
rampant desire had exploded.

He caught his breath.

She was lovelier than he could have imagined.

“Gods,” he whispered, “you take my breath away!”

Suddenly shy and self-conscious, she blushed and looked away, but he would not allow that and caught her chin, drawing her gaze back to his.

“Please, Hermione, you mustn’t,” he said urgently. “You are so beautiful. So incredibly lovely. More than I could possibly have guessed. And believe me— he smiled— ‘I’ve done some serious guessing!’”

They both laughed and he opened his arms to her, drawing her close again. It was lovely, feeling his warm skin and the heartbeat just beneath it. She felt so safe. Slowly, he drew her down until they lay facing each other.

“I’ve wanted this for so long.” His words were like a prayer. “So long.”

The surging of her own heart was filling her ears and she nodded, closing her eyes as he crushed her against him, taking her mouth deeply, filling her soul as he moved against her. The smooth, solid heat of his erection pushed between her thighs, its slick tip teasing her, and instinctively, she opened her legs, wanting more.

It would be wonderful for her, he would make certain of that. Suddenly her pleasure was all he desired for himself.

He brought his mouth down to her breasts and suckled until their rosy peaks stood firm and erect, and then he lavished kisses and strokes of his tongue down her body—her ribcage, the small of her waist, her belly, the hollow of her navel—until he reached her upper thighs. He caressed their smooth flesh in a series of tiny kisses and little, teasing bites, until he was positioned before her maidenhead, already glistening for him.

There was a throbbing deep inside her now, and she desperately wanted it sated, and yet, there was a sweetness to the wait. Every part of her that he touched seemed newly alive. Feeling as if she were standing on the edge of a precipice, she allowed him to part her thighs further, squeezing her eyes shut and holding her breath as she sensed him approaching, her skin positively on fire with anticipation.

And then suddenly he was there, and glorious Morgana, it was like nothing she could have imagined. It was all heat and ice, softly sensuous and demanding, hungry and yet teasing, as his tongue and lips moved against her sensitive flesh, probing and licking, suckling and curling and thrusting again and again, until she was quite breathless.

Her climax came in a sudden rush of blinding, shuddering sensation, and afterwards, he moved quickly to cradle her. She lay boneless and overcome in his arms, as he stroked her cheek and kissed her softly, again and again.

“Merlin,” she said finally, her voice hushed. “That was… that was…” And then she fell silent, for once at a loss for words.

Draco smiled against her skin as he pressed his lips to her shoulder, resting his hand gently on her breast and gently teasing its nipple.
“Yes,” he replied. “It was. But there’s more.” He took her hand, brought it up to his lips, and kissed her palm. “Touch me, Hermione,” he said, his voice tremulous with his desire. “Please.”

A blush crept over her cheeks, but her desire to please him was stronger, and she allowed him to guide her hand down to his penis.

“Show me,” she said shyly.

He smiled and placed her hand at the base, wrapping her fingers around the shaft, and then gently drew her hand up in a smooth, fluid movement, skimming the weeping head once quickly and then bringing her now-slick palm back down its length.

“You can stroke here too,” he told her, placing her other hand on his balls, which felt lovely to her as she cupped them in a slow, tickling caress and stroked the fine, gold hair. He was a revelation to her.

And then Hermione did something unexpected, the spontaneity of which surprised both of them. Without thinking, she leaned down and kissed him there -- left a series of light kisses along his length until she reached the head, and then she delicately licked the pre-cum from it, eliciting a groan from him before she slid up his body to share it with him in a deep, soulful kiss.

There would be no more waiting now. Swiftly, he rolled them over and positioned himself between her legs, gazing down at her finally as she lay beneath him.

“Ready, love?”

The melting tenderness she saw in his eyes recalled to her the look she’d seen there earlier. It left her breathless with need and more than need.

She nodded, her heart pounding.

Yes. Yes. Oh yes.

Fingers trembling slightly, he opened her and then hesitated for just a moment.

“This might hurt a bit,” he said softly.

She nodded, and then he eased himself in most of the way, looking down at her again. At her tense smile, he gave a final thrust. She sucked in a breath, and he went quite still.

"I’m sorry,” he murmured, stroking her hair. "Just breathe, love. It’ll pass."

Moments later, it had. He felt her relaxing gradually, and then, as he began to move again within her, the walls of her flesh seemed to clench around him, molding themselves to him with their miraculous heat and slick elasticity. And then he began to move in earnest -- the imperative surging from his flesh to hers-- and with each thrust, she felt him filling her ever more deeply, reaching down deep inside her, turning her inside out, marking her.

Instinctively she wrapped her legs around him, pressing him tightly to her breasts and meeting his every thrust with a rocking, undulating rhythm that completed his own. He was moving so deeply inside her, now, that his flesh seemed to merge into hers, their shared heat searing them in the final moments before they both exploded, his climax triggering a second one for her.

She had been clutching him so tightly that her fingernails had left small, half-moon-shaped marks on his shoulders, and even now, she found she was still loath to let him go. His weight and the heat of his body and his soft breath as it tickled her ear were sweetness itself to her, and she wound her arms
around him tightly, keeping him close. The sensation of him inside her was sweet too, and she wanted nothing more than to hold him there a bit longer if she could.

“Am I hurting you?” he whispered, concerned, raising himself up on his elbows to look down at her.

She shook her head and drew him back down, kissing his damp hair as it fell about his face.

There were no words.

Both of them recognized without really understanding-- on a far deeper, more intrinsic level beyond the power of simple speech-- that something extraordinary had passed between them this night. It remained unarticulated. It was too new, too delicate, too unfamiliar and strange. This had been a profound rending -- of hearts, of flesh, of souls -- and a Making. It was the most potent of all magicks, in a sense, and the very oldest, and when the miracle of it happened, it was always in its own time and in its own way.

There would be a word for it, but not this night.

Limbs entangled, they slept deeply and did not dream.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf
26 November
Monday morning

Bars of sunlight dappled the jumble of bedclothes in which two prone bodies lay tangled. It was past eleven, and beyond the outer door of room 12 in Staircase 5, life surged busily forward as the new week got underway.

Somewhere, a door slammed and voices could be heard cheerfully yelling back and forth. One of the bodies in the bed stirred, and a pale, slender arm emerged from under the navy-blue duvet, stretched itself straight out, and then dropped limply back onto the bed.

Its owner’s head, her long, curly brown hair dishevelled and a bit wild, emerged next, and a very sleepy Hermione opened her eyes a crack, squinting in the late-morning light that fell across her face.

Her eyes traveled slowly around the room. Stark walls, one striking poster the notable exception just overhead. A chest of drawers, its top nearly bare; a desk, littered with papers and books and a pair of laptops. The desk chair, various articles of clothing—some of it hers-- strewn haphazardly over it.
Those were definitely her knickers.

Hermione yawned, stretching luxuriantly, as her mind gradually cleared. The fabric of the duvet felt silky against her bare skin. *Everywhere.*

Sweet Circe, she’d… they’d really… Gradually she became aware of a dull ache between her legs, and then a very distinct image crystallised behind her eyes, and she found herself smiling and blushing as she remembered.

She was truly a woman now. She felt as if she’d been initiated into that final mystery, the one she’d been listening to others talk about for the past three years. Lav, both the Patil twins, Susan, Hannah… and then, in the year after the war, to others who’d stayed to take the uni prep class.

And the experience of it had been… well… quite simply, *amazing.* Somehow, she didn’t believe it had been a matter of luck either. Briefly, she wondered if he were just prodigiously gifted in the sack—or did she dare to believe it might really have been the two of them together creating those incredible sparks? It had to be, she told herself, remembering his eyes as he’d looked down at her just before… Those eyes that had turned lambent and seemed lit from within as he’d gazed at her. They had communicated a raw truth, albeit fleetingly, before clouding over with desire. But what had slipped through in that moment was unmistakable.

Had he meant to reveal himself to her quite so nakedly? She guessed not. It was startling and rather scary, now that she thought about it. And *thrilling.*

Raising herself up on one elbow, she looked down at the sleeping figure beside her. He lay sprawled on his stomach, only his tousled blond head and shoulders visible above the bedcovers. Then abruptly, he rolled onto his back, his left arm flung carelessly over his eyes to shield them from the sun that was hitting the pillows.

It was there. Faded a bit, true, but still fairly distinct and sinister-looking as it spread itself over his left forearm. Even faded, it stood out in sharp relief against the very pale, fine skin. She wondered at not having seen it before, and then reminded herself that he’d always worn jumpers and long-sleeved shirts, and the one time he’d inadvertently pushed the sleeves up, he’d tugged them back down almost immediately. Now she had a pretty good idea why.

Repulsed momentarily, now Hermione found herself perversely fascinated. She reached a gingerly fingertip out and delicately traced the outer perimeters of the Mark and then the serpent within it.

It did not burn her. The jaws of Hell did not open to swallow her. There was no clap of ominous thunder overhead. It was just a tattoo, miraculously beginning to fade now: the evil symbol of a horrific time they’d both come through, a sign that he’d been caught early and then branded-- against his will, she now knew. But its power was long gone.

Her heart constricted in her chest as she remembered what he’d said the night before about having regrets. She sensed that he’d meant it in more than just a general sense. How often, she wondered, had he only been going through merely sad and pathetic motions when he’d said something cruel and hurtful to her, years before? When had his bigoted and contemptuous behaviour stopped being an expression of his true feelings and begun merely to be a half-hearted echo of his father’s vicious sentiments, said more because he thought he should than because he truly believed any of it anymore? She thought just maybe it had been sixth year, when so often he’d seemed withdrawn, his eyes haunted and distant. The nasty words were the same, but the conviction seemed gone from them. She’d merely laughed them off, throwing his pathetic attempts to humiliate or criticise her back in his face. She hadn’t given much thought to what might truly have been behind those haunted eyes, except… except when he’d been seen weeping in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. She’d wondered
briefly then, but had soon forgotten it in the face of so much else that had preoccupied everyone that tumultuous year.

Merlin… he’d worked on that cabinet sixth year, let the Death Eaters into the school, been on the verge of killing Dumbledore, and now… now she knew how much those acts had tortured him. He hadn’t wanted any of it. He’d been coerced, used, a pawn caught between Voldemort’s boundless cruelty and insatiable hunger for power and his own father’s overweening, toadying ambitions, and the virulently racist beliefs that had fueled both.

*You do what everyone has always expected you to do all your life.*

And he had, hadn’t he. How awful, to feel so chained to the expectations of others—of one’s own parents, one’s father. To feel so ultimately powerless.

*Until you just can’t anymore.*

Until he’d simply had to stop.

She couldn’t even begin to guess at the nightmarish images he’d had to carry with him all the time, what he’d been made to witness and participate in. Suddenly she felt her gorge rising at the very thought of Lucius Malfoy and the horrors to which he’d subjected his own child. She could happily have strangled the man. Looking down at his son, now beginning to wake, she felt her throat closing with sudden, angry tears, and she leaned down to gently smooth the hair from his eyes. She wondered if Lucius Malfoy knew his son at all, if he had the slightest idea what a truly complex and questing soul Draco was, beneath the cocky, arrogant facade.

Just then, Draco opened his eyes fully and his mouth curved into a soft, dreamy smile.

“ ‘Morning,” he whispered, reaching out to stroke Hermione’s arm gently.

“Hi,” she replied softly, and immediately snuggled down next to him again, drawing his left arm back over her and idly running a finger up and down its underside, deliberately moving ever nearer to the Mark.

When he realised where her finger was heading, he tried to pull his arm away, but she wouldn’t have it. She laid her hand firmly on the Mark then, giving his arm a gentle squeeze, and looked up at him. Her eyes held his, daring him to push her away.

“Hermione…” He swallowed. “No… please…”

“It’s nothing to you now! *Nothing,*” she declared fiercely. “It’s got no power over you anymore. All that is over. *Finished!* He’s gone! For good this time! Look,” she said, “I’m touching it. I’m touching *you.* It’s just skin. It’s just a bloody *picture.* It can’t hurt you anymore, not if you don’t let it!”

All this time, he’d turned his head away, staring at a fixed point in space. Now, he looked down at her, his eyes reflecting a host of emotions all warring inside him at once. He seemed frozen, powerless to move away from the moment in any direction.

Swiftly, then, Hermione brought his arm to her mouth and pressed a firm kiss to the marked skin. She hoped fervently that this would tell him more than any words could.

Her mouth was still pressed against his lower arm, leaving small, tender kisses in a random pattern all over the disfigured skin. He felt a flush spread its warmth throughout his entire body, and
impulsively, he reached around with his right arm to encircle her in a tight embrace, crushing her to his chest and burying his face in her fragrant hair, dropping light kisses into the curls.

“Hermione,” he murmured again and again, in wonderment. This amazing girl had just done the unthinkable, the impossible… the incredible. The fucking miraculous.

Finally, he pulled away and looked at her. She was crying now, her tears dripping onto his chest, leaving tiny rivulets in the smooth skin.

“You don’t know…” he began, and his voice trembled, and then dropped to a reverent whisper. “Thank you.” Tenderly, he kissed her forehead, her nose, her wet cheeks, her chin, finally moving to her mouth. “Thank you,” he breathed once again.

They lay there quietly, resting in each other’s arms, until finally, Draco moved his head in order to look at Hermione’s face again.

“Last night…” he began. “Last night was…”

Bloody amazing.

“For me too,” she said simply and then she smiled shyly, her cheeks suddenly suffused with a sudden blush. “You were wonderful, you know. You made my first time really beautiful and special.”

Suddenly Draco’s heart felt lighter than it had in ages. A smile lifted the corners of his mouth, refusing to be suppressed and he hugged her again, feeling curiously at peace. “I’m glad,” he murmured. And then something occurred to him, a sudden, worrisome intrusion. “Granger… we never… I mean, we didn’t… use any sort of protection… cast a contracep--”

“It’s all right.” Hermione’s breath tickled his neck. “I’m on the Pill.”

“What is ‘the Pill’?” he asked, confused. “Some sort of Muggle potion?”

She giggled. “I suppose, in a way,” she replied, idly exploring the fine, golden hairs surrounding his nipples. “It stops a woman becoming pregnant. I take a small tablet every day for three weeks out of each month. Works like a charm,” she added, grinning at her own pun.

Draco let out a sigh of relief. “That’s all right, then,” he said and smiled, holding her close. Then another thought struck him.

“Why? I assume you have to take it for a while before it starts really working. You couldn’t have known in advance about last night—neither of us could have done.” Though I’ve wanted it for long enough, Merlin knows.

Absently, Hermione stroked his right nipple, causing it to firm into a tiny pebble of flesh. He could feel himself growing hard beneath the covers.

“Well,” she answered matter-of-factly, “it’s simple. I knew I’d probably begin seeing somebody at some point—at least, I hoped I would— and I wanted to be ready. It just seemed the responsible thing to do.”

That was his Granger through and through. Trust her to be prepared. He really couldn’t imagine her being as heedless and careless as he realised he’d just been. “Well,” he chuckled, “I commend your very thorough preparation for such an eventuality.”
They lay in contented silence for another minute or two and then her hand left his chest and found its slow, meandering way beneath the covers. She paused for a moment before her fingers closed around his growing erection, and then commenced a hesitant stroke along its length, feather-light initially and then becoming more confidently firm. His breath caught in his chest.

“Oh yeah…” he murmured with a sigh. “Just like that…”

Hermione grinned, a delicious sense of power emboldening her further. She kicked away the covers altogether and slid down the bed a bit, leaning over his now-prominent erection and replacing her hand with her mouth.

She had no idea if she were doing this right; she only knew what instinct told her, as she took a fair amount of his cock into her mouth and began to suck on it, flicking her tongue lightly over the head before beginning deeper, pulling strokes. As she sucked, her hand found his balls and she fondled them tenderly as he’d taught her the night before. Suddenly, he stiffened and moaned, his hand clutching at her hair, and a jet of warm liquid spurted into her mouth, a few drops dribbling down her chin.

A moment of surprise and then she looked up, smiling gamely as she swallowed it all down, her tongue flicking out to lick the remainder from below her lip.

_Fucking hell._

For an innocent, the girl had talent—not to mention bloody fantastic instincts! A reward was definitely in order. Smiling wolfishly, he reached down to pull her back up alongside him on the pillows, and with a soft, throaty laugh, he proceeded to devour her.

* 

Four hours later, the “scouts,” whose job was to clean the students’ rooms and leave fresh linens for them at the start of every week, had still been unable to gain entry to room 12, Staircase 5. The outer door remained closed, the implicit message clear to everyone: _Do not disturb_. Raised eyebrows and knowing grins amongst the other denizens of the third landing assured Draco’s Staircase 5 reputation for the remainder of the year. The door had been firmly shut now for seventeen hours straight. It might just be a college record.

Mark Applegate in number 11 had kindly volunteered to keep watch and note the precise time the door opened. He’d stationed himself just inside his own outer door, a book in hand and a pad and pencil on the floor beside him. Tony Spencer of number 9 had agreed to disseminate news of the final time amongst the other nine residents of the staircase, in order to determine the winner of the pool. Eric Rogerson of number 10 had offered to collect the money from everyone. The most heavily favoured odds were on the door opening at twelve hours.

At 6:00 pm, the door finally opened. It had been nineteen hours. Peter Lawson’s bet had been a long-shot at fifteen, though everybody had scoffed at the time. But the winner had turned out to be quiet Colin Whitehead from number 7 on the second floor, whose own guess of seventeen hours had been the result of luck combined with a fertile imagination and a fair bit of fantasising and secret wishful thinking about Hermione. The winnings were quite substantial too. At £2.00 a bet, they totaled £22.00, enough to take himself and a date out for a rather
Talking of food, there hadn’t been much in the way of actual food throughout the day; all Draco could scrounge up for the two of them had been some stale wholemeal biscuits, half a Cadbury Curly Wurly bar, and a wizened-looking apple. They’d been far too busy with other pursuits to care until now, but by close to 6:00, acute hunger had set in with a vengeance, and they had reluctantly got out of bed and dressed, splashing a bit of cold water on their faces and pulling on their jackets and woolen scarves to cross the quad for dinner.

The door opened and they stepped onto the landing. Immediately, applause erupted from all sides, the sound of it welling up all the way from the first floor. Spencer, Applegate, and Rogerson stood by their doors, clapping appreciatively, huge grins splitting their faces.

“Oi, Malfoy!” somebody hooted. “Thought you died in there!”

“Working on your essay, were you, mate?”

“Bit of hands-on research, Malfoy?”

A chorus of wolf whistles shrilled.

“Sod off, you wankers,” Draco snorted as he and Hermione shouldered their way past their grinning audience. “C’mon, Granger, enough of their arsing about. I’m starved!”

The cheers and applause followed them right out the door, echoing on the chill air as the door closed behind them. It was a clear, cold night, stars winking in silver strands between cottony masses of clouds, the moon gleaming in a fragile, curving arc. Once outside, they looked at each other and laughed, and he gathered her into a quick hug.

They walked briskly towards the eccentrically designed building containing the dining hall, its lights a yellow beacon in the darkness of the quad. Inside, it was bright and warm, a cheering fire burning in the large, tiled hearth. Clusters of students waited with trays in the queue and others milled about, their trays laden with steaming dishes, looking for an empty table.

The shepherd’s pie looked best tonight, and they heaped their trays with plates of the savoury casserole, bowls of fresh salad, drinks, and a sweet to finish with. Draco looked with approval at the dish of creamy chocolate mousse Hermione had chosen. He liked a woman who wasn’t afraid to enjoy sweets once in a while. And Hermione positively relished them, though her slender figure put the lie to that.

They sat down finally, and for a couple of minutes, filling their empty bellies took precedence over conversation. Eventually, though, both surfaced from the ambrosial mixture of mashed potatoes, minced lamb, vegetables and gravy, and took a breath.

Draco sat back, rubbing his stomach and sighing with satisfaction. “Shit, that’s good!”

Hermione grinned. “Done already? Can I have the rest of yours?”

“Greedy! You want to watch that, Granger. You’ll get fat, you know.”

They laughed and Draco forked up another succulent mouthful. Both ate in contented silence only occasionally punctuated by conversation until finally, Hermione put down her fork and looked at Draco.

“So… Saturday’s it then, I suppose. End of term. I can’t believe it…” Her voice trailed off. Then she
began again. “When are you… um… when are you going home, then?”

Draco looked up from the pear tart he had been about to dig into. His expression grew somber, his grey eyes suddenly unreadable. “Saturday afternoon. The 4:20 train to Bath. And then a taxi to Castle Combe. I can Apparate from there.” He laid his fork down and rested his chin in his palm.

“Oh…” Hermione stuck her spoon sit into the folds of chocolate mousse, where it remained, forgotten. “Yes… right. Bath…”

“What about you, then?” Draco regarded her steadily.

“My parents are driving in to collect me. They’ll be here sometime before lunch, I think. Oh, Draco-” Suddenly she took a breath, her eyes filled with excitement laced with a certain apprehension. “Can you… will you have lunch with us?”

He hadn’t expected that somehow. And yet… he wasn’t really surprised. But he had to ask. “Are you sure you want me to?”

Hermione’s eyes grew wide. “Want you…” she echoed, incredulous. “Of course, silly! Why ever not?”

“Well,” he replied, his voice measured. “I just thought… perhaps they wouldn’t want to meet me. If they know anything about me, I mean.”

Hermione sat back, her breath expelled in a sigh. “Oh.”

He persisted, wanting the answer to his next question and yet fearful of hearing it. “Did you tell them about… about Dumbledore? What I tried to do…?”

She couldn’t lie. “Yes,” she answered quietly, “but I also told them you didn’t go through with it. They know everything, really. I didn’t keep anything from them. They know the terrible position you were in.”

“You actually discussed me… that… with your parents?” Draco was astounded.

She thought for a moment before replying. “Let me explain. I never really talked much about you—you in particular, I mean—other than the way I’d have mentioned anyone else in our year. Well, that’s not strictly true, I suppose. They did know who you were.”

“And who was I?” He asked the question lightly, but there was an undercurrent of tension in it.

She gave him a teasing smile. “Oh, you know… just that insufferably spoilt, snobbish little rich boy who was horrid to me all the time.”

His face fell. Stricken, she reached out for his hands. “I’m so sorry, Draco! I was just teasing! I didn’t really mean that!”

“Of course you did, really,” he muttered bitterly. “And you had good reason. Because that’s exactly who I was and we both know it.”

Hermione gripped his hands and looked at him fiercely. “Were, yes. Not are. You’re not that boy anymore. You haven’t been for a long time. I couldn’t feel the way I do about you if you were!”

She stopped short, a blush pinking her cheeks.

“And… how do you feel about me… Hermione?” he asked softly, his gaze unwavering.
“Oh, this isn’t fair,” she wailed, looking away. “I can’t… I don’t…” The blush had grown alarmingly and now she felt her entire face burning. “I… care, all right?” Her tone was almost defiant. And then, not quite as an after-thought, and in a voice not much more than a whisper, she added, “A lot.”

Draco smiled. Actually, if he hadn’t been sitting in hall surrounded by scores of his fellow students for whom this was an ordinary supper rather than the earthshaking, astonishing event it had suddenly become, he’d have shouted out loud. As it was, he swallowed the glee that bubbled up in his chest like newly uncorked champagne, and replied quietly, “Me too.”

Quite a lot, in fact. More than he had a right to allow himself. Certainly more than he had a right to expect in return. And yet… and yet…

He forced himself away from these euphoric thoughts and back to the subject at hand. “So… you told them about sixth year…”

“Well, yes. Of course. As much as I knew at the time, anyway. I had to, didn’t I. But once everything was over—really over—I told them what Harry had seen in the Pensieve as well. So they know you were being made to do things you didn’t want to do, and that you couldn’t go through with killing Dumbledore. And that both Snape and Dumbledore were trying to protect you.”

Hermione sighed deeply and pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose. “Sorry. Bit of a headache. Anyway, the gist of it is, yes, Mum and Dad do know about you.”

They knew. It was what he’d dreaded and yet it was precisely what gave him an unexpected and oddly liberating sense of relief.

“Look.” He gazed at her with sudden intensity. “I want to see you. Over the vacation, I mean. What do you think?”

Her smile was radiant. “I want to see you too! I’ve been…” Careful, Hermione. “Well, I mean… I’ve been thinking (how much I’ll miss you) how strange it’ll be not to see each other (at all!) considering all the time we’ve been spending together.” There was a pause whilst Hermione considered further. “How can we manage it, though?”

Draco shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know right now. But I’ll come up with something. Let’s both try to think of a way.”

Hermione nodded happily and gave his hand a quick squeeze. “Right,” she agreed, “and in the meantime, will you come to lunch with my parents and me on Saturday? I’ve someplace really nice in mind.”

She really seemed to want him there. And he had to admit that a part of him—a large part—wanted to be there as well. Admittedly, he was curious about her parents, wondering about the people who had produced such a clever, opinionated, bossy, beautiful and utterly captivating girl. If he were going to be honest, he knew he also wanted to be with her as much as he possibly could before boarding that train to Bath. He had very mixed feelings about returning home, now especially, and before setting foot on the train, he very much wanted to fill up every remaining moment making memories of his life here and now, where it was truly his own, that he could keep and replay in his head over the long vacation.

“Well,” he said slowly, teasing her, a tiny grin quirking his mouth, “I suppose I can manage to put up with you a little while longer…”
The time between Monday and Thursday seemed to fly. Both had other essays to finish and then turn in, in addition to their joint project for Mediaeval Lit. At 9:45 on Thursday morning, Draco stood outside Mr. Allen’s door, tapping his foot impatiently as Hermione came flying down the hallway. They had a bit of time to spare before their final tutorial, and Hermione was grateful for a chance to catch her breath.

“Sorry!” she panted, flinging a stray curl out of her eyes. “Got caught in the queue turning in my Victorian Lit essay. Oh, I am so glad to be done with that one!”

Draco chuckled. He knew the feeling all too well. He’d only just finished his last essay as well, a comparative study from a cultural perspective of witch-hunts in Britain, Germany, Italy, and France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It had been a hard slog towards the end, finishing in an all-nighter that still had him yawning. He waited whilst she dug around in her rucksack before carefully extracting their essay on “Beowulf,” for which she’d done the final proofing and printing.

“Totally clean copy. All the corrections are done and I redid the ‘works cited’ page as well. Think we’re finally really finished with it, Malfoy.” She looked up at him and smiled softly. “I’m proud of us.”

He caught her hand, twining his fingers with hers. “Me too. You did excellent work, by the way. Top notch. Not surprised, of course.”

“You’re not?” Hermione knew, of course, that he thought her intelligent. That wasn’t it. But actually hearing him articulate it did still seem bizarre at times, even now.

“Listen, Granger, I always knew you were incredibly bright. I confess, for a long time, I hated that you always seemed to best me in just about everything. Hated you for that. A girl and a M-- well, you know. I finally sussed out the stupidity of that attitude around fifth year. You know,” he said, “Part of me wished we could have been friends, back then. I’d have really liked to just talk to you. But by then, it was too late. All I could do was watch you and listen when I could get close enough without raising suspicions. Besides, you were so involved with that group--”

“The DA,” Hermione put in.

“Yes, right. I hardly saw you except in class or at meals.”

“And you were part of Umbridge’s despicable Inquisitorial Squad.” Her voice had dropped to just above a whisper as she shuddered, remembering.

Draco took her elbow and drew her into a corner.

“Umbridge,” he spat. “She made me sick.” He ran a distracted hand through his hair, but the soft, blond fringe flopped back over his eyes again and he gave up. “My father made it quite clear from the off that I wasn’t to offend her in any way. She was part of an obstructionist Ministry and that could only help the Dark Lord. You know, ‘divide and conquer,’ ” he scoffed. “So I was to be the good little pureblood and suck up to her, do whatever she wanted me to. I have to admit that at first, the power she gave us was rather fun. Everybody was afraid of us. Great for the ego. But over time, I began to see what a sick, twisted bitch she really was. One false move and it could have been me having messages cut into my skin with that fucking quill of hers.” He glanced almost furtively at Hermione, and then pushed on. “I was scared. Of her, of my father, of sodding everything. So I kept
on with it, kept helping her. I was rather good at it too, don’t you think?” Shame coursed through him and he turned away, a muscle pulsing in his jaw.

Hermione’s heart clenched and she reached a hesitant hand out, laying it gently on his arm.

“I wish I’d known,” she whispered. “I wish… gods, Draco, we could have helped you.”

“Yeah…” He gave a small, derisive laugh. “If you lot had believed me. You wouldn’t have done. Let’s be honest.”

“No, I suppose not,” she said sadly. “Not even me. Maybe especially not me. Not then. But oh…” She looked at him with huge, sorrowful eyes. “I’m so, so sorry. For everything you went through. All of it.”

Without thinking, she dropped her rucksack and slid her arms around his waist, laying her head on his chest and holding him tightly. Tears were threatening to fall and brusquely, she wiped them away.

Slowly, his arms encircled her and he laid his cheek against the top of her head. Her soft hair tickled him and he breathed in its fragrance, letting out a deep sigh. It felt as if another chunk of the weight pressing on his heart had been loosed and was now falling away.

Just then, the door to Allen’s quarters opened, their tutor standing there regarding them with a raised eyebrow.

They broke apart with identical, sheepish grins, and filed inside.

* 

1 December
Saturday morning, 10:45 AM

The mobile jangled from somewhere in the depths of Hermione’s handbag, and groggily, she thrust her hand inside and groped around until she found it at last.

“Hello? Oh, Mum… I’m… um…” She cleared her throat. “No, sorry, I was… um… just coming back from breakfast. You’re… okay, yes… eleven-thirty, right. See you then. Bye!”

Shit.

“Wake up!” Hermione gave Draco a panicked poke in the ribs. “My parents are on their way! They’ll be here in forty-five minutes! We’ve overslept! Malfoy!” Her voice was becoming slightly shrill. “Get up!”

Without waiting for his response, she leapt out of bed, taking the quilt with her and wrapping herself in its warmth. Completely exposed and rather chilly suddenly, he sat up, a bit dazed.

“Fuck’s sake, Granger!” he muttered, reaching to grab a corner of the quilt and then dragging part of it back over himself. “No need to panic! I’m awake!”

Sitting on her bed, a small section of the quilt covering only his bits, he grinned at her rather wickedly. “What? You don’t think your parents will be happy to see me here? I assure you, I’m quite
well-mannered. Parents love me.”

“I’m sure they’ll love you, just not in my bed!” Hermione groaned. She tugged at the quilt, finally snatching it off his lap completely and wrapping it back around herself. “Please, Draco, you’ve got to get up now and get dressed! Oh…” She stopped and considered for a moment. “You know, maybe it would be better if you went back to your room and waited for us there. I mean, it’s enough that I’m introducing you to them—I don’t want them to have a coronary!”

He laughed as he stood up and walked over to her, opening the quilt and slipping inside it, his naked body flush against hers.

“I haven’t had my good-morning kiss yet, Granger,” he murmured, nuzzling her neck and pressing against her. Mmm… damn, she felt good.

Hermione smiled despite herself. She was having similar thoughts, though the image of her parents arriving and catching them in flagrante delicto had a decidedly dampening effect. “If I give you one—just one, mind!—will you be good and get yourself out of here in the next ten minutes?”

Draco nodded his head dutifully and closed his eyes, a faint smile curving his lips. Grinning slyly, Hermione reached up and gave him a tiny peck on the tip of his nose. “Good morning!”

She made to wiggle out of his embrace but he was too quick for her. Hugging her to his chest even more tightly, he shook his head in mock consternation.

“Well, if she must, she must.” Sighing dramatically, Hermione stood on her tiptoes and brought her mouth to his. It was meant to be a quick little kiss, but no sooner did their mouths meet than he brought his hand round to the back of her head and changed the nature of the kiss entirely.

When they broke apart finally, both of them were breathing hard, their lips swollen.

“Now that,” he announced smugly, “is a proper good-morning kiss. Observe and remember for future reference, Granger.”

He turned and, completely oblivious to his own nakedness, moved about the room, gathering his clothing from the various spots where pieces of it had been hastily flung the night before.

Future reference. She liked the sound of that.

* *

At precisely 11:38, Hermione’s mobile trilled again. After an abbreviated conversation, she rang Draco immediately.

Five minutes later, he met her outside the entrance to Staircase 2, looking visibly nervous. She gave his hand a brief squeeze, standing on her tiptoes to kiss him quickly on the cheek.

“You’ll be fine, don’t worry. They won’t bite, I promise!” she said, trying to reassure him with her
smile. “We’re going to lunch first, and then we’ll come back here and load up the car. They’re waiting in Catte Street. Come on.”

Tugging lightly on his arm, she pulled him forward and they reached the entrance to the college in a matter of minutes. Too soon, Draco thought, feeling a bit like he was facing an executioner. A pair of them, in fact.

A tastefully dressed, middle-aged couple stood just outside the Bridge of Sighs and Draco knew them as Hermione’s parents instantly. They looked to be about the same age as his own parents, somewhere in their mid-to-late forties. Richard Granger was tall and lanky with gingery hair, his hairline beginning to recede a bit. Claire Granger was Hermione all over, still svelte though slightly plumper than she must have been thirty years earlier, her shoulder-length chestnut curls lightly threaded with grey. She had Hermione’s large, soft brown eyes too, Draco noticed. Or rather, it was the other way round.

Hermione rushed up to them, throwing her arms around them both in an ecstatic hug.

“Mum, Dad!” she cried, smiling broadly. “It’s so good to see you!”

They enveloped her in their arms and the three of them stood that way for a minute or so, and then Hermione stepped back and held her hand out to Draco, who had waited self-consciously, several paces back. He smiled nervously and walked forward to take her hand.

“Dad, Mum,” she said brightly. “I would like you to meet my… my friend, Draco Malfoy.”

A shrewd glance flickered between the elder Grangers, and then Richard stepped forward, his hand out.

“Very nice meeting you, Draco,” he said, grasping Draco’s hand warmly.

Hermione’s mother was right behind him. “Hello, Draco,” she said, and her smile was Hermione’s all over again, wide and genuine. “It’s a pleasure!”

Draco’s first impulse was to stand there, speechless, like a complete ninny. Fortunately, he managed to recover his manners after only a couple of seconds, and he returned Richard’s handshake as forcefully as he could.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Dr. Granger and M- oh, I mean Dr. Granger,” he managed, and hoped the slight tremor in his voice wasn’t noticeable. “Grang- uh… Hermione always speaks about you with great affection.”

Phew. Good. They’re still smiling.

“Oh, Claire and Richard, please,” Hermione’s mother laughed. “We don’t stand on ceremony, do we, Richard?” She turned to her daughter then. “Well, Hermione darling, where are we having lunch, then?”

“Oh, yes!” Hermione covered her own nerves with an animated smile. “I’ve booked us into a restaurant I’ve heard is really fantastic. The best Thai food in Oxford.” She glanced at Draco and winked.

The tiny nugget of warmth that had begun deep inside with her parents’ friendly greeting was now spreading with that wink, and he could feel the tension in his muscles beginning to ease.

“Come on, we can walk. It’s not far,” Hermione told them, and they set off following her lead down
Catte Street towards Radcliffe Square, taking a quick right into Brasenose Lane, a left at Turl Street and finally a right into the High Street.

“Where in Merlin’s name are we going?” Draco whispered. “I thought you were taking us to Oxford Thai!”

Hermione shook her head, smiling. “This is a surprise, even for you,” she said smugly. “One reason I wanted you to come so badly. I really wanted to share it with you.”

Not far into the High Street, she stopped them in front of a beautiful Tudor building and a small, narrow alleyway. Kemp Hall Passage, it was, and within it there was an unassuming sign: CHIANG MAI KITCHEN, followed by “Thai Restaurant” beneath.

Entering, they were led upstairs to a lovely room with eggshell-white walls, dark ceiling beams and a wood floor. On one side, the huge stone hearth was graced with an elaborate arrangement of dried flowers. The tables were covered in palest pink linen and there were tall, slender vases of flowers on each. Overall, the effect was one of utter simplicity and elegance designed to convey comfort and encourage relaxed dining.
Where Hermione and Draco ate with the Grangers
“Oh, Hermione,” Claire breathed, sitting down at their table just in front of the hearth. “This is lovely! However did you find this place?”

Hermione grinned. “One of the girls in my staircase mentioned it. She said she always takes her parents here.”

“Good choice, Kitten,” Richard said, and opened the menu.

*Kitten. It fit, somehow.*

“Now then,” he continued, scanning the lunch selections. “What looks good? Oh, Claire, they’ve got that soup you like, number eighteen. Draco, what do you fancy?”

Hermione cast a sidelong glance at Draco and reached for his hand under the table.

*See? her wink said plainly. *I told you they’d like you.*

He nodded, biting back his own relieved grin, and returned to a study of the menu.

In the end, soup and salad were dispensed with in favour of the Mieng Gai, a mildly spicy chicken dish made with ground peanuts and wrapped in spinach leaves, and Khanom Jeep, small, steamed rice pastry dumplings filled with water chestnuts, minced pork and spring onions in a soy-garlic sauce.

“Does anyone have a particular preference for the main course?” Claire asked brightly. “We happen to love any sort of Pad Thai.”

Draco relaxed a bit more. At least this was something he’d had brief experience with.

“Oh yes, I like that too,” he put in.

“Well, good, we’ll have that then, and maybe something else…” Richard said, his voice trailing off as he turned back to see what special dishes were on offer. “What about the Gai Pad King? That looks very nice.”

In the end, they selected one chicken dish, one with seafood, a vegetarian Pad Thai, and stir-fried broccoli with oyster sauce.

“Richard, some wine perhaps?” Claire asked, and then glanced at Hermione and Draco, both of whom nodded. Wine sounded very good indeed, and so they ordered a carafe of the house white.

*

An hour later, their hunger sated, they sat happily relaxed over the remains of the wine.

“Hermione tells us that you’ve been working on a project together,” Richard said presently. “How did that turn out?”

Draco wondered briefly what else she might have told her parents, and then smiled pleasantly. “Very well, I think. We had our share of disagreements, though, didn’t we, Granger? I mean Hermione, sorry. Old habits.” He laughed slightly.
Hermione nodded. “Yes. But you know, Draco brought a really insightful perspective to the reading of the poem. I think he understood it in a way that I didn’t at first. He helped me to feel its complexities, if that makes any sense. I’m not really expressing it very well, I’m afraid.” She smiled, shrugging apologetically.

“No, I think you are,” Claire replied. “I understand just what you mean. All good poetry needs to be felt on a deeper level to be truly appreciated in the way that the poet meant it to be.”

“I agree,” Richard added. “Poetry is like music in that way, or should be at least. On a visceral level, you have to feel something that is one step beyond the words.”

It was clear to Draco, now, that Hermione had come by not only her warmth but also her great intelligence honestly and from both sides. These were people with whom he’d felt comfortable almost immediately and with whom he could really engage in genuinely interesting conversation.

Finally, delightful as it was, the meal came to an end, and it was time to get back and pack Hermione’s belongings into the boot and back seat of the car. Draco helped carry things from her room and did what he could to assist Richard in loading all of it in. Finally, everything was in, the car taking on the appearance of a stuffed sausage. Hermione held her small, potted jade plant in her hands as the four of them stood a bit awkwardly at the kerb.

“Well, sweetheart, time to go, I think,” Claire said gently. “Why don’t you just go back and have one more look round your room to make sure you haven’t left anything behind? And then you’ll need to turn in your key. Draco, you go too and help, why don’t you?” She gave Hermione a wink, took the plant from her, and got into the car.

Relieved, Hermione and Draco took off for Staircase 2 at very nearly a run. They stopped just inside the entryway and he pulled her to him fiercely.

“I miss you already,” he whispered. “I wish you weren’t leaving.”

“Me too,” she managed, her throat constricting suddenly. “I wish you were coming with me!” She rested her cheek against his chest, squeezing her eyes shut. “Oh—could you come see me, maybe? I’m sure it’ll be fine with my parents. They really like you, I can tell!”

“I’ll try,” he told her. “I promise. Look, I’ll write as soon as I can, yeah? We’ll sort it out somehow.”

She nodded, her eyes beginning to water with the tears she’d promised herself she wouldn’t shed.

“Baby, don’t,” Draco begged softly. “Please. It’ll be all right. Promise.”

And then they came together in a messy and desperate kiss, full of longing and regret in equal measures, and clung to each other, not wanting it to end.

When, regretfully, they separated, he took her hand for a moment.

“Look, I’ll… I’ll say goodbye here. It’ll be better that way. Tell your parents goodbye and thank them again for me, okay?” He swallowed hard, and gave her hand a squeeze.

Hermione nodded, and allowed him to smooth the tears from her cheeks. “Okay,” she said shakily. “Write to me soon. Don’t forget!”

He watched as she walked away from him, disappeared for a moment into the porters’ lodge, and then got into the car. He stayed long enough to see the car pull away from the kerb, Hermione looking back at him solemnly and waving, her face growing smaller and smaller as the car gradually
disappeared from view.

How could he possibly forget? It would be the one thing that would keep him going.

It was the thought he kept with him as he took the taxi to the railway station later that afternoon and boarded the train for Bath.

Write to me soon. Don’t forget… don’t forget…

It became a mantra, a hypnotic refrain, a promise he would reach for when he needed reminding that all of this was real.

As the world flashed by the train windows, he began to formulate a plan.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: Only the original plot and characters are mine. I make no money from this story.

A/N: Thanks to both of my wonderful, incredibly supportive betas, kazfeist and mister_otter, for their superb help and even more, for their friendship. Hugs, Karen and Carol!

Thanks to moonjameskitten, whose very lovely banner graces the opening of each chapter and helps keep me inspired and in story mode as I write.

The title of this chapter is a lyric from an incredibly beautiful Danny Kirwan song, “Sands of Time,” off Fleetwood Mac’s Future Games album.

You can find the complete menu and wine list for Chiang Mai Kitchen here: http://www.chiangmaikitchen.co.uk/
1 December
Saturday evening

The village of Castle Combe in Wiltshire was the prettiest village in England, it was commonly said. Strikingly picturesque, it was often thronged with tourists wanting to steep themselves in the charm and history of the mediaeval stone houses and narrow, cobbled lanes. Visitors would get off tour vans and coaches and wander along the pavements that meandered through the village, remarking on the total absence of television antennas and telephone wires on the ancient, gabled roofs. They would stop to take photos of the River Bybrook from the old Roman bridge or the town bridge and then scamper off and photograph the bridges themselves. Afterwards, they’d make plans to trek up the hill just outside the village, in order to take more photos—this time of the stony ruins where nearly nine hundred years earlier, there had been a fortified stronghold, the “Castell of Cumbe,” belonging to the de Dunstanville family. They might stop at the local museum or the old village church, where the stone effigy of Sir Walter de Dunstanville reposed in remote majesty.

After their various exertions, many would repair to the White Hart, a lovely, 600-year-old pub housed in an even older, half-timbered house, where they’d enjoy lunch washed down with a pint of
ale or some strong cider. And then they’d pile back onto the tour vans and coaches and motor off again to their next stop.

At half past six in the evening, a taxi pulled up outside the White Hart. A single passenger got out.

It was to a narrow alleyway behind the White Hart that Draco headed after paying the taxi driver. He hefted his black canvas trunk, a sort of large-ish duffel, over his shoulder and quietly disappeared into the shadowy recesses behind the old building. Anyone wandering out of the pub faintly inebriated and passing the alley at that moment in time would have sworn he’d seen a young, blond man there one second and then gone in a blink. The hapless observer would have wandered away convinced he’d been fuddled by drink and was imagining things.

He’d have been dead wrong.

Castle Combe, Wiltshire, in winter
The generously proportioned front hallway at Malfoy Manor was quiet, almost preternaturally so, when Draco appeared just inside the heavy oaken door with a pop. It was entirely reasonable to suppose that under the richly wrought Turkey rug where he now stood, far under the foundation of the early 16th-century manor house built by Lucien-George Malfoy and home to generations of Malfoys for the last 500 years, lay the rubble and detritus of the fortified stronghold that Reginald de Dunstanville, Earl of Cornwall and bastard son of the king by his longtime mistress, had built in 1140. He was a Malfoy too, on his mother’s side; she had been Lady Sybilla Malfoy Corbet. This had been Malfoy land for close to a millennium. Its current master intended that it should remain so for at least the next several thousand years. And to that end, he made certain that the ancient Glamour magicked around the entire estate nearly 500 years earlier to prevent it being seen by prying Muggle eyes, was still in place, its power fortified from time to time. All wards were periodically checked and strengthened as well. Those coachloads of keen tourists were no threat as they wandered around the hill on which Malfoy Manor stood, invisible and intangible to all but those who were meant to see and touch. Signs and fences marking off a certain generous portion of the land as a protected archaeological site kept strangers from bumbling through the Malfoys’ home, albeit in another dimension. The very idea of that, even hypothetically, had always struck Draco as incredibly weird.

Draco dropped his trunk with a thud and was just stretching to ease the knotted muscles in his neck and shoulders when a wizened old house-elf came hurrying in from one of the front drawing rooms, the one decorated in warm, yellow hues. “Young Master, welcome!” the little house-elf cried. “Master and Mistress is expecting you! They is waiting for you in the drawing room. Come, come!”

The little man waved his arm, beckoning enthusiastically. Draco had known Tibby all his life. Although he was primarily Lucius’ manservant, Tibby had always been fond of his master’s son, and despite the disdain and disregard Draco had been taught to show where the servants were concerned, he had always harboured a secret affection for loyal old Tibby, who’d always shown him nothing
but kindness, and for Missy, who had been his first nanny and still treated him like her own child.

“Tibby!” Draco smiled and for just a moment, he relaxed, before remembering he was about to walk into the proverbial snake pit.

“Is that you, Draco darling?” a musical contralto trilled from the direction of the drawing room. A moment later, the double doors swung open and Narcissa Malfoy appeared. Impeccably coiffed and groomed and wearing a robe of rich brocade, she moved gracefully to her son’s side and opened her arms.

Dutifully, he moved into her embrace, and a moment later, willingly wrapped his arms around her, breathing in her familiar lilac fragrance. A rush of childhood memories came back to him with that flowery scent. He’d missed her without even realising just how much. For all that had increasingly stood between them over the years, there was still a powerful bond between mother and son that went far deeper than ideologies. Narcissa Malfoy’s primary allegiance had always been to her family before anything, and then to her child, when it became clear that his father’s paramount loyalties had lain elsewhere.

“I am so pleased to see you, Draco! But you did not write once in the last two months. Why?” Her tone remained measured.

“Mother, have you forgotten? I can’t keep Paladin in my room at uni. You know that.” He sighed, slightly exasperated, and then glanced furtively at the drawing room, his voice dropping. “Did you not use the post box down in the village as I showed you before I left? I wrote every week. There must be a stack of letters in there by now!”

Narcissa cast her own quick look in the direction of the drawing room, before replying.

“I’m sorry, darling! I would have done, but I felt a bit…uneasy, I suppose, about entering a Muggle post office and having to deal with… them—you know, possibly having to handle their money and… well… I was afraid I’d give myself away. I ought to have been braver.”

Draco regarded her, a hint of reproach in his eyes. “I did wonder why I never got an answer to any of my letters,” he said quietly. “But I suppose I understand. It can be… daunting at first. Their world, I mean. I remember.”

He did remember. But that early fear—a feeling of being plucked out of a landscape in which everything was familiar and comfortable and thrust into one in which everything from certain terminologies to mechanisms that did the things one had been accustomed to doing with a wand or even wandless, to forms of travel to currency to—everything, virtually—seemed lifetimes ago, just as it seemed like only yesterday that he’d felt it for the first time at the start of term. And so much had happened in between.

“Come, your father is waiting to see you,” Narcissa said, drawing her arm through his and gently propelling him forward. She caught his eye and shook her head slightly. “It’ll be all right.”

Lucius Malfoy stood by the tall casement windows in the drawing room, gazing out at the gardens beyond. In his hand was a small glass of amber liquid, a before-dinner aperitif, a habit he’d fallen into years before. Lucius was a man of many longstanding habits. He was also a man for whom change was difficult. Habits of a lifetime—be they the custom of a drink before dinner or the distance carefully cultivated and maintained between himself and his son—were not lightly foresworn. Even if perhaps a certain uneasy, creeping regret had begun to nudge him vaguely from time to time.

“Father.” Draco stood in the doorway.
Lucius turned in an almost balletically graceful arc to face his son.

“Draco. Welcome home.” Setting his glass down, he strode to where Draco waited, and offered his hand. Draco shook it politely.

“Sit,” Lucius said, gesturing towards one of the overstuffed sofas, and Draco dropped into it gratefully. He found suddenly that he was far more tired than he’d realised. Had it really been only—he stole a glimpse at his watch—four hours ago that he’d been with Hermione and her family, had held her in his arms, had kissed her goodbye? It didn’t seem like the same month, much less only a matter of a few hours in the same day. Oxford and the brown-eyed, curly-haired girl who’d come to be so central to his life were a universe away now, in another life. A life that was as remote from the one into which he’d just stepped back as chalk was from cheese.

He smiled slightly to himself as he remembered that phrase. Hermione had explained it to him one evening as they’d walked back to their quad from the library after several hours of studying. They’d been having a lively conversation about famous literary couples and the effect of love on creativity. She’d told him about French Existentialist writer Jean-Paul Sartre and his long-time lover, Simone de Beauvoir, and then the talk had moved to C.S. Lewis and his wife, poet Joy Davidman.

“Well, you know,” she said, scuffing the fallen leaves with the toes of her boots as she walked. “For starters, she was American, and a fair bit younger than he was, and a really lively, brash sort of woman, very outspoken. Absolutely the opposite of Lewis. Different as chalk and cheese. But they positively adored each other!”

Draco had been kicking small clumps of leaves up in front of him as he went and then watching them fall, savouring their sweet, rich, leaf-mould fragrance so redolent of autumn.

“Mmm, yes, and—” He turned to look at her suddenly. Her cheeks were rosy with the evening’s chill, her wild curls flying from beneath the colourful wool cap she’d pulled down over her ears. “What did you say?”

“What?” she’d asked. “Oh, that they adored--”

“No, no.” He’d shaken his head. “I meant the other thing just before that. Something about cheese.”

“Oh!” Hermione had laughed. “Yes, right! I said they were as different as chalk and cheese. It’s an expression. A strictly Muggle one, apparently, if you’ve never heard it. It means two things that are fundamentally different—opposites, even.”

“Chalk and cheese,” he’d mused. “I like that. I shall use it from now on.”

They’d continued on, the streetlamps throwing glimmering, buttery light on the pavement and casting the shrubbery and trees into deep shadows.

“Well, Draco.” Lucius’ voice jolted him out of his reverie. Reluctantly, he let the image of Hermione’s smiling eyes fade.

“Father?”

“I take it that you are well? We have had no word from you for two months.”

Draco raised an eyebrow and looked at Lucius. His father regarded him dispassionately-- no apparent hint of disapproval or disappointment, merely a simple statement of fact.
“We are not permitted animals in our rooms. I could not send a letter by owl. I had no means of reaching you, short of actually coming home. And—”

“You mean you chose to have no means of reaching us, don’t you?” Lucius’ gaze had sharpened. “I am certain you know as well as I do that there are wizarding connections in Oxford of which you might easily have availed yourself, if you had desired it. You might have contacted us in any number of ways through them. Please do not underestimate my intelligence, even if you have done so with your own. Your mother… missed you terribly. Your silence hurt her a great deal.” He turned away and carefully studied his drink.

Draco couldn’t very well tell his father that he had, indeed, devised a method of contact—with his mother, at least. That knowledge made public would only make life more difficult for Narcissa, and that he was unwilling to do. Nor was he quite ready to tell the whole truth of his intense desire to study at Oxford. The reason for that was the same as the one that stopped him contacting his parents by magical means whilst away. Magic was simply-- and quite deliberately-- not part of his life there.

“I apologise,” he said in clipped tones. “I was remiss.”

There was an uneasy silence for a couple of minutes, and then Lucius stood, moving to the windows again, his back to Draco. “And… was your term… successful, at least?”

“Yes, Father. I did quite well, thank you.” He’d been about to say, “I believe you would have been proud,” but caught himself. “I expect quite high marks, actually,” he said instead.

Lucius swirled the remaining sherry in the glass and took a small swallow. “Excellent. I expected no less.”

Bollocks. You hoped I’d fail miserably and come crawling back here with my tail between my legs. You didn’t believe I could succeed in their world.

One year earlier, six months after the war’s end

“What in Merlin’s name do you imagine you’ll accomplish, going off to study for three years—three years—in one of their institutions? What is the point, Draco?”

“The point?” Draco had turned to face his father, his inhibitions nearly shredded after yet another prolonged and increasingly acrimonious discussion of the subject. “I’ll tell you—again. Oxford is just about the most prestigious university in England—”


“Yes, all right, in Muggle England. Not to mention the rest of the world. I can study whatever I choose. The possibilities are endless. I’m discovering in the prep class that there is so much knowledge beyond what we are taught here! The Ministry is encouraging this. Lots of people I know are leaving for Muggle universities next autumn. What’s wrong with us learning more about their world, seeing what they might have to offer? Maybe it really will help our world to heal.”

“The Ministry!” Lucius had scoffed, his laugh derisive. “Ineffectual, pandering fools, the lot of them, easily swayed by expediencies! Don’t be naïve, Draco. These policies are just a show. They look pretty but mean nothing. They’re meant to appease certain factions who have a good deal of power and influence—now. In the end, things will once again be as they’ve always been. The Muggles
have their world and we have ours. There is absolutely nothing to be gained by mixing with their society. What can they possibly offer that we don’t already have or do infinitely better? As for their so-called “knowledge” of which you speak so highly, we have never suffered for its lack, and introducing it into our world would only cause tremendous confusion and a diluting of our own power.” He looked intently at his son for a moment. “They are not like us. They will never be like us. You only lower yourself by mixing with them. Your place is here, in our world, with our kind. This… this idiotic venture of yours will be a complete waste of time and money.”

“Not your time, nor your money anymore,” Draco had gritted out, barely containing his anger. “Nor your life, for that matter. I shall do as I please.”

Lucius had sighed and turned his face away. “Evidently,” he remarked.

The conversation was at an end. The irony was that six months later, Lucius himself would be at the centre of a movement of formerly influential, powerful purebloods eager to demonstrate their newfound embrace of the Ministry’s policies of rapprochement between the many factions of wizarding society and establishment of initial relations with the Muggle world. It was simply the expedient thing to do, private feelings aside. Lucius Malfoy may have been many things, but he was no fool.

End flashback

“Excellent. I expected no less.”

Draco looked at his father with a mixture of incredulity and scorn.

“Thank you, Father,” he replied stiffly. “I think I’d like a drink.”

*D*

Dinner had been a strained mixture of attempts at animated conversation from one end of the long table—his mother’s—and a taciturn avoidance of it from the other, with Draco in the middle, his stomach churning as he took small spoonfuls of soup and attempted an enthusiastic response to all of his favourite dishes being set before him, one after another. Narcissa had tried her best to make his homecoming dinner a special one, but even she could see fairly quickly that the tension would not be dispelled by the most succulent joint of roast beef.

However, Draco was doing his best to drown it in very expensive French wine. Three rather unfashionably full glasses of it had turned his mood happy and then bellicose, and now he stared silently at the dregs of crimson liquid pooled at the bottom of the glass and watched as the light from the candles set the colour aflame.

Bugger. There was not enough to drink. Hadn’t he just had a full glass a moment earlier?

“More wine, Tibby,” he slurred, and held his glass out. Narcissa and Lucius exchanged glances.
“Don’t you think--” she began.

“No. I don’t,” Draco answered rudely. “Not nearly. Tibby! I said more wine!”

Inside of twenty minutes, Draco had passed out; he’d been moved, via Mobilicorpus, up to his bedroom and deposited on the spacious, well-appointed bed. His mother decided she’d leave him to sleep it off in his clothes, merely removing his shoes and socks and woolen jumper, under which he wore a t-shirt. Then she covered him gently with a spare quilt, blew out the candle, and slipped out of the room.

When he awoke some nine hours later, his head pounding and his mouth tasting like ashes, he realised two things: one, that he really was back in his own room at Malfoy Manor, lying squarely in the middle of his luxurious bed, and two, that he had intended to write to Hermione and hadn’t, because he’d obviously passed out. Wan, milky light was filtering in through the openings in the heavy drapes and the first birdsong was piercing the early-morning quiet. He checked the bedside clock. 7.10 am.

Tottering to the en-suite, he relieved himself with a huge sigh, and then fumbled about in the mirrored cabinet for a hangover potion. There were several, in fact. He sniffed them all and gratefully grabbed the least noxious one, downing a shot of it while holding his nose and shuddering.

He would write to her now. He directed his attention to the hearth, where a warming fire erupted brightly, and then to the candles on the writing desk, which blossomed into bright points of light, illuminating the area. It felt slightly odd, doing magic again after the two-month hiatus. He’d grown used to doing without, to approaching life without magic. And yet, it was comforting. It was home. He supposed, in a sudden flash of insight, that this pull in two directions was probably very like what Hermione had experienced for the past eight years, when her life in the wizarding world had first begun.

Now he sat down at the desk to compose that letter.

“Granger,” he began, his quill making sharp scratching sounds on the parchment. Shite, no. I can’t start it like that! “Dear Granger.” He rolled his eyes. Brilliant. “Dear Hermione.” He sighed and grinned. Much better, you twat. “My father’s being his usual, coldhearted bastard self and so I got drunk and I might just sick up all over myself any minute, but I wanted to say that I’ve been thinking about you. A lot. And I miss you. Do you miss me at all? If I can fix things, would you consider coming to see me here sometime? Draco.”

Rolling the parchment somewhat sloppily, he stood and discovered the room spinning in ever-widening spirals. Apparently, the potion had been bottled too long and had lost whatever curative power it once had. He clutched the edge of the desk until his vision was no longer rotating anti-clockwise and then staggered to the window. The morning air was brisk as he stuck his head out, calling softly for his owl, who flew down from the upstairs owtery and landed gracefully on the ledge.

Attaching the letter to Paladin’s leg, Draco muttered, “Hermione Granger, 16 Stratford Way, Watford,” and launched him out into the early-morning sky. Bands of mauve and peach streaked the horizon, leaching upwards into the deepening blue of the fading night. Some stars still winked high overhead, reminding him of how many could be seen from an elevated spot in the country, unspoilt by lots of artificial lights. He found himself wishing that Hermione were there to see it too.

Two hours later, he’d dozed off, his head on the desk, when there was a persistent tapping on the windowpane. It was Paladin with a return letter.
Eagerly, Draco unlatched the casement and plucked the letter from the tired owl. Absently he ruffled its feathers and fed it a couple of treats he kept in a box in the top drawer whilst untying the parchment.

“Dear Draco,” he read. “I’m so sorry your father is giving you a bad time! I hope you’re feeling much better now. The drive home yesterday was long. I kept wishing I were back in my little room in Staircase 2. I already miss Oxford. I even sort of wish we were still working on our Beowulf essay together. Because then we’d still be there, and last weekend would still be ahead of us. I think about it a lot.

“But the idea of being in your house again scares me, honestly. The memories are so bad. Hermione.”

Draco sat back and thought. He was fully awake now.

He was still sequestered in his room three hours later, stretched out on his bed and staring at the curtained canopy overhead, trying to work out how he could, indeed, fix things so that she would come. At ten o’clock, a breakfast tray had been left by the door and he’d sat at the desk, mechanically chewing on a croissant dressed with butter and jam and sipping a cup of dark, richly aromatic coffee, lost in thought.

At half past twelve, he sat down to compose a response.

“Dear Hermione,” he wrote. “Scenario: my parents are gone for the day. I Apparate to your house and collect you. We return to my house, directly to my room. You never see any other part of the house, nor do you see my parents. And then we shag each other blind. And I get to tell you in about a hundred different ways how much I miss you. Because shit, Granger, I really, REALLY do. And it hasn’t even been a full twenty-four hours yet. I don’t actually get it. But I feel sort of like I’ve lost an arm or something. Write back soon. Draco.”

Paladin’s majestic wingspan was dazzling in the afternoon sunshine as he took off in a southeasterly direction. Draco waited impatiently for his return. He unpacked his trunk, methodically laying his clothes in the large chest of drawers and setting his books on a shelf in the bookcase where he’d have easy access to everything. His eye fell on the several copies of “Beowulf” that stood there, back to back, and for a moment, he was lost in the memories of that experience. He tried distracting himself with a novel, no longer worried about having Muggle literature in the house because it was mandated and Lucius would simply have to deal with it, only to put it down again, unable to concentrate for very long.

At 2.30, his agony was over. Paladin returned bearing another letter.

Eagerly he slipped it off the owl’s leg and broke the seal.

“Dear Draco,” it said in Hermione’s very precise, elegant hand. “I find myself sitting by the window now, waiting for your magnificent owl to arrive. What’s his name? And what sorts of treats does he like? I suspect he’s going to get to know me very well, and I’d like to have something nice to give him when he comes.

“Your scenario: well, it could work, I suppose, as long as I don’t have to see your father and we go straight to your room and not anywhere else. But look, I have an idea for in the meantime. What
about you coming to see me? You’d be very welcome. Oh and—I miss you too. Hermione.”

He folded the letter and held it, smiling. It was going to happen. It would. Now all he had to do was contrive a way of getting his parents out of the house for at least several hours one day.

Grabbing a fresh piece of parchment, he dipped his quill into the inkpot.

“Dear Hermione,” she read a couple of hours later. “His name is Paladin and he loves bits of dried meat if you don’t happen to have any rodents, worms or spiders lying about. I’m still working on a way to get my parents out of the house for an afternoon. I would love to come and see you, if you’re sure your parents won’t mind. My mother’s got me tied up in all sorts of bloody annoying social obligations for the next several days, but what are you doing on Saturday afternoon? Fancy meeting in Diagon Alley? We could go into London. Draco.”

His reply came as fast as Paladin could fly back to Wiltshire from the London suburb of Watford.

“Dear Draco, as my parents don’t have any rodents, worms or spiders to hand, I have bought Paladin some special treats from our local pet supply shop and I think he must like them very much, as he has just nearly taken my hand off in his rush to get at what I was holding! And Malfoy, I think your owl likes me. He rubbed his beak against my hand after he’d taken the treat.

You poor thing, having to put up with all those boring social functions your parents are dragging you to. Mine have planned a bit of the same for me this vacation, I’m afraid—some obligatory family visits and then dinner on Friday night at Uncle Bill and Aunt Ruth’s. They’re not really my aunt and uncle, they’re just friends of my parents and I’ve known them practically since I was born so they’re like family really. They’ve got a son, Philip, who’s our age (he and I were in nappies together!). He was spotty and dreadful the last time I saw him two years ago. I think they want to get us together. I shudder at the thought!”

Draco frowned at that last bit, but was heartened by her mention of Philip’s wretched complexion, and returned to the words that loped across the parchment in her graceful scrawl.

“This is getting to be a very long letter, isn’t it? I feel like I haven’t seen you in an age. Which brings me to your question, finally. YES! I would love to see you on Saturday! Shall we meet in front of Flourish and Blotts at one? Hermione.”
The next five days dragged. They were filled with what felt like an unending round of afternoon teas and posh dinners at a succession of pureblood bastions, the very people he’d grown up seeing his parents associate with and whose children had become his friends. Eventually the whole week became a blur for Draco. He began to feel rather like a wind-up doll, nodding and making polite conversation whilst sipping innumerable cups of tea and glasses of sherry, taking small bites of biscuits and tiny, triangular sandwiches, their crusts ever so neatly trimmed, and inwardly quailing at yet another lavish spread at yet another Belgian lace-covered dinner table.

On Thursday, as he sipped his hundredth cup of tea, wishing he could yank his heavy, confining dress robes off, he wondered what Hermione was doing at that precise moment. Whatever it was, he was certain it must be more fun and a lot more comfortable than what Narcissa was subjecting him to so relentlessly. It had also occurred to him, somewhat belatedly, that his mother had had more in mind than just the fulfillment of certain seasonal social obligations. He noticed that in at least four cases, there just happened to be an unattached daughter whose purring mother had no qualms about practically pushing her into Draco’s lap.

The latest one was currently a seventh year at Hogwarts. Taller, even, than Draco, she was painfully thin, no doubt to attain her fashionable mother’s ideal of womanly perfection. She picked delicately at a watercress sandwich and blushed, tongue-tied, into her teacup.

Draco shifted in his seat impatiently. He was expected to make agreeable conversation with this spluttering beanpole. For the life of him, he couldn’t be bothered anymore. The capacity for polite chitchat had long since deserted him, and he had no interest in even trying to mask his boredom.

“Draco,” Narcissa said, smiling ingratiatingly, the edge in her voice imperceptible to everyone, Draco was sure, except for him. “I understand that Lydia has done extraordinarily well in Potions this term. That was always one of your strong suits, was it not? Perhaps you might take her for a walk in the Lady Garden. I’m sure you have a great deal in common.”

Draco had reached his saturation point at last. “Mother,” he replied, his own smile showing through gritted teeth, “it is quite cold outside. Hardly strolling weather.” He stood rather abruptly, nearly upsetting the half-full teacup he’d forgotten was balanced in his lap. “Please excuse me. I have rather a headache.”

With that, he inclined his head slightly, turned, and strode out of the blue drawing room, closing the double doors behind him and leaning back against them, sucking in a deep breath and releasing it in a long, satisfied sigh of relief.

He knew his parents would be far from pleased, but he just didn’t care anymore. Lydia Farnsworth, Angeline Parmentier, Penelope Cathcart, Elizabeth Goyle, and Portia Nott might as well have been cut from a single bolt of cloth. Not one of them had anything to say that Draco found remotely interesting. Three were passably attractive, one of them approaching a sort of affected beauty. But his response to mere surface prettiness seemed to have got short-circuited somehow. Not one of them, with their model-thin figures, absurdly high cheekbones, and pouty, glistening lips, did it for him. There was simply no real spark in any of them. Not one ounce of curiosity or genuine intellect or scrappiness. The only thing that would put a light in any of their eyes was the possibility of an assured material future. None of them would challenge him about anything, he could tell. And he’d had his fill of people fawning over him.
Lydia pursed her lips as she put her teacup down.

“Mother-r-r-r,” she whined.

“It’s all right, my pet,” Ardith Farnsworth sighed, and then looked to make sure Narcissa wasn’t in earshot before muttering, “You can do a lot better!”

She glanced around the room, her gaze falling on Theo Nott, who stood with his mother across the room.

“Ah! Come, Lydia!” she chirped brightly, taking her daughter by the elbow. The two of them flounced off, their hapless target trapped between his own mother and the buffet table.

Draco had opened the door a crack to peer back inside, and caught the tail end of this little drama. Rolling his eyes, he bit his lip to keep from laughing, made a mental note to apologise to Theo later, and disappeared upstairs to the relative sanctity of his bedroom.

That night, he climbed into his big bed with a new novel he’d bought at Blackwell’s just before coming home. It was *The Last Kingdom* by Bernard Cornwell, the story of a young Anglo-Saxon raised as a Viking, who grew up with divided loyalties as Alfred the Great came into power. The writing was crisp, vivid, and totally engaging, and sucked him very quickly into the treacherous world of 9th-century Britain. “Beowulf” had reminded him that it was a world he’d always very much enjoyed. Before long, his eyelids began to slide shut and he struggled to stay awake just for one more page. Finally, though, the battle was lost and he closed the book and blew out the candle. As his eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness, he lay back against the mound of soft pillows and gazed out the window. The drapes were partially open, and in the space between them, he could see the deep, clear night sky, a sea of black studded with stars like tiny, distant diamond chips. Snug under the warm quilt, he wondered if maybe a certain girl were looking at that same collection of constellations. Orion’s Belt glittered above the Wiltshire hills. He knew it shone above a house outside London too, and that she liked to wish on the jewels that sparkled there.

“‘Night, Hermione,” he thought sleepily, and then dreams overtook him.

That boy is entirely too chipper this morning,’ Narcissa thought, as she watched her son eagerly help himself to fried eggs, rashers, orange juice and slices of toast from the sideboard in the dining room.

Saturday morning had dawned clear and crisp, and at twenty past nine, the entire family was at the breakfast table together, something that hadn’t happened in so long that nobody could remember when the last time had been. Lucius, an early riser, was generally long finished by the time Draco came ambling in. Narcissa often made an effort to prolong that second cup of coffee so that she might have some time with her son, but usually, even she was gone by the time Draco roused himself and wandered in to eat.

“Well, darling, you seem in a good mood this morning,” Narcissa remarked conversationally.

“Mmm!” Draco smiled, a mouthful of bacon rendering his words indistinct. “I--”

“Manners,” she reminded him, one eyebrow raised.
He gave a convulsive little gulp and grinned. “Sorry. Yes, I am in rather a good mood. Plans for this afternoon.”

Lucius peered over the top of the Daily Prophet. “Really? And what might they be?”

Sudden caution dampened Draco’s high spirits just a tad. The resulting lie came very easily.

“Oh, just a friend. We’re… uh… meeting up at the Leaky Cauldron and then I suppose we’ll just… you know… hang out.”

“Which friend is this?” Lucius folded the newspaper and leaned forward slightly.

“Oh, well… that would be Theo.” It was the first name that popped into his head, probably because he’d only just seen Theo the day before and suddenly remembered Theo mentioning that he would be in Diagon Alley today. Draco gave what he hoped was a confident smile, resolving to send off that apology to Theo immediately, along with a heads-up about the ruse, just in case any questions were asked later on.

“Theo, eh? Glad you’re spending time together. Well… enjoy yourself,” Lucius said mildly, disappearing behind his newspaper once again.

That was it? No further questions? Draco frowned momentarily. This bordered on the surreal.

He finished his breakfast rather more quickly than he’d intended, anxious to get started on the day. There were things that needed doing immediately. Narcissa and Lucius continued to sip their coffee and look through the morning paper as Draco touched his napkin to his mouth, stood, and asked politely to be excused. Both nodded and barely watched as he left.

The moment he was gone, however, Narcissa’s cup came down rather emphatically on its saucer.

“ ‘Theo’ my eye! It’s a girl. He’s seeing somebody. I’d bet anything.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow. “Would you now?”

Narcissa nodded energetically. “All the classic signs are there, Lucius. He’s been moody, distracted, and uncommunicative. He spends an awful lot of time in his room doing Merlin only knows what.”

“I think I’ve a pretty good idea…” Lucius remarked dryly.

His wife rolled her eyes, and then her expression turned serious again. “Be that as it may…he wasn’t the slightest bit interested in any of those lovely girls he’s met this week, not a one! I thought surely… It was quite a bother, setting all of that up, you know!”

“No doubt you and the other ladies went to a good deal of trouble,” Lucius chuckled, easing back in his chair.

“Well, yes, we did, as a matter of fact! Once I knew that nothing would ever come out of our efforts with the Parkinson girl, I thought it high time we reacquaint him with the other eligible young ladies of our circle. He’s nineteen and a half now, certainly of an age to be thinking more seriously about settling down.” She sighed dramatically.

“Well, there’s little likelihood of that happening so long as he’s determined to carry on with this preposterous notion of studying at that Muggle university for the next two and a half years!” Lucius scoffed.
“I know. And I suspect that may have something to do with why he reacted the way he did to all those nice girls. This past week was all for nothing. At best, he was bored, and at worst? He behaved quite rudely indeed to the Farnsworth girl, and was completely indifferent to the rest of them as well.”

“Ergo, he must already have a love interest?” Lucius regarded his wife’s powers of deduction with admiration, mixed with a healthy reserve of scepticism.

Narcissa, however, had no doubts at all. “Absolutely. He’ll tip his hand one of these days, you mark my words.” She paused, and a quizzical smile slowly turned up the corners of her mouth. “I wonder who it could be…?” She decided to spend some time that very morning checking the social register again.

One o’clock couldn’t come soon enough for Draco. He had sent Paladin off with that message to Theo, receiving a reply fairly quickly.

“Not to worry, mate. I’ve got your sorry arse covered. Who is she, anyway? Theo.”

Draco laughed and stuffed the parchment into a desk drawer. Then he took a leisurely shower, shampooing and lathering all over three times. The hot water cascading down his shoulders and back relaxed him, and he found himself drifting off into a variety of very pleasant fantasies involving him, Granger, and the biggest, softest, most decadent bed he could imagine. He shaved, making sure not to nick himself in the process, and then dressed with care, choosing a pair of comfortable, worn jeans that fit him like a second skin, a black turtleneck jumper, and his favourite black dragonhide boots.

Only half past eleven. Bloody hell, there was still nearly an hour and a half to kill. Right. He took out his book, plopped himself down in the oversized armchair by the hearth, where a warming fire was crackling thanks to the discreet efforts of the house-elf staff, and buried himself in a pitched battle between King Alfred and the Danes.

At ten minutes to one, he’d had enough. A small, persistent knot in his abdomen seemed to tighten in anticipation. Only another ten minutes. He couldn’t wait. Slipping into his warmest woollen cloak, scarf and gloves, he had a final look round his room, took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and disappeared with a small pop.

The air crackled around him for a split second and he found himself standing in front of Flourish and Blotts, centuries-old purveyors of fine books. The sky was a leaden grey and it looked like snow was imminent. He hoped it would hold off just a few hours at least.

Anxiously, he looked around for Hermione, but she was nowhere in sight. He checked his watch. 12.59. Okay, she wasn’t late, not yet anyway. He’d been early. Two agonising minutes passed. Still no sign of her. Could something have happened? Surely she’d have sent word.

Three more minutes crawled by. By now, he was getting cold standing in one spot, and he began a little warming-up dance, hopping from one foot to the other and rubbing his gloved hands together.

Finally, at 1.05, he shut his eyes for a moment, disappointment pricking at him even as he reassured himself that she would indeed be there and not to worry.
There was a sudden scent of apricots under his nose, and then he felt two arms wrapping themselves tightly round his waist.

“You’re here!” he said stupidly, opening his eyes, and then laughed with delight and relief. “I was afraid… I mean…”

“I’m so sorry I’m late!” Hermione said into his chest, her nose buried in his woollen cloak. “Did you think I wouldn’t come?”

“No, no,” he said hastily. “I knew you’d be here. I was just…you know…getting cold, that’s all.” He held her away from him for a moment and drank the sight of her in. “Merlin, you look great!”

She laughed happily and twirled around and then hugged him again. She wore a bright red cloak and white angora gloves with a matching cloche and scarf. He had no idea how she was dressed underneath that, but he was certainly looking forward to finding out. But first, something far more important.

“Don’t move an inch,” he bent to whisper in her ear. “I need to warm up. I’m bloody freezing!”

Instantly she stood very still, waiting, and he began to rub his cold nose on the warm skin of her neck, making her giggle. He followed this with a series of soft, little kisses, breathing in her lovely, natural scent that had always reminded him of almonds and honey, moving from her neck to her jaw and finally to her lips. There was a split second’s pause before their mouths finally came together, during which both were breathing shallowly in anticipation, and then they couldn’t wait another moment.

It was a kiss that had been a week in the making, seven whole days building and growing, and as he crushed his mouth to hers, they clung to each other with a sort of crazy, delighted, insatiable fervour.

At last, they broke apart, breathless and laughing.

“Gods, I’ve missed you,” she sighed, looking up at him, her eyes warm and full.

Draco’s heart sang, and as he rested his forehead against hers, his arms locked around her waist, he felt, for the first time in a week, really like himself again; there was an odd sense of completion… of coming home… that he hadn’t had until just this moment.

“Come on,” he said, clearing his throat, suddenly embarrassed by the intense emotion. “Best get going. We’ll turn into a pair of statues if we stand here another minute. Where would you like to go?

Hermione thought for a moment, and then her eyes sparkled with the excitement of a sudden idea. “I know! What about Notting Hill? It’s sort of a funky neighbourhood, very colourful, with lots of great little shops and places to eat, and every Saturday, there’s a huge antiques market that’s really a lot of fun! You can’t imagine the sorts of strange and wonderful old stuff you can find there!”

“Sounds like a plan. Let’s go.”

Taking her hand, he led the way through through the Leaky Cauldron. Just before heading out into Muggle London’s Charing Cross Road, he Transfigured both their cloaks into warm, Muggle winter jackets. And then they stepped out through the portal into the street-- and into a whole other world.

From there it was a simple matter of finding the right Underground line, and here it was Hermione, not surprisingly, who led the way to the nearby Tottenham Court Road station for the Central line to Notting Hill Gate. It was Draco’s first time taking the Tube, and he couldn’t help staring in every direction as he walked down the entrance stairs and then encountered his first escalator, which would take them far deeper into the earth, along a steep, downward slope. Muggles were continually
surprising him, he’d discovered. Momentarily stunned and then fascinated, he couldn’t help thinking back to the moving staircases at Hogwarts.

The walls on either side of the escalator were plastered with framed posters advertising television programmes and new West End plays and exhibits at the British Museum, and all sorts of products that were new to Draco. His time at Oxford had been liberating and broadly educational regarding Muggle culture, but still fairly limited at this early stage regarding many things.

As the train pulled into the crescent-shaped tunnel, a tinny voice announced, “Mind the gap!” and the doors slid open. The same ominous warning was painted along the edge of the concrete platform just before it dropped off to the tracks below, and Draco was still staring at the fairly wide chasm that yawned between the platform and the train when Hermione yanked him to safety.

“Thanks!” he muttered as they sat down.

It was a comfortable ride in nicely upholstered seats, and quick too. Hermione couldn’t help smiling at the almost childlike wonder with which Draco watched people getting on and off at the various stops. All sorts of people—busy holiday shoppers, people coming into town to see a play in the West End or visit a museum—everybody resolute and focused on where they had to go, and everybody in a rush! Hermione took Draco’s elbow as they manoeuvred their way through the crowds upon leaving the train and headed up the exit stairs to the street.

A quick walk up Pembridge Road from the Tube station and they were in Notting Hill, at the famed Portobello Road. Hermione’s eyes were shining with excitement.

“Not exactly Diagon Alley, but nearly as quirky in some ways, I think!” she laughed, tugging him along.

They entered the road at the end that was most dense with antique shops, many of them only open on Market days such as this. Draco laughed and pointed at one, with the improbable name of “Oi!” It
sold jewellery, and he wanted to go and have a look, but Hermione urged him on, telling him there
would be many such shops.

“Let’s just get a feel for what’s here, and then we can come back to any shop we like, yeah?” she
suggested, and he agreed.

Next door to Oi!, a blue-fronted shop drew both of them to its large, plate-glass window. It was the
Portobello Road Antique Gallery, and inside were all sorts of intriguing treasures: antique boxes of
all sorts, clocks, chess sets (these interested Draco in particular), jewellery, animal-related antique
pieces, and metalware. It was just the sort of shop that beckoned to the curious spirit, and Hermione
and Draco stood with their noses pressed to the glass like little kids in front of a sweet shop.

“I know what I said before, but…” Hermione began, a sheepish grin on her face.

“Come on!” Draco laughed, and they pushed open the door and went inside.

* *

“Oh! Malfoy, look at this!”

He could hear Hermione’s voice coming from somewhere in the back of the shop. He turned away
from a beautiful chess set of boxwood and ebony, circa 1867, and went to find her.

She was standing surrounded by clocks of all sizes—tall case clocks, mantel clocks, wall clocks,
Delft clocks, others made of rich wood, intricately carved or plain, mariners’ clocks, and musical
clocks.

There was one—a French champeve clock, ornate and intricately made, meant for a mantel—that
had Hermione completely stunned.

“Draco,” she breathed. “Look! It’s so…”

“Exquisite, yes,” said a voice behind them, and the smiling shop owner stepped forward. “May I
help you, young lady?”

Hermione turned. “Yes, could you tell us about this beautiful clock, please?”

The owner, a Mr. Bartholomew, was short, round-faced and balding, with a slight lisp and tufts of
greying hair protruding from his ears. He reminded Draco of a hobbit, and it was all he could do not
to stare down at the little man’s feet.

“Ahem,” Mr. Bartholomew cleared his throat. “Well, this clock is made of very heavy bevelled glass
in the bezel. Behind that, there is a quite beautiful three-and-a-half-inch brass and champleve dial.
And as you can see, the back of the clock…” He beckoned them to look around at its other side. “…Has an opaque glass cover. Really an extraordinary piece.”

“How much would something like that cost?” Hermione asked quite unabashedly.

“This piece is being offered for £1,947.00.”

“Oh!” The word rushed out of her in a whoosh.
“What about this one?” Draco wanted to know, pointing at a tall case clock nearby.

“Ah, that one,” the little man said, clapping his hands together. “That’s an 18th-century Paul Price, and it’s signed. He was a very well known clockmaker from Chester, and a clock of his is very valuable indeed. That one,” he said, anticipating the next question, “is being offered for £2,588.00.”

Draco looked at Hermione and winked. “Bit pricey for us, darling, don’t you think? What with the baby coming and all.”

Hermione bit her lip, averting her eyes. “Oh, yes, that’s true. Sweetheart.” She followed Draco towards the front of the shop, just barely holding a giggle in check, but caught his hand suddenly, just before they reached the door.

“Malfoy, look,” she said, her voice hushed and reverent.

On a small table, on a cloth of fine lace, rested a collection of tiny crystal boxes and perfume bottles, each one unique in design. A small embossed card standing close to them revealed that they were French, about a hundred and fifty years old, and made by the famous glasshouses of Baccarat and St Louis.

Hermione couldn’t take her eyes off them. Each was exquisite in its detailing, particularly because of its small size. She put her hand out, her slender fingers extended, to touch one, but drew back.

“They’re incredible,” she whispered.

Draco looked at her carefully. He’d planned to buy her a Yule present today if he found something special and unique. He had thought perhaps a piece of jewellery—nothing big or ostentatious, nothing… well… not that sort of jewellery, of course, just something pretty that really suited her. But maybe one of these small things would be an even more memorable choice. If it wasn’t too dear.

“What do you like best?” he asked casually, his expression carefully schooled into one of friendly curiosity.

Hermione glanced up at him sharply, and then relaxed when she saw his open, guileless smile. “Oh gosh, I don’t know! They’re all so beautiful! Maybe…” She hesitated, looking closely again. “Maybe this one.” She indicated one of the small boxes. “And this.” She pointed to a tiny perfume bottle with a round, ruby-coloured stopper.

Draco nodded. “Okay,” he said then, his tone suddenly brisk, “I’m ready to go. You?”

Hermione gave him one last sideways glance as she passed him on the way to the door, but his expression remained completely inscrutable beyond the bright smile he flashed her as he held the door for her.
Baccarat perfume bottles

Baccarat crystal boxes

From a Steinitz chess set, c. 1867
They continued along, stopping often to gaze at the intriguing and fanciful wares that beckoned to them from the display windows. So many captivating shop fronts caught their eyes that it was difficult to know which way to go first, and so they wandered at will. In Ledbury Road, they found themselves in front of Melt, where the delectable aroma of freshly made chocolate wafted out into the street to seduce them.

Every sort of chocolate imaginable was there, laid out in neat rows on tray after tray. The shelves of enticing sweets seemed endless, the fragrance positively intoxicating. An inveterate chocoholic, Draco was rooted to the spot, not knowing how he should indulge his passion first.

“Good afternoon!” The woman behind the counter smiled pleasantly. “May I be of any assistance?”

“Do you offer samples for tasting?” Hermione wanted to know.

“Why yes, certainly,” the sales clerk replied. “You may try anything we sell except for the pre-wrapped chocolates and of course, what is already boxed.”

What to begin with? Hermione looked at Draco, who was grinning, slightly goggle-eyed, and then smiled slyly as her gaze fell on a tray of special-edition, deluxe, dark chocolates, some of them with fillings and some plain but elegant.

“Those, please,” she said, pointing.

The sales clerk nodded and drew the tray out of the display case. Then she removed one of each type-- six bite-sized pieces-- and set them on a smaller tray.

“Now-- the proper way to enjoy fine chocolate is to inhale its bouquet and then let it melt very gradually on the tongue.” She waggled her finger at the two of them playfully. “No rushing!”

“Try one, Malfoy,” Hermione said sweetly, holding out the tray. He selected one and popped it into
his mouth, and she did the same. The rich chocolate gradually liquefied in the heat of their mouths, waves of exquisite flavour rising from their palates and filling their senses.

“Mmm,” she sighed. “Yum. Let’s have another.” She slanted a look at Draco. He was licking his lips euphorically. This time, she chose a square one with small ridges on top. “Open up, Malfoy.”

Dutifully, he did, and she slowly dropped the confection onto his tongue. He drew it into his mouth and closed his eyes, smiling blissfully.

“Spectacular,” he murmured. “Your turn now. Open your pretty mouth, Granger.”

He advanced on her, plucked a chocolate off the tray, and held it for a second just out of reach of her mouth, forcing her to extend her tongue in order to capture it. This she did, curling the tip of it seductively and finally being rewarded with the square of rich candy. She sucked on it slowly, relishing it, smiling and shutting her eyes appreciatively, as the luscious chocolate gradually disappeared.

“Another?” he purred, popping one into his own mouth and moving even closer to Hermione. She nodded, her eyes glued to the square of dark, rich chocolate on the tip of his tongue.

Scooping up the tray and then walking her backwards behind a display case to shield them from view, he bent his head and covered her mouth with his, his tongue finding ready entry as hers twined around it, seeking, caressing. Slyly he held back at first, playing with her, eluding her. Finally he passed the chocolate to her, and then kissed her soundly.

“Thank you,” she whispered, flushing prettily.

There was one more sample on the tray, a round one. “This one’s got a cherry inside, I bet,” she said, her voice husky. “Would you like it?”

“I think I’ve already had your cherry, Granger,” Draco said, laughing quietly.

She raised an eyebrow but said nothing, instead dropping the sweet into her own mouth. She sucked on it for a moment and then, her hand at the nape of Draco’s neck, she drew his head down to hers and shared the chocolate, the cherry and its heady liqueur, her tongue gliding over his and marking it with their various flavours.

“Delicious,” he sighed, swallowing finally. Hermione gave him one more very luxuriant kiss and then turned to walk back to the counter, ready to buy some of the chocolates they’d tried. They were shocked to discover a small army of people watching their every move from outside the window.

“You two put on quite a show, my dears,” the sales clerk remarked dryly. “If you’d care to do it again sometime, I’ll give you a very nice discount.” With a wink, she handed a paper sack to Hermione but shook her head when Hermione attempted to pay her.

“On the house, love,” she said, sighing happily, as four new customers entered the shop, the bell over the door jangling.

Crossing back into the main road, they continued north and then made a detour into tiny Elgin Crescent, stopping at Marilyn Moore’s to try on vintage clothing. They took turns playing with a slew of old hats, Hermione laughing uproariously at the sight of herself in a huge, wide-brimmed, posh hat that looked uncannily like a giant version of a lampshade in her parents’ sitting room, only with feathers. Draco affected his most debonair pose with a black fedora slouched over one eye.

“Very Cary Grant!” Hermione observed, grinning.
“Who?”

“Oh, never mind!”

Back in the Portobello Road, they played with an electric train set at Honeyjam Toys, Draco taking particular delight in making it stop, go, and even move backwards through tunnels with the remote control box, and remarking that such devices almost approached the handiness of a wand. A giant Lego set also occupied them for a time as they raced to see who could create the tallest, most intricate structure.

Finally wending their way back down the road, Hermione looked at her watch. “It’s gone three and I’ve just had the most marvelous idea! Are you game?” She gave him a mysterious smile.

“Think I can handle whatever you’ve got in mind, Granger,” he drawled.

“Excellent.” She tucked her arm into his and they started off.

They retraced their steps until she stopped them in front of a stone façade under the sign “The Electric Cinema.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Please go right on to Part Two for the conclusion of this chapter!
“It’s a real cinema, plus a restaurant. They’ve got tables right where the films are shown, so you can have a meal while you watch. It’s fantastic. I’ve been here only once, but I had a great time.”

Hermione glanced hopefully at Draco. “Fancy a late lunch and a movie?”

“Excellent. Let’s do it,” he replied. The truth was, as novel an experience as this would surely be, he’d have done virtually anything to prolong their afternoon together. Lunch and a film sounded perfect. It guaranteed him at least another two or three hours with her before going home. Plus, the idea of time with Hermione in a nice, dark cinema was an added bonus. He was all for it.

Miraculously, this day’s offering turned out to be a double feature, part of a Francois Truffaut retrospective. The films were “The 400 Blows” and “Stolen Kisses,” the latter title piquing Draco’s interest. (Wryly, he deemed it rather apt in the circumstances.) For one blanket price, both films and a glass of wine could be had. Additional food and drink would be billed separately.

“Let’s see,” Hermione calculated quickly. “The first film starts at half past three. That gives us plenty of time to order our meal and find seats. And each film is close to two hours, so that means we’ll be out by…” She thought for a moment. “… by about eight. What do you think, Malfoy?”

“Eight.” Draco nodded enthusiastically. ”Excellent. Sounds good, yeah,” he added lamely, flushing a bit at his own eagerness. “You’ll… uh… have to tell me about this director, what was his name? Trouveau?”

Hermione merely quirked a knowing smile at him and they went inside.

A late lunch— one bottle of very nice Pinot Grigio, one ploughman’s lunch, and one chicken salad with walnuts and raisins on a bed of fresh greens— set out on the small tables located between each seat, they lounged comfortably in red leather armchairs complete with foot stools at the back of the auditorium, which was unusually empty this particular afternoon. As the lights dimmed, there was nobody anywhere around them, and nearly the only other people were several elderly ladies eight rows ahead of them and a few couples scattered towards the front of the screening room.
Draco stretched his legs as far as space permitted, and sipped his wine as the opening credits began to roll. “This is really nice, you know?” he whispered. “Very… civilised.”

“We Muggles can be civilised on occasion,” Hermione retorted, giving him a small poke in the ribs for good measure.

“I didn’t mean it that way and you know it!” he protested.

“Yeah, yeah…” she muttered. But she was smiling.

Half an hour into the film, the wine was nearly gone. Draco stretched again, and casually draped his arm around Hermione. Almost immediately, her head dropped to his shoulder and she tilted her chin up and smiled provocatively.

“This is the bit where you kiss me, I think,” she murmured.

“Oh, is it?” he answered, with straight-faced innocence. “I was really hoping to watch the film.”

Another poke in the ribs was her reply, and then, as she turned away with a theatrical huff, he swooped down and pulled her to him, catching her in a fierce kiss.

“You want to watch that violent impulse of yours, Granger. I’m getting seriously bruised,” he admonished her, and then he laughed softly, chucking her on the chin. “Silly girl. You didn’t really think I’d rather watch the film, did you?”

“Course not, you great prat! You didn’t really believe I was upset, did you?” Even in the dark, he could see that her eyes were dancing with laughter.

“Suppose we’re even then,” he said, and the elderly ladies turned in their seats as one, with a loud “SSSHHH!”

After that, it was very hard to keep a straight face. There was only one thing for it. He would simply have to snog her into oblivion, giving their mouths something else to do besides laugh helplessly at the three old ladies who’d been so affronted by their whispering.

And snog her he did.

Sliding down low in their seats, he angled his head and came in for a soft, provocatively light kiss for starters. She responded by sliding her fingers into his hair, and then touching her mouth to his with a series of tender kisses, each one lasting a bit longer and opening them up a little bit more.

Merlin, she got better at this every time they did it! A woman with fantastic instincts. He could definitely get used to this, he thought, as her tongue skated across his bottom lip and then ventured into his mouth. He could taste the tangy dressing from her chicken salad, mixed with the faint bouquet of the wine. It was delicious, and he pressed for more, thrusting his own tongue along hers, stroking it, drawing it back into her mouth along with his own, kissing her ever more hungrily.

“Come here,” he murmured. She smiled in the darkness, flickering images from the screen briefly lighting her face, and moved to straddle his lap, twining her arms round his neck and catching his left ear lobe lightly between her teeth.

“You feel so good,” he said softly, running his hands up and down her back, gradually moving them lower to sweep down over her hips, bum and thighs, and then up under the front of her jumper until they found her breasts. They rested lightly there, his thumbs flicking and stroking the sensitive little buds through the thin material of her bra until they were fully hard, and she sighed against his hair,
rocking her hips against his pelvis.

This bra was a nuisance. It needed to be gone.

“May I?” he asked in a whisper, his fingers toying with the clasp. She nodded, and in a trice, it was unfastened. Moving it aside, he ran his hands over her bare breasts, squeezing them gently and lightly pinching her nipples, now taut and tingling. His caresses were languid, and he could hear her breaths growing more shallow and ragged with each teasing stroke.

“Hermione,” he breathed, and the sound of his voice sent a thrill of electric desire right down to her toes. She arched against him, offering herself, wanting to be touched everywhere. He happily obliged. Soon his fingers found their way to the warmth and moisture of her knickers and then this garment was moved aside as well, and he delved deep inside and then back out, fondling, stroking, his fingers slick with her arousal, until she arched and stiffened, suddenly, her mouth opening in a soundless scream of pleasure. She fell against his shoulder, breathing hard, and rested there, her breath ruffling the fine, golden hairs on the nape of his neck.

On the screen, Antoine Doinel was turning out to be a deeply troubled adolescent. His parents were having marital problems, school was a torture for him, and he felt completely alienated in his world of 1950s Paris.

Unfortunately, most of the film’s subtleties were lost on the busy young couple in the last row. The old ladies eight rows up no longer heard much of anything except for the occasional breathy sigh or tiny moan, but they did notice that the boy and girl had slid completely out of sight. How could they possibly watch the film in a horizontal position? Well, clearly, they weren’t. There were places for that sort of thing, and a cinema wasn’t one of them!

Except—what could be more perfect than a very dark room and comfy, generous seats, nobody bothering you, and the most sweetly passionate girl Draco had ever known in his life, wanting nothing more than to please him! Such thoughts ran intermittently through his mind, when he was able to form them coherently-- that is, until Hermione, still straddling his thighs, began unzipping his jeans.

She made short work of the zipper, and then delicately pulled down the waistband of his boxers. His cock sprang free, a deep rose colour and fully erect, waving cheerfully at them. Draco grinned sheepishly, and Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a sudden giggle; then, being an enterprising girl, she slid to the floor between his knees and proceeded to stop her laughter in a more productive manner.

For his part, Draco sat slouched down against the seat back, and just breathed deeply. What she was doing to him with her naively talented mouth was making him want to erupt out of the seat in an explosion of pure pleasure.

Convulsively, he grabbed the armrests and then her head, thrusting his fingers into her curls and clutching them tightly, as his balls suddenly clenched almost painfully against his body.

“Fucking hell, Granger!” he hissed, as he felt the wave building. “I’m… it’s…”

And then he did explode, straight into her waiting mouth. This second time, she’d deliberately held on, expecting to swallow it. Just as before, it tasted slightly salty, like the ocean. Not unpleasant at all. Looking up at him as he lay back against the seat, drained and limp, she smiled, wiped her mouth with careful deliberation, and then tenderly tucked his slowly deflating member back into his jeans, dropping a tiny kiss on its smooth skin as she did so.
Then she settled into her seat, chased his spunk down with the rest of her wine, and watched the remainder of the film with complete concentration, her small hand slipping comfortably into his.

It was ten past eight when they finally emerged from the cinema. The streets were still fairly busy with holiday shoppers on their way home now, heading-- like Draco and Hermione-- towards the Tube station. The two of them walked along slowly, people in more of a hurry moving in a stream past them on both sides. The evening was crisp and clear, and already quite a few stars were winking overhead, surrounding a silver slipper of a moon.

“When can I see you again?” Draco asked, tucking her arm in his as he peered at her in the yellow light of the streetlamps.

Hermione cocked her head to one side and raised an eyebrow, a teasing smile on her face. “Well, you know, I did invite you to my house, have you forgotten? The invitation is still open. Mum said any
night this week for dinner, if you like. She’s a very good cook. She specifically said to tell you that you’d be very welcome.”

Hermione’s house for dinner. With her parents. Yes, he’d already accepted the invitation in theory, and yes, he had enjoyed her parents’ company, but this… this was different. There was something about being invited to a girl’s house to have dinner with her family that put a relationship on a whole other level. He supposed he must be there already. Truth be told, he’d been there for some indeterminate amount of time, without putting a name to it. This relationship had definitely moved from the category of best friends with (considerable) benefits to something else, though he wasn’t precisely certain when it had actually happened. He wondered if she were picking the significance of all of it apart the way he was doing. Knowing Granger, she had already done so three different ways to Sunday. He grinned wryly to himself. And despite that (or maybe, he hoped, because of it), she still wanted him to come.

And so he would go.

“What about Thursday?” Hermione was saying, as they neared the Tube station. “Seven o’clock? You can Apparate or even Floo if you want. We’re set up for it. Special permission for Muggleborns and all that.”

They began the descent down the many steps leading to the Underground platform.

“Thursday is perfect,” Draco replied, a part of him wondering what in Merlin’s name he’d just agreed to. “I’d love to come.”

The smile on Hermione’s face at that moment was worth any amount of lingering doubt that might nag at him later.

It was pure gold.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks and boxes of dark chocolates from Melt to my lovely and loyal betas, kazfeist and mister_otter! They are totally there with me every step of the way.

Thanks to moonjameskitten for her beautiful and inspirational banner.

Thanks to the very nice folk at HP Britglish, as always, for their invaluable help with my innumerable and often very picky questions.

Thanks to Bernard Cornwell, for gifting the reading world with some of the very best historical novels ever, including his wonderful Uhtred series, beginning with The Last Kingdom. I have fudged the publication date a tiny bit, I confess, for the purposes of the story.
9 December
Sunday morning, 9.00 am

“I’m telling you, Narcissa, it’s the truth! I saw them with my own eyes. They were standing there, plain as day, in front of Flourish and Blotts! If I tell you that there was not an inch of space between them… well! And he looked as if he were positively inhaling her!”

Elspeth Parkinson’s expression was positively gleeful in a face surrounded by green flames in the fireplace in the master bedroom of Malfoy Manor. It was still fairly early in the day, and Narcissa Malfoy was really in no mood for the sort of catty gossip Elspeth so gloried in spreading. Except, of course, that in this case, the gossip involved her son and something—or rather, someone-- she’d been wondering about increasingly for the past week.

“Did you get a good look at who it was?” Narcissa asked, intensely curious despite her annoyance at the pleasure her friend was so obviously deriving from being the bearer of such momentous information. She had just dressed and had been about to go down to breakfast when the Floo Network was activated and Elspeth’s head suddenly appeared, bursting with the news that she’d
spotted Draco the afternoon before, kissing a young lady in the middle of Diagon Alley.

“No!” Elspeth wailed in frustration. “Draco’s back was to me and so he blocked her from view almost completely. All I could see of her was a bit of a red cloak and some brown hair, longish and a little curly. I’m sorry I can’t be more specific, darling!”

_No doubt._ “Hmm… well, thank you, my dear. I do appreciate knowing of this, even though you are unable to furnish me with something more… concrete.” She turned away for a moment and then back again to face her friend, whose head still floated eerily in the flames, and her tone was dry and just slightly sardonic. “Just out of curiosity, what took you so long? To tell me, I mean?”

Elspeth Parkinson had the good grace to look slightly abashed at that. “Oh, well,” she began, and Narcissa could have sworn her friend’s face had turned a deeper shade of green. “You know… I didn’t want to speak until I was certain of what I’d seen.”

_You mean until you’d made it your business to tell everyone else we know first!_ “I am very grateful for your discretion, Elspeth,” Narcissa said evenly, her smile faintly reminiscent of a grimace.

“Anything for a friend, darling. You know that. Well, I must dash. Goodbye!” The flames surrounding Elspeth Parkinson’s head flared for an instant, and then she disappeared, and they resumed their normal colour as they licked hungrily at the large logs crackling within.

“Stupid cow,” Narcissa muttered as she left the bedroom and headed down the long, curving staircase leading too the front hallway.

Over breakfast, she wasted no time informing Lucius of this latest development. In turn, he merely let the central point of this new intelligence settle, digesting it quietly and impassively.

“Well?” Narcissa cried, exasperated. “_Now_ do you believe me?”

“Of course I believe you, my dear,” he said, in a smooth, deadly quiet voice. “However, we have only Elspeth’s word on this and I think we may safely agree that she has something of an agenda of her own where our son is concerned.”

“Are you suggesting…?” Narcissa began, her bone-china coffee cup coming down on its saucer with a decided clink.

“That there might just be some… hard feelings, shall we say?… stemming from Draco’s refusal to show the slightest interest in Pansy? And that consequently, Elspeth might be only too eager for a way to have just a bit of her own back?”

“By spreading rumours about Draco, very likely, and dangling inconclusive bits of information in front of us.” Narcissa sighed wearily.

“I’m certain that the sight of Draco with another girl would have angered and frustrated her tremendously,” Lucius mused. “Not that I blame her for that, really. It would have been so much more… _productive_ all round if Draco and Pansy had made a successful match. But our son can be very stubborn, as you know. He made it quite clear that she was not what he desired.”

Narcissa sighed again and toyed with her spoon, stirring the lukewarm coffee and then laying the spoon down again as a certain rather heated discussion came to mind. “I remember. Only too well. And now it seems the point is more than moot.” She stood and shrugged. “Well, this afternoon will certainly be interesting, don’t you think?”

Lucius looked up from the remains of his breakfast and sudden understanding lit his eyes. “Ah, yes.
Narcissa laughed. It was a brittle sound. “Oh, they won’t dare to say anything directly, not at first anyway. They’ll be more subtle than that. It’ll be small, sly hints before one of them simply cannot hold back one more minute.”

Lucius stood and walked around to his wife’s end of the table, slipping his arms around her from behind. “Well, just you keep your chin up, my dear. Remember who you are. Whatever those harpies have to say, it’s all innuendo at this point. Don’t forget that.” He gave her a quick kiss. “Off you go now, Cissa darling. We shall get to the bottom of this, never you fear. In the meantime….”

“Semper fortis, yes, I know,” she laughed ruefully. “The Malfoy family motto. Or one of them, anyway. I’ll remember.”

Always strong. Easier said than done, but she would certainly try. In any event, what choice did she have?

Just then, Draco shambled into the dining room, still in his pyjamas and a dressing gown. Lucius raised an eyebrow and sat back down. Narcissa sank back into her chair as well, and for a few moments, there was silence as Draco cheerfully helped himself to some toast and porridge. He sat down, had a sip of orange juice, scooped up a generous spoonful of porridge drizzled with butter and a bit of honey as he liked it, and then froze, the spoon halfway to his mouth.

“What’s the matter with you?” He glanced from his mother to his father and back again. “Both of you!”

Lucius glanced briefly at his wife, hoping to pick up a signal as to how much she felt ought to be said at this point. She gave a slight shake of her head and then turned.

“Tibby! More coffee!”

The ancient house-elf appeared instantly with a steaming pot in his gnarly hands and proceeded to pour fresh cups all round.

“Be there anything more I can do for you, Mistress?” he asked, his voice quavery with age.

“No, no, that will be all for the moment, Tibby,” Narcissa said mildly, with a small wave of her hand. “Leave us now.”

Tibby bowed respectfully and vanished, leaving that same awkward silence in his wake.

Draco laid down his spoon. “All right, what did I do now?”

“Ah… nothing, darling. Did you have a nice time yesterday in Diagon Alley?”

“With Theo?” Lucius couldn’t resist adding, at which Narcissa shot him a dark look.

It was impossible to miss the little exchange of looks between the two elder Malfoys. But just what was he to make of his father’s small, verbal addendum? How, exactly, to interpret the tone of his voice? It seemed to Draco that there was just a hint of extra emphasis on “Theo,” which could suggest that somehow, they knew he hadn’t spent the day and part of the evening with Theo Nott. Had he and Hermione been seen? They’d been in Diagon Alley so briefly. It was only a matter of minutes, really, from the time she’d arrived to after they’d… Merlin’s balls. Their kiss. That had to be it. Draco could have smacked himself. How could he have allowed himself to get so carried away in the moment? He’d been reckless and indiscreet and somebody must have seen the two of them and

“Oh, yeah, well, Theo couldn’t make it after all. I mean, he was there, I did see him briefly, but he had things he had to do. I just… mucked about on my own.”

“Oh, you own,” Lucius repeated conversationally.

Bugger.

He knows. Something, anyway.

And he’s letting me hang myself, an inch at a time.

Right. Only one thing to do, then.

Stonewall.

“Yeah, exactly. On my own.” Draco gave an expansive smile to both his parents and took a large bite of toast, chewing impassively.

Narcissa and Lucius looked at each other. So this was how it was to be. Points to Draco for sheer ballsiness, Lucius thought with grudging admiration. Well, this was his son, after all.

Later, after what seemed to Draco an interminable amount of time making inane chitchat with his parents as he ate, they finally left the dining room. He breathed a small sigh of relief and finished his meal in peace, his mind racing ahead all the while. They knew more than they’d let on, that much was certain. He would have to be on his guard to avoid another cock-up like the one he’d just narrowly skirted. The issue itself could still come back to bite him in the arse, and probably would do. They’d be watching him closely from here on. Next time, however, he’d be better prepared.

That night, 11 pm

“And?”

Narcissa looked up from the book she’d been reading in the comfort of their palatial bed. Lucius had just slid in beside her and now he leaned on one elbow and looked at her inquisitively.

She gave a short laugh. It had gone just as she’d anticipated. Eight ladies, all longtime friends, arrived to lunch together and play bridge, and eight ladies sat themselves down, fully intending to ferret out the truth of the delicious rumour they’d all been privy to in the past twenty-four hours. They were dying to discuss it amongst themselves first, but could only do that if the mother of the object of all the juicy innuendo were out of the room. The second she left, ostensibly in order to see to their meal, the flurry of excited questions and speculations began in earnest. Narcissa stood just outside the door to the yellow drawing room, listening. Part of her was inclined to laugh at the extreme foolishness of her friends, and the other part was quite simply indignant, not to mention chagrined, to be the subject of the current gossip.

And then she’d returned, to a suddenly very quiet room. The second wave hadn’t begun until well into lunch.

“And then,” she continued, having filled Lucius in on the preliminaries, “then as we were dining,
Emmeline said something to the effect that now that Theo has grown up, there probably isn’t much she can do about his choices… romantically, she meant. To which Sylvia said that she fully intended to make sure that Gregory married within our circle if it was the last thing she did. All of them looked right at me when she said that, as if to suggest that I feel differently!” Narcissa rolled her eyes.

Lucius snorted. “And what did you say, my love?”

“Oh,” Narcissa grinned wryly, “I simply smiled as sweetly as I could manage and nodded, and said I thought that was a very wise decision.”

Lucius chuckled. “Somehow I have the feeling it did not end there.”

“It certainly did not. We ate for a while, and then, over coffee, they tried another tack. Ardith dropped a little remark about the impropriety of certain sorts of behaviour in public places. They all agreed that young people who cannot control themselves in public need to be reined in. Again, all eyes were suddenly on me.” She sighed heavily. “Lucius, you would have been proud of me. Never once did I allow their nasty, sniping little comments to shake my composure. I merely smiled again and asked if perhaps we didn’t have better, more productive things to do with our time than to dissect the behaviour of young people in the streets and then imply that their parents are to blame.”

“Brava, my dear. Excellent response! What was their reaction to that?”

Narcissa laughed. “I could see that Desdemona Parmentier had been on the verge of saying something else just then. But that shut them up completely.” Her smile faded then, and she looked at her husband gravely. “You know, I must confess… what they said has really given me pause about whom Draco is seeing. Not one of them indicated that she knew who it could be. As far as I know, Elspeth was the only one who actually saw them together. Nobody else has heard anything at all. Still—the insinuation was that it could very well be somebody totally unsuitable. I’m worried, Lucius.”

“There’s no need, Cissa. We shall have it all sorted in due time, no doubt. As you said, the boy will tip his hand sooner or later, and then we will know what we are actually dealing with. Until then, I have no intention of losing sleep over it, my sweet, and neither should you. Goodnight.”

With that, he gave her a kiss, blew out the candle, and turned over. Narcissa was left lying in the darkness, unable to sleep despite her husband’s sage advice.

Draco had spent that same day in blissful ignorance of his mother’s travails on his account. He’d lain on his bed, reliving his day with Hermione countless times and in vivid detail, every now and then recalling a particularly funny or endearing moment in the vintage clothing shop or the antiques gallery or as they’d walked to and from the Tube. He recalled their visit to the chocolate shop and the dark, delicious time spent in the cinema with special delight. If he closed his eyes, he could call to mind her fragrance, the very taste and feel of her, the soft moans that had thrilled him… and then there were her kisses, so inexpert and yet so alive with passion that it was impossible not to feel excited and moved.

Thursday. Four days away. It seemed forever, suddenly. He would send her a letter.

His quill scratching relentlessly on the parchment, he began.
“Dear Hermione, I’ve been thinking a lot about yesterday. Notting Hill was great. I thoroughly enjoyed myself. Every part of the day was really good. I hope it was for you, too. Are we still on for dinner on Thursday? What time shall I come? And do you want me to Apparate? Or would the Floo Network be better? I mean, regarding your parents. Draco.”

For a moment, he wondered if he should have mentioned his own parents’ odd behaviour, and his belief that they had certain suspicions, and then decided not to for the moment. There would be time enough to tell her if his concern evolved into something more substantial. Right now it was all smoke and mirrors, nothing more.

He sealed the parchment scroll and opened the window, calling softly for Paladin, who swooped down in a rush of feathers, lighting on the ledge and immediately preening himself.

A moment later, after a favourite treat from Draco’s palm, he was off out the window, soon no more than a tiny speck against the mauve and peach streaks of the sunset sky. It was nearly four o’clock.

By ten that night, Draco had his reply.

“Dear Draco, I’m so glad you liked Notting Hill! I had a wonderful time too. I’ve been thinking about it all day. Of course we’re still on for Thursday! My parents are looking forward to seeing you. You can Apparate to our back garden, if you like. You know the address, of course. They’re still a bit disconcerted by it, honestly, but I actually think they’d be a bit less so if you turned up at the door like other people do instead of suddenly appearing in the sitting room fireplace. I still try to keep that sort of thing as low-key as possible, though they’ve gradually become used to quite a bit over the years. Anyway, come at seven, as I said yesterday. That’ll be perfect.” There was a small smudge right after “perfect,” as if a word had been written and then removed, followed by “Hermione.”

First thing Monday morning, he sent his response back.

“Dear Hermione, I will Apparate as you suggested. Seven sounds fine. I’ll raid my father’s wine cellar for something really good. See you then. Draco.”

* *

For the next several days, Draco busied himself with the required reading that had been set for next term’s papers, and he imagined Hermione was doing much the same thing. In this way time passed in something of a blur. On Thursday afternoon at tea, Narcissa noticed that Draco seemed more than a little keyed up. Knowing better than to ask, she simply watched him closely, and noted that his ability to keep his mind on any conversation more than five minutes in length seemed to have seriously eroded.

Eventually, he put down his cup and saucer and stood.

“Sorry, Mother, will you excuse me, please?”

He seemed positively antsy by this time, and she couldn’t help herself.

“Of course, darling. Is everything all right?” The question slipped out before she could stop it.

“‘Course, why do you ask?” He was edging towards the door now, very slowly.
“Oh, no reason, except that you seem a bit… Never mind. Look, darling, I meant to tell you— your father and I have plans for the evening, but I shall instruct Tibby to—”

“Um… that’s not necessary, actually. I’ve got plans myself.” At Narcissa’s raised eyebrows, he rushed on. “I’m sorry, I should have mentioned it earlier. I’ve been invited to dinner at a friend’s house. Somebody from college. He… um… he lives in Hertfordshire.”

“Not somebody from our world, then, I take it.” An obvious point, but again, it slipped out before she could censor herself.

“No, Mother. He’s a Muggle.” Draco shifted impatiently from one foot to the other and glanced at his watch.

“I see,” Narcissa replied. *Translation:* ‘He’ is a she, and you’re hiding something, Draco. “Well, all right. Will you be back tonight?”

“Expect so, but possibly not. I mean, in case I’m not, don’t be worried.” He leaned down and left a quick kiss on his mother’s cheek.

She watched him go and sat back thoughtfully, her tea cup still in her lap. So. The girl was from just outside of London then. He’d met her at Oxford. What could this mean? The pieces didn't quite fit together. She couldn't be a Muggle, else she’d never have got into Diagon Alley. That left two possibilities, and the first of those, that she was a witch from a pureblood family Narcissa had somehow overlooked, was highly unlikely. The implications of the second struck her, and suddenly she felt a sick headache coming on. The remainder of the afternoon was spent in the quiet and solitude of her darkened bedroom, a soothing compress on her forehead.

6:55 pm

A moment before, Draco been in the comfort and warmth of his own bedroom. Now he found himself standing next to a trellis of rose bushes, their twining branches bare of nearly everything but the thorns. In his hands were two bottles of very fine wine he’d taken from his father’s extensive collection, counting on the probability that they wouldn’t be missed. Warm yellow light poured from the windows and he could make out several figures moving in the room beyond the back door.

Suddenly his heart rate seemed to have tripled and there was what felt like a Bludger stuck in his throat. He approached the door as quietly as possible, as if to reassure himself that he could Disapparate at a moment’s notice if he should decide to back out.

Oh, grow up! a part of him chided the panicked remainder.

Right, then.

Before he could change his mind, he stuck a fist out and knocked quite forcefully.

A moment later, the door opened and there was Hermione, giving him that just-for-him, amazing smile. She looked positively radiant, in fact. And suddenly, basking in that glow, he knew that it was going to be all right. He stepped over the threshold with a relieved little grin.

Before either of them had a chance to say anything, Claire came hurrying over from behind Hermione, holding out her hand to him.

“Draco! Please come in! It’s lovely to see you again.”
Awkwardly, he made to take her hand, and then, embarrassed, thrust the two bottles at her.

“Hello, Mrs.—Claire, I mean,” he remembered. “Thank you for having me. I didn’t know what you were planning to serve, so I brought one red and one white.”

“That was so thoughtful of you. Thank you, dear. Richard, Hermione’s friend is here!” And then Claire leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Startled at such a spontaneous show of warmth to a relative stranger, he touched the spot lightly, and then let his hand drop to his side.

The kitchen was spacious and modern, with glass-fronted, honey-oak cupboards and a centre island with tall stools arranged around it for quick, casual meals. Recessed lighting in the cupboards and beneath them gave the room added warmth. Delicious smells were emanating from the huge, custom AGA cooker, on which several pots were steaming. Something quite delectable was baking in the oven as well, Draco’s nose informed him.

He found himself automatically glancing around for the house-elves and had to remind himself that of course, there were none—nor any servants at all, for that matter. He was just reflecting on that fact belatedly when Richard strode into the kitchen, his hand out in greeting.

“Well, well, Draco. I see you found us all right. Welcome to our home. Care for a drink?”

“Darling, look—Draco’s brought us some lovely wine. Two bottles, actually. Open the red, won’t you? It’ll be perfect with dinner.” Claire handed her husband one of the two bottles, a Pinot Noir, and smiled. Then she looked at Draco, an impish twinkle in her eye. “I know many people prefer white wine with fish, but I like to be more adventurous! Oh--I do hope you like fish, dear. We’re having salmon.”

Hermione, standing almost protectively right next to Draco all this while, now glanced quickly at him to gauge his reaction. She relaxed visibly when he broke into a smile.

“I love salmon. I’m sure it’ll be delicious,” he answered graciously, and Hermione gave his hand a quick, grateful squeeze.

Just then Richard reappeared with the open bottle, pouring it into a decanter and setting it down on the counter. “We’ll just let that breathe a bit, I think,” he said, fetching out four graceful wineglasses from the cupboard where a collection of crystal was stored. “In the meantime, what about a bit of something else?” He poured out glasses of a nice Cabernet already open, and handed them around.

“Thanks, Daddy,” Hermione said, smiling. “Look, Mum--would you mind very much if I showed Draco around a bit before dinner?”

“Not at all,” Claire replied. “We shan’t be eating for half an hour at least. Besides, things are well in hand. Go right ahead. Oh, and if you’re feeling a bit peckish, Draco, there are canapés on the coffee table in the sitting room.”

“Great! Thanks, Mum. Come on, Malfoy!” Hermione grabbed his hand, eager to make an escape finally, and he found himself trailing along behind her into the adjoining dining room. It was a good deal smaller than his own at home—but then, what wasn’t?—and yet, it was not small by any means. In fact, now that he was really looking, he could see that Hermione’s house was quite spacious and well-appointed, the furnishings tasteful and comfortable.

They walked through the sitting room next, with its invitingly overstuffed sofas and twin armchairs and a nice fire crackling in the hearth, and then she led him up the stairs and down a hallway until they reached a door with a ceramic plaque that said, “Hermione’s Room” in bright primary colours.
There was a painting of a cloud, a sun, and a rainbow, and balloons around the letters.

Hermione blushed and rolled her eyes. “Remnant of when I was five. Mum refuses to let me take it down!”

He grinned and gave her waist a pinch. “Bet you were a very cute little girl.”

“Oh, I was,” she nodded. “Everybody loved me, especially when I accidentally turned Arabella Moreton’s hair into a pile of writhing worms.”

He laughed out loud then. “Merlin’s beard! What had she done to you?”

Hermione’s face became suddenly somber. “She said I’d stolen her favourite book. I hadn’t meant to keep it. I’d just wanted to look at it. When she said those terrible things, well… the worms just sort of… happened.”

There was pain in the memory, and Draco knew to leave it alone. He slid his arm around her and they just stood quietly for a minute.

“I’m sorry, Granger.” He’d never really considered what it would be like to have magic but not understand what it meant. “You must have been scared.”

She nodded. “After that, they were scared of me, all of them. That wasn’t the only time either. It was a long while before I made a real friend. Tell you later, okay?” She took a deep, settling breath, and pushed open the door to her room.

Before them was a cozy space that was very much a young girl’s private retreat. The walls were papered in a delicate, floral mini-print in ecru, peach, lilac, and rose, with hints of green. On the bed was a matching duvet, a white eyelet dust ruffle beneath, and crisp, white eyelet curtains over white-painted, louvred shutters. Beneath the large bay window, the recessed window seat had a cushion to match the wallpaper and duvet, and colourful throw pillows. He could imagine Hermione spending many happy hours there, reading or daydreaming, or maybe looking at the stars and the moon before bedtime. She’d have had lots of company too—a huge collection of dolls and plush animals ranged from one end of the window seat to the other.

She caught him looking at them and she giggled. “And they all have names too. Shall I introduce you? This is Theodora, and this one is Twink, and here’s…”

“That’s okay,” Draco chuckled. “I’ll meet them all properly later. Right now, there’s only one hello I want to say.” He threaded his arms around her waist and pulled her close.

“Hello,” she whispered, and tilted her head up to gaze at him.

“Hello,” he said softly, and caught her mouth in a sweet, lingering kiss.

When they separated, it was to rest their foreheads together with a sigh.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Hermione told him happily.

“Me too,” he murmured into her hair. “Oh! I nearly forgot! I’ve brought you something too! Hang on--”

Fishing around in a pocket, he drew out a small box and handed it to her with a pleased smile.

“Go on, open it!” he urged.
Her eyes were shining as she looked up at him. She opened the lid and there, on a bed of velvet, lay a miniature yellow rose bud, not more than an inch in length. It was just at the point where the petals were beginning to unfurl.

“Oh,” she breathed. “It’s beautiful! Is it… is it…”

“Real? Yes. My mother grows them,” Draco explained. “She’s got a whole bush of them in the conservatory. One end of it is sort of a greenhouse where she putters about with plants. Anyway, this rosebush has been Charmed so its flowers bloom continuously and always stay fresh and perfect, never needing light or water, even once they’re picked. And they smell wonderful! I just thought… you know… you might like to have one.”

Hermione bent her head and sniffed. A rich, heady bouquet filled her nostrils, sweeter than the rarest and most expensive perfume.

“It’s divine!” she exclaimed. “Thank you so much—I love it!” Throwing her arms around him, she hugged him tightly, and Draco knew that pinching one of Narcissa’s enchanted, miniature roses was worth whatever trouble he might find himself in later, if it were discovered. He doubted it would be. As it was, there were far too many blossoms on the bush for her to keep track of each one individually. And anyway, he was certain she wouldn’t begrudge him one in the name of romance. Well, except if she knew to whom he’d given it, of course.

They went to sit in the window seat, Hermione patting the cushion beside her. From that vantage point, Draco had a view of the entire bedroom, and now he was able to get a good look at the rest of it. Just as in her room in Staircase 2, there were framed photos—on the bookshelves, on her white-painted desk and chest of drawers, even some loose photos and ticket stubs crammed into the frame of the mirror. A dried garland of flowers with satin ribbons trailing down was hooked over the top corner of the mirror as well. Another photo—a moving one, this time, of her standing between Harry and Ron, their arms linked together and all three grinning—stood on her bedside table. It looked to have been taken years before, maybe as early as second year.

Looking at it, Draco felt a sudden, sharp pang of regret prick at him. Lost opportunities, stupid choices, pointless cruelties, wasted time. Years wasted that could have been so much more productive, more fulfilling, happier in a genuine sense. He studied the smiling faces in the picture, the three of them turning to look at each other, as secure in their friendship as if they’d been in the same family, and then the regret eroded into sudden anger that was raw, black, unreasoning. Years wasted following the wrong path and blindly accepting ideas just because they had one’s parents’ brand on them. Damn their filthy, poisonous ideas. Damn Lucius, especially, for dragging him down along with them!

“Draco? Draco, are you all right?” Hermione’s voice, hesitant and worried, seemed to be coming from very far away.

He came back to himself with a small shudder.

“What? Oh—sorry! Yes, I’m… I’m okay.”

“You were a million miles away just now! What were you thinking about?” She reached out and ran her hand gently over the back of his, closing her fingers around it. Her eyes were wide with concern. He could only imagine what he must have looked like a moment earlier.

Covering her hand with his free one, he managed a shaky smile and sighed.

“Just some old ghosts, Granger.”
Before Hermione could reply, Claire’s voice floated up the stairs, calling them down to dinner, and Draco breathed an inward sigh of relief. He had been caught by the blackness that had materialised so abruptly when he had looked at that photo. He hadn’t realised that it was so close to the surface now. It never had been before.

The dining room table was elegantly set with a peach-coloured, damask tablecloth and matching napkins, and a service of cream stoneware with the delicate look of eggshells. A bouquet of hothouse flowers graced the centre in a cut-crystal vase, and lit candles glowed in matching candlesticks on either side. The Pinot Noir Draco had brought waited in the graceful, glass decanter on the sideboard, and now Richard poured a glass for everyone and handed them round.

To…” he began, raising his glass, and everyone followed suit. “To good food and good company,” he exclaimed, “and to continued success at uni for both of you!”

“To good food and good company, and to continued success at uni for both of you!” Claire enthused, and they all touched glasses.

The Pinot Noir Draco had brought waited in the graceful, glass decanter on the sideboard, and now Richard poured a glass for everyone and handed them round.

The two women disappeared into the kitchen and Richard turned to Draco, leaning back in his chair. He took a sip of his wine and sighed, satisfied.

“Fine wine, absolutely excellent. Thank you for bringing it. I happen to be partial to a good, full-bodied red, and this one is superb.”

“My father has been collecting for years,” Draco replied, swirling the wine in his glass. “He’s taught me a little bit over the years, but I’m afraid I don’t have quite the interest or the passion for it that he does.”

“Ah, well, perhaps in time. You’re still very young. Ah!” Richard’s face lit up as the door to the kitchen swung open and Claire reappeared, carrying a large platter. On it was a succulent, pecan-encrusted baked salmon in a butter-brown sugar-Dijon mustard sauce. Hermione was right behind her with a plate of twice-baked jacket potatoes bubbling with garlic butter and parmesan, and a bowl of new peas. A large green salad, tossed with walnuts, almonds, tomatoes, herbed feta cheese, croutons, and sultanas, completed the meal. It was truly a feast, and Draco goggled at the sumptuousness of it, all made without the help of servants.

“Did… did you cook all this yourself?” he asked hesitantly, hoping he wouldn’t offend with a naïve or inadvertently insulting question.

Claire laughed, not in the least offended. In fact, she seemed pleased. “Why yes, Draco, I did. Or actually, that’s not strictly true. Hermione helped quite a bit.”

He looked at her, his eyebrows raised in a question, and she grinned at him sideways, her own eyes merry. “Right, Mum,” she laughed. “I did the salad. Very tricky.”

“And you made the jacket potatoes, don’t forget,” Claire reminded her. “And lovely they are, too.”

“Well, no matter who did what, this meal is magnificent!” Richard said heartily, forking up a bite of the tender fish. “Delicious!”

For a time, nobody said much of anything as forks were plied and the meal washed down with several glasses each of the wine. Eventually, conversation resumed, touching on politics, local neighbourhood gossip, news of old friends of Hermione’s who were away at university as well and newly home for the holidays, and family stories that had everybody roaring.
Coffee was served, along with what was truly the pièce de résistance: a beautiful, densely rich chocolate ganache cake that made Draco’s head swim with its luscious decadence. Immediately a certain visit to a chocolate shop came to mind, and he slanted a quick look at Hermione, who smiled to herself, refusing to look him in the eye.

“You know, Hermione insisted on this cake in particular, Draco,” Claire confided. “She said you’re a serious chocolate lover.”

“Mum!” Hermione blushed furiously. ‘You weren’t supposed to tell!’

Draco looked at her and winked. “Granger,” he chided gently, “you said your mother was a great cook, but you didn’t tell me she could bake like this! It’s amazing. May I have another slice, please, Claire?”

The meal finished, everybody lingered over a final cup of coffee, and over Hermione’s wails of protest (“Absolutely no naked-baby photos, Dad!”), Richard pulled out a family photo album, which Draco looked at eagerly. There she was, a much younger version of herself but still with that wild head of curly hair and the determined, clear-eyed look on her face. He had to grin.

One photo drew Draco’s attention back several times. In it, Hermione was perhaps four years old, and she was sitting on a small plastic chair in the back garden, a flower in her hand, the shot showing her in profile. She wore a bright yellow sundress and she was studying the flower, a pink rose, with great seriousness as if to memorise every detail. Her lids were lowered, her long lashes sweeping her cheeks, and her hair cascaded in riotous abandon over her shoulders. A light breeze must have been blowing at the time, because tendrils of hair had lifted off her shoulders and rippled just above, frozen forever in the moment. There was something inexpressibly endearing about the picture. He wished suddenly that he could have it, just slip it into his pocket. He flushed, thinking about that, and raised his eyes to see Claire looking at him, an odd smile on her face.

“Lovely, isn’t it. It’s my favourite,” she said softly. He nodded, and for just a moment, their eyes met and he saw a curious warmth in hers that was startling.

The mantel clock struck ten, and Hermione’s father stretched and stood. “Well, my dears, you will have to excuse me, I’m afraid. Early surgery tomorrow. You too, Claire,” he remonstrated. “We’d best get to the washing up.”

“I’ll help,” Hermione said immediately and before he knew it, Draco found himself carrying things to the kitchen as well. It was curiously pleasant, Draco thought, doing something that, all his life, house-elves had taken complete charge of nearly invisibly. He made several trips, carrying the cake platter and the thermal coffee pot, and coming back again to help with the dishes.

“Right, we’ll take care of the rest,” Claire told them. “You two relax.”

“Actually, I was hoping to take Hermione out for a little while, if that’s all right.” Draco looked quickly at Hermione, who smiled, and then at her parents. They nodded their assent. Shyly, he moved forward a bit.

“It’s been… wonderful,” he said. “Honestly. The nicest evening I can remember in ages. And dinner was amazing. Thank you so much for inviting me.” He held out his hand.

Richard shook it warmly, but Claire would have none of that. She gathered him in a quick hug, and then released him, still holding his hand. Her gesture was a surprise, and, as before, moved him in a way he couldn’t quite define.
“We’re delighted you could make it. We always enjoy spending time with Hermione’s friends. You’ll come again, I hope, won’t you?” Claire smiled and gave his hand a squeeze before letting it go.

Draco assured her that he would, and both Grangers bade him goodnight.

“Not too late, Hermione,” Richard reminded her as she and Draco disappeared out the back door into the garden. The door shut behind them and Richard turned to his wife, now with a dish towel over her shoulder as she began the washing up.

“Hmm…” he mused. “I don’t know, Claire… I’ve a feeling about that boy.”

“Good or bad?” she joked. “Open the dishwasher for me, love, won’t you? My hands are all soapy.”

He bent to comply and then straightened. “Oh, good. Definitely good. I think our initial instincts two weeks ago were spot on.” He absentely handed her one of the large platters. “Have to keep an eye on this one, I think…”

Outside, Hermione flashed a quick glance at Draco as they buttoned up their jackets, wrapped scarves round their necks, and pulled on gloves against the cold. “Where are we going anyway?”

“Oh—well—I was thinking… that is… I hoped we could go back to my house for a bit. My parents are out tonight. We’d have the house to ourselves. Not that we would need to go anywhere but my room, of course,” he added hastily, and then pulled her to him in a quick embrace. “Will you? It’s been—I don’t know… seems like ages.”

He lowered his head to her ear and nibbled on it. “Ages,” he whispered, his warm breath stirring the curling tendrils around her neck. She shivered involuntarily and nodded yes.

Only the fitful, dying light from the hearth illuminated the room as Draco and Hermione, holding hands, appeared in its centre. Its flickering orange glow threw the room into sharp relief, casting dreamlike light and deep shadows on the tall chest of drawers, the capacious desk and leather chair, and the bookshelves, with their odd marriage of Hogwarts texts, well-thumbed paperbacks, tagged books Hermione recognised as coming from the sale tables in Blackwell’s, and of course, texts he was currently reading for the new term. There was a strange sort of comfort in the sight of those shelves, so very familiar and similar to her own.

A quick bit of wandless candle magic and several candles on the desk, already burned halfway down to stubby, mushroom shapes sitting in pools of hardened wax, sprang to life, their flame points betraying the slight movement of air currents. She noticed his ink pot and quill, and thought about all the letters he’d sent lately. Here was where he’d written them all. And that, she thought, looking at the tall casement window, must have been where he’d sent Paladin off on his way to her own window, so many miles away.

Protruding into the room’s centre was a formidable and luxurious canopied bed, its silk hangings tied back with heavy, tasselled cord. His bed.

The house was silent, the door to his room closed. Nobody was at home save the staff of house-elves, and they were below stairs, far from this shadowy, quiet room.

Just to be sure, however, Draco did quick Silencing and Locking charms, and then turned to Hermione, who suddenly seemed very fragile indeed, standing in the middle of the large room, one hand on the back of the desk chair.

“Um…” she began, her voice very small. “Where’s the loo, please?”
“Oh!” Draco exhaled sharply. Suddenly, he felt unaccountably nervous, more so, even, than when he’d stood in the Grangers’ back garden debating about whether to go through with the visit or not. Having her here, in his own room… knowing how badly he’d wanted this and aware of how tense she’d become despite her efforts to be brave (he could feel it in her grip as he’d held her hand), remembering what had taken place the last time she’d been under this roof, as no doubt she was doing too, at this moment…

Had it been a mistake to bring her here? Was it too soon?

There was a gentle tugging at his sleeve.

“Um… Malfoy… the loo?”

“Oh, sorry! It’s just there,” he pointed, shrugging out of his jacket and scarf. “Let me take your coat.”

She slipped hers off and handed it to him, and he tossed both over the back of the desk chair.

The door to the en-suite closed behind her and then there was silence again for a time. Draco sat down on the small sofa that faced the fireplace, and rested his chin in his palm. He watched the flames as they danced and rippled, the dry wood sending out small, crackling sparks.

*She’s been in there for an awfully long time.*

He waited another minute. He could hear the second hand of the mantel clock moving through its rounds, ticking sluggishly, relentlessly, each second seeming to drag.

*What in the name of all the gods is she doing in there?*

Finally he could stand it no longer. Springing up from the sofa, he went to the door of the en-suite.

“Granger, you okay in there?”

No answer.

He knocked then and pressed his ear to the door.

There was just the faintest sound, a cross between a sigh, a hiccough, and a sob.

“Hermione! Open the door, please.”

Another few agonising seconds passed, and finally he could hear the lock turning, and then the door slid open an inch. He pushed it open the rest of the way and found Hermione sitting on the toilet lid.

She looked up at him, her eyes and nose red and watery, and then gazed down at her lap, folding her hands.

Gods. It was too soon.

“Hermione, I’m so sorry! Please for--”

Instantly she was on her feet, her arms tightly around him, her face buried in his jumper. “Shut up, Malfoy! It’s… Don’t you see? I had to do this!” she cried fiercely. “This is a good thing! I’m not upset with you, you great plonker. I’m just…” She sighed heavily and sat back down. “Upset.”

Turning her tear-stained face to him, she gave him a wobbly smile. “You didn’t do anything to say sorry for. I wanted to come. I needed to, don’t you see? If we’d never met again, never become friends, this… this thing in my past would always have been there to haunt me. It would always have
had power over me. I have nightmares sometimes…” She shuddered. “Your aunt… Bellatrix…”

“I know,” Draco said dully. “I was there. Remember?” A terrible wrenching twisted his gut. He knew about nightmares. And this… this was the thing for which he’d been trying to atone for the past two months, in every feeble way he could think of. But he could not take away what happened, nor could he take himself out of the memory for her. He had been there. He had seen. And worst of all, he had been powerless to stop it.

“Yes,” she said, and the word was cast out to drift, untouched. And then, “Hold me?”

Incredulous, he went to her, falling to his knees beside her and gathering her in his arms. She laid her head on his shoulder and he could feel the dampness of her cheek against his neck.

“I’m sorry, Hermione… I’m sorry…” he whispered again and again into her hair.

“I know, baby… Don’t, please… there was nothing you could have done…”

Hermione clung to him fiercely as slowly he stood, lifting her up, kissing her hair, her face, wherever he could reach. She wrapped her legs around his waist, still crying, and he carried her to the bed and sat down. She was now in his lap, her ankles still locked behind his back, and he rocked her like a baby, rocking himself as well.

“I hate that something hurt you so badly here, in my house,” he whispered. “I hated watching what that sadistic bitch did and not being able to stop her. I hated hearing you scream that way, seeing her curse you over and over. I heard your screams in my head for months afterwards. I was glad Dobby dropped that chandelier. I almost hoped it would kill me and just blot everything out. I didn’t want to do it anymore.” He paused a moment, his throat closing, and swallowed hard, his fingers tangled in her soft hair.

“I was glad when Weasley got you out of here.”

He could feel her warm breath against his neck as she spoke. “And now it’s over. It’s in the past. We’re okay, both of us. Right?”

He nodded, less sure than she seemed to be, but happy she’d said it nevertheless.

“Draco…” Her voice was soft, nearly a whisper.

He pulled back just enough to see her face. Her eyes were luminous.

“Make love to me. Please.”

In that moment, his heart swelled and he was certain it would burst, full and unfettered, from his chest. Gently, he laid her down on his pillows and lowered himself to lie alongside her, his fingers smoothing strands of her hair away from her face and then tracing paths from her forehead to her chin.

He found he needed to kiss every part of her face and he began with her eyes, dropping soft kisses on each lid and then on the cheeks beneath, and then moving down slowly, his lips tenderly caressing her cheeks and jaw and chin, finally reaching her mouth.

Time might have stopped altogether, for all he knew. There was only Hermione and this moment, and her warm, soft mouth welcoming his. His lips moved over hers, exploring their taste and texture slowly, carefully, reverently, drawing them in, pressing, tasting with his tongue. He could go on kissing her forever, he thought. There was a hint of chocolate and he smiled against her mouth at the memory. *Hermione insisted on this cake in particular, Draco*…
She sighed and turned to him, pulling him closer, her hands stroking his back, his hips, his bum, and then slipping under his jumper, tugging on its hem to lift it out of her way.

“Help me,” she said, and he reached over his head and pulled the jumper off.

“Mmm, nice,” she sighed, laying her cheek against the warm, bare skin of his chest and pressing kisses there whilst lightly stroking from his collarbone to his smooth, taut abdomen. Then she sat up and raised her arms high overhead, looking rather like a little girl being undressed before her bath.

Smiling, he peeled her jumper up and over her head, tossing it aside, and then swiftly, needing to see and touch all of her, he unhooked her bra and drew it down. It was a matter of a moment before he’d dispensed with both her jeans and then his own.

Skin to skin, then. He had been missing this extraordinary sensation of wholeness he had whenever he lay with Hermione. It had been just thirteen days since the last time, and yet it seemed so much longer.

Her breasts were fragrant and warm as he nestled happily between them, stroking their dusky peaks, lightly sucking and nipping and then soothing with tender kisses and strokes of his tongue.

Ah, gods, how had he gone this long? She was like a drug. He needed more, and so he moved down to insinuate himself between her legs. The scent of her growing arousal was strong, and he moved closer to its source. Only a thin scrap of pale, silky material separated him from what he craved. But he would not rush.

Gently, he spread her legs further apart and began a tantalisingly light stroking of her inner thighs, first one side and then the other.

Oh Merlin, that… that was wonderful. She arched her back and strained to part her legs further, inviting him to touch her there. But he refrained, merely continuing that maddeningly delicious stroking, getting closer and closer until finally, finally he bent to press his tongue to her damp knickers just there.

“Off! Take them off!” she hissed, and he laughed softly, hooking a finger in the waistband and drawing them down until they dangled at her ankles and she kicked them inelegantly away.

Draco Malfoy was by nature a very sensual person in all respects, and pleasuring a woman had always been one of life’s true delights for him. But never in his prior experience had he felt this enjoyment as keenly, nor been more richly and completely satisfied, than with Hermione. Her sensitivity and heightened responsiveness drove him to try for ever more intense gratification each time they were together. Tonight was no exception.

“Oh! Slide down a bit, love,” he murmured, “and bend your legs at the knee.”

As she did, he slipped his hands beneath her bum, raising her hips slightly, and brought his mouth down to her most private, sacred place. She could feel the currents of his breath warming her, tickling her, and the thrumming deep inside her that had already begun now intensified to a pulsing, insistent throbbing.

He placed a gentle kiss on the soft outer flesh just over the slit, and then, with his tongue, parted her like the petals of a flower and began to explore. He probed delicately, caressing, curling around the small nub of highly sensitive tissue and flicking at it lightly, dipping inside once again, spreading the cream of her arousal and then licking it clean.

The sensation of being about to incinerate from within was familiar now and yet still so new to
Hermione. She clamped down on Draco with her knees, holding him to her tightly as the first wave rushed to take her over.

A chesty moan escaped her, rising to a near scream of his name, and she rode it out, his tongue still inside of her as she clenched and spasmed around him.

“Oh! Oh gods!” she cried. “Draco!”

And finally it was over; the last shuddering burst had spent itself and now she lay utterly boneless against the satin pillows, staring up at the canopy overhead.

Draco smiled as he looked up at her, pressing a kiss on her lower abdomen, and then moved himself up to stretch out alongside her.

“Wow,” she sighed happily, twining her fingers in his. “That was great.”

“Oh?” he said, feigning insult. “Just ‘great’? Is that the best you can do? What’s happened to that OED-sized vocabulary of yours, Granger? What about “fantastic,’ ‘brilliant,’ ‘amazing’?”

“All that…” She paused and looked up at him innocently, her lips twitching. “And… really great too.”

“That’ll do, I suppose, for now…” he trailed off, his attention diverted by the sudden awareness of her hand around his cock as she continued to gaze up at him, a slight smile on her lips.

Before he knew it, she had pushed him onto his back and begun to kiss him very slowly, all the while stroking him with rhythmic precision: long, sinuous strokes combined with occasional light, glancing flicks across the weeping head. The combined assault of her tongue in his mouth and her warm fingers doing wonderful things to his penis made his head spin.

Just when he felt he really couldn’t take another minute of it, she pulled away from his mouth and then there was a sudden, wet, tickling caress to his balls, which began clenching almost instantly, so nearly there was he. One lick, two, her tongue curling wickedly around him, and then she took the length of him into her mouth as deeply as she could manage, her hand replacing her tongue on his balls.

His legs began to tremble with the intensity of his pleasure. Only a stroke or two and he knew it would be over. Reaching down, he pulled her up to his chest, sliding himself back into a semi-sitting position against the headboard, and held her tightly, one hand in buried in her hair.

“Why did you stop me?” she asked, her eyes wide with surprise and confusion. “Was I doing it wrong?”

He sighed and smoothed a stray curl away from her face. “No, no, it was wonderful… but I was too close… I didn’t want to come that way. I want…”

She smiled. “Okay.” With that, she sat up so that she was straddling him, and gave him one last, quick stroke before lifting herself and sliding slowly down on him until he was buried inside her as deeply as he could fit. She wiggled about for a moment, getting comfortable, and he moaned with the exquisite friction of that small movement.

“I find I like it this way,” she grinned. “Do you?”

He could only nod dumbly.
And then slowly, she began moving herself up and down, looking for a rhythm, her curls flying in wild disarray around her shoulders. He gripped her waist with both hands at first, drawing her down onto him deeply as he thrust his own hips up to meet hers. Then he reached for her breasts, cupping and squeezing them in turn, rolling his thumbs over her hard, little nipples until she gasped.

“Oh… don’t stop, Draco… that feels…”

“Great?” He couldn’t resist teasing.


He knew she was very nearly there once again when her breathing became shallow and almost constricted, and she threw back her head. One quick tweak to her clit from him, and it was all over. With a final cry, she shattered around him, and that was all it took to send him over along with her, his own explosive climax continuing to empty his seed into her in roiling surges.

When she collapsed on top of him, both of them breathing hard, no words were said for several long minutes. Finally, Hermione raised her head and looked down at him. His eyes were still closed and in repose, his face was utterly relaxed and open. She leaned down and kissed the tip of his nose lightly.

“It was so much more than great, Malfoy,” she said softly.

His eyes opened and he looked at her for a moment, then pulled her back down to cuddle against him. Sighing contentedly, he tightened his arms around her. His muscles felt like butter, warmed and completely uncoiled. He hadn’t felt this utterly relaxed in a very long time.

“Thank you for tonight,” she continued, her cheek against his chest. “I’m so glad you brought me. For lots of reasons.” She paused, and then added, “My parents really like you, y’know.”

Draco grinned. He’d suspected as much, but it was still a relief to hear her say it. “You think?”

“Yes, silly, couldn’t you tell?” She giggled, dropping an affectionate kiss on his warm, smooth skin. “I think they might just want to adopt you!”

“I wouldn’t mind that! More of your mum’s fantastic cooking then!”

“You can have that anyway, whenever you want,” she replied, and then flushed. “I mean…”

“Whenever I want, eh? You don’t think they’d get a bit fed up, having me hanging about all the time?” He gave her a small, tickling pinch.

Hermione squirmed a bit, laughing. “Hey! Stop that! And as for your question, Dad would probably love having you around. You two could hang out together and talk rugby! Oh, I forgot—you don’t know rugby. Well, he could teach you, and you could explain about Quidditch. I’ve always been complete rubbish at it whenever I’ve tried.”

She glanced at her watch then, and regretfully sat up. “Oh, Merlin, it’s getting late! Nearly one. I suppose I ought to go. Mum and Dad don’t wait up for me, not officially, but I know they don’t sleep well until I’m home. And they’ve got early surgery hours tomorrow.” She leaned down to smooth a stray lock of pale hair from Draco’s forehead. “I wish I could stay with you.”

Draco lay back against an arm folded behind his head. He caught her hand and pressed a kiss to its palm and then sighed. “I wish you could too.” But we both know what a disaster that would be.
Not long after she’d gone, he moved himself to the centre of the bed and ran his hand over the sheet where she’d lain, tracing the indentations, feeling the slight warmth that remained. He lowered his head to the pillows and sniffed. There was the faintest scent of apricots.

He hugged the pillow to himself, his last waking thought one that would give him serious pause when he remembered it upon waking the next morning. For now, the comfort of it simply sent him to a sound, dreamless sleep.

* 

The locked door and a complete absence of sound had not struck Narcissa as odd when she’d tried Draco’s doorknob ninety minutes earlier, after she and Lucius had returned home from their engagement. She’d shrugged, gone to the master bedchamber, and begun to prepare for bed. Passing his room again later, on her way to the library for some new bedtime reading, she tried his knob again, thinking to wish him goodnight. It was still locked.

It wasn’t until later still, when the room was dark and she’d turned over on her side and closed her eyes, that the thought occurred to her. Her son never slept with a locked door. Ever since earliest childhood, nightmares would plague him from time to time, coupled with a fear of being trapped, and he’d always wanted the door unlocked whilst he slept.

Silently, she rose from bed and glided down the darkened hallway until she reached Draco’s door. She tried the knob. It would not turn. She put an ear to the door. Deadly quiet.

Why would the door still be steadfastly locked? Only one reason occurred to her, and it was the very one she most wanted to avoid entertaining.

TBC
The Grangers’ home in Watford

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to my two trusty betas, mister_otter and kazfeist, on whom I rely for all sorts of stuff, not least of which is emotional support and gut-level feedback. Thanks and huge hugs to you both!

Thanks, of course, to moonjameskitten, for her superb banner!

Thanks to the lovely people at HP Britglish, for invaluable help with the most minute details imaginable, and to Robin J., a good friend from the UK who has detailed knowledge of Oxford as well, having been a student there, and very generously offered me some suggestions as well.

The OED—The Oxford English Dictionary. One of its contributing editors was JRR Tolkien.

The house I chose for the Grangers actually is in Watford, Hertfordshire, outside of London.

The chapter title comes from a great song of the same name by Danny Kirwan of Fleetwood Mac, off their album Kiln House.
Here are the recipes Claire and Hermione used for the meal they served when Draco came to dinner. I thought it would be fun to share them!

Bon Appétit!

**Pecan-Encrusted Salmon**

**INGREDIENTS:**
One salmon filet  
¼ cup Dijon mustard  
2 cups chopped pecans  
2 tbsp melted butter  
1 tbsp brown sugar, salt and freshly cracked pepper

**SALMON PREP:**
If the salmon has not been de-scaled, then de-scale the salmon. Lay the salmon out on a Sil-Pat-lined baking sheet.

1. Sprinkle the sugar evenly over the salmon.
2. Brush the Dijon mustard onto the salmon.
3. Sprinkle salt and pepper onto the salmon
4. In a bowl, combine the chopped pecans and butter. Stir to coat the pecans with the butter.
5. Once the pecans are coated, sprinkle them onto the salmon and press them down firmly.
6. Bake salmon in a 200 C-degree oven (Gas Mark 6, or 400 degrees F), for about 15 minutes or until it flakes easily with a fork.

http://kutv.com/food/local_story_353121853.html
Twice-Baked Potatoes

*Note: Hermione used garlic butter rather than plain butter, and coarsely shredded parmesan cheese instead of cheddar cheese.

INGREDIENTS:

4 large baking potatoes
8 rashers (slices) bacon
8 oz. (1 cup) sour cream
4 oz. (1/2 cup) milk
2 oz. (4 tablespoons) butter
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper
8 oz. (1 cup) shredded Cheddar cheese, divided
8 green onions, sliced, divided

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat oven to 180 degrees C or Gas Mark 4 (350 degrees F).
Bake potatoes in preheated oven for 1 hour.
Meanwhile, place bacon in a large, deep skillet. Cook over medium high heat until evenly brown.
Drain, crumble and set aside. When potatoes are done allow them to cool for 10 minutes. Slice potatoes in half lengthwise and scoop the flesh into a large bowl; save skins. To the potato flesh add sour cream, milk, butter, salt, pepper, 1/2 cup cheese and 1/2 the green onions. Mix with a hand mixer until well blended and creamy. Spoon the mixture into the potato skins. Top each with remaining cheese, green onions and bacon.
Bake for another 15 minutes.
For a tall cake, use three 7-inch round pans. Use three 8-inch pans for a slightly lower cake. Lindt and Ghirardelli are best for this particular cake. Active time: 90 minutes; start to finish: 6 hrs. Servings: Makes 16 servings.

INGREDIENTS:
For cake layers:

6 oz. (3/4 cup) boiling water
4 oz. (1/2 cup) unsweetened cocoa powder (not Dutch-process)
1 teaspoon instant-espresso powder
4 oz.(1/2) cup whole milk
1 teaspoon vanilla
16 oz. (2 cups) plain (all-purpose) flour
1 1/4 teaspoons baking soda
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 sticks (1 cup) unsalted butter, softened
16 oz. (2 cups) packed dark brown sugar
4 large eggs

For ganache filling and glaze:
1 pint (2 1/2 cups) double (heavy) cream
20 oz fine-quality bittersweet chocolate (not unsweetened)
Finely chop the above in a food processor.

PREPARATION:
Make cake layers:

Preheat oven to 180 degrees C or Gas Mark 4 (350 degrees F).
Butter 3 (7- or 8-inch, 2-inch-deep) round cake pans and line bottoms with rounds of wax or parchment paper. Butter paper and dust pans with flour, knocking out excess.

Whisk together water, cocoa, and espresso powder until smooth, then whisk in milk and vanilla.

Sift together flour, baking soda, and salt.

Beat together butter and brown sugar in a large bowl with an electric mixer at high speed until fluffy, then add eggs 1 at a time, beating well after each addition. Add flour mixture and cocoa mixture in batches, beginning and ending with flour and mixing at low speed until just combined.

Divide batter among pans (about 2 1/3 cups per pan), smoothing tops. Bake in middle of oven until a tester comes out clean, 30 to 35 minutes for 7-inch pans or 20 to 25 minutes for 8-inch. Cool in pans on a rack 30 minutes, then invert onto racks, remove paper, and cool completely.

Make ganache while cakes bake: Bring cream to a simmer in a 3- to 4-quart saucepan and remove from heat. Whisk in chocolate until smooth. Transfer ganache to a bowl and chill, covered, stirring occasionally, until thickened but spreadable, about 4 hours. (If ganache becomes too thick, let stand at room temperature until slightly softened.)

Assemble cake: Arrange 1 layer on a cake stand or plate and spread 2/3 cup ganache evenly over it. Top with another cake layer and 2/3 cup ganache, spreading evenly, then third cake layer. (Chill
ganache if necessary to keep at a spreadable consistency.) Chill cake until ganache filling is firm, about 1 hour. Keep remaining ganache at a spreadable consistency, chilling when necessary. Spread a thin layer of ganache over top and sides of cake to seal in crumbs, then chill 30 minutes. Spread remaining ganache evenly over top and sides of cake.

Cook’s notes:

• Cake layers may be made 1 day ahead, cooled completely, then chilled, wrapped well in plastic wrap.
• Ganache may be made 1 day ahead and chilled, covered. Let stand at room temperature 2 to 3 hours to soften to a spreadable consistency.
• This cake can also be made in two 8-inch, 2-inch-deep round cake pans. Split layers horizontally, then use 1/2 cup ganache between layers.
• Assembled cake keeps, covered and chilled, three days. Makes 16 servings.

http://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/105133

Chocolate Ganache Cake

Now is the solstice of the year.
Winter is the glad song that you hear.
Seven maids move in seven time.
Have the lads up ready in a line.

Ring out these bells.
Ring out, ring solstice bells.
Ring solstice bells.

Join together 'neath the mistletoe,
by the holy oak whereon it grows.
Seven druids dance in seven time.
Sing the song the bells call, loudly chiming.

Ring out these bells.
Ring out, ring solstice bells.
Ring solstice bells.

Praise be to the distant sister sun,
joyful as the silver planets run.
Seven maids move in seven time.
Sing the song the bells call, loudly chiming.

Ring out these bells.
Ring out, ring solstice bells.
Ring solstice bells.
Ring on, ring out.
Ring on, ring out.

"Ring Out Solstice Bells"
from “Songs from the Wood”
--Jethro Tull

20 December
Thursday

It had been a whole week since Hermione had been here. A somewhat harried week in which Draco had felt his mother’s, and to a lesser degree, his father’s, eyes studying him closely for any sort of a sign.

Sod it all—he had no intention of giving even an inch on this thing. Let them scrutinise him all they pleased. They could keep a running tally of each time he wiped his nose, for all he cared. There was no way he would tell them whom he was seeing. Not until he was ready.

He really did have to give himself a well-deserved pat on the back.

It had begun the very morning after his evening with Hermione and her parents. He’d come down to breakfast, shuffling in at just past nine in his pyjamas and dressing gown, yawning and playfully cracking his knuckles just to annoy his mother. She was alone, sitting at one end of the long mahogany table, Lucius having left for his usual day’s activities as president and CEO of Malfoy Enterprises, half an hour before.

As Draco came in, Narcissa looked up at him and her gaze became curiously fixed, her eyes not leaving his face. Her expression, however, remained inscrutable. She seemed to be studying him for… what, exactly?

The fine hairs on the back of his neck stood up suddenly and he shuddered. Generally, if something were on her mind, his mother came out with it. It was much more his father’s style to keep silent and watchful, never letting on about what he was thinking, until he’d gathered enough evidence to spring a trap. He was far more gifted at being devious than his wife was, though lately it seemed she’d been holding her own rather admirably.

She watched Draco, and along with speculative curiosity, her clear blue eyes almost seemed to invite a confidence if he wanted to share one.
He didn’t.

“ ‘Morning, Mother,’” he said with exaggerated cheeriness. “Sleep well?”

That question went over brilliantly. No, I did not, you ungrateful boy.

“Yes, darling, very well indeed. And you?” She smiled brightly at him as she spooned some bilberry jam from the small, cut-glass bowl, spreading it on her butter-drenched crumpet.

“Best night’s sleep I’ve had in ages,” he said with a lazy grin, and he stretched luxuriantly, cat-like, before ducking his head for a first bracing gulp of tea: a good, strong cup of Earl Grey, his favourite.

Narcissa bit her tongue before the sharp-edged retort that was on its tip came tumbling out. She couldn’t afford to be making unfounded accusations based merely on a mother’s gut instinct. Instead, she had a sip of her own tea and looked brightly at her son, busy attacking an omelette with relish.

“Did you… have a pleasant evening with your… friend?”

Draco nodded, his mouth full of eggs and cheese. “Mmm.”

“And… did you get in late? Your father and I arrived home at half past eleven.”

What the bloody hell was she playing at with this question? She knew perfectly well that he’d already got home by that time. She’d tried the doorknob the first time just after that. And again at just past midnight, and a third time close to an hour later, just before Hermione had left. Merely because she couldn’t hear anything coming from inside his room didn’t mean he hadn’t noticed the knob being very quietly turned. Fortunately, Hermione had not.

“Yes, I got in very late indeed. Didn’t want to disturb you. It was…” As long as he was lying, he might as well make it a good one. “It was close to two, I reckon.”

Narcissa’s eyebrows shot up and she nearly choked on her tea.

Draco bit back a grin and turned resolutely back to his eggs and toast. That ought to end this line of questioning. Full stop.

And so it did. She knew—and he knew—that he was lying through his teeth. But there was no way she could challenge him about it without revealing her larger agenda, and that she was not prepared to do, not just yet.

He’d been in his room, and she would have bet every Galleon in Gringotts that he hadn’t been alone. And there wasn’t a single thing she could do to prove it.

* *

It had been a whole, long week since he’d seen Hermione. Too long, Draco reckoned. He would have to rectify that situation.

He’d finished breakfast and now sat on his bed, chin in hand, an open text in front of him: Lennard’s Poetry Handbook. Ordinarily, it was something he enjoyed, poetry being an area of literature that he had found truly moved him, but today, it was all he could do to plod through a paragraph before he had the urge to throw down the book.
Right. It really was a simple matter of academic survival. If he didn’t contact Granger immediately and set up another date, he’d never be able to keep his mind on his reading, and then he’d start Hilary term abysmally unprepared and as a result, he’d fall behind, and then the entire term would be bugged.

So then. When and where? He thought it over as he drew some parchment out of his desk drawer and dipped the quill into the inkpot.

22 December
Saturday
Winter Solstice

At precisely two in the afternoon, the hearth in the storeroom at the back of The Goddess and The Green Man in Glastonbury saw some sudden activity, when first a young, blond wizard and then, ninety seconds later, a pretty, young witch materialised and stepped out from the green flames that had shot up from nothing a moment before.

“Hi,” Draco said softly, and grinned.

“Hello yourself,” Hermione smiled back.

And then, as one, they moved into a quiet embrace.

“Really missed you,” Draco whispered into her hair, not certain she’d heard or even that he’d wanted her to hear. He felt oddly vulnerable, suddenly. It was one thing to write it in a letter. It was another thing entirely to say it.

Hermione, meanwhile, had laid her head on his shoulder, her eyes peacefully closed. Now, reluctantly, she stepped back.

“Well, I suppose we should get going. We didn’t come to Glastonbury to spend the afternoon in a storeroom, did we?” She gave a light, little laugh.

“Suppose not,” he agreed. “Right, then, come on.” Taking her hand, he led her out into the main area of the shop.

Almost immediately, both of them were drawn to particular aisles.

“Look,” he said over his shoulder, as she hung back to look at a book that had caught her eye. “I need about ten or fifteen minutes here. I see something I might like to get for my mother.”

“Okay.” She nodded absently, and promptly lost herself in the book she’d already begun reading.

Shortly after that, they stepped out into the pale sunshine and began walking along the High Street. Less than two hours of daylight remained on this shortest day of the year. It was the Winter Solstice — Yule, Midwinter, Alban Arthuan, Mabon. A variety of ancient names for it called upon a number of inter-connecting traditions and observances. But all of them would welcome this turning of the
Wheel of the Year, and celebrate the rebirth and gradual strengthening of the sun in this time of his growth and ascendance. It was the time of Bel and Bran, Oak and Holly Kings, lords of Light and Dark, and their ages-old struggle, when the Holly King gave way and the Oak King ruled his half of the year in increasing strength. In six months’ time, the Summer Solstice would see the struggle played out once again, but with the opposite result.

There was a celebratory spirit in the air as they made their way along the main shopping street in town. Sprigs of mistletoe and holly and evergreen boughs adorned many doorways and graced shop windows, as people reminded themselves that the green of the earth merely slept now and would return as the sun grew in strength and warmed the soil, the smallest particles of living matter striving to reawaken and grow once again. Lit candles brightened many a window.

Glastonbury was a very old market town that had a dual identity and a very cleverly camouflaged one at that. By nature, it was at once the repository of a potent admixture of history, myth, fantasy, and religious associations, and as a result of all that, a huge tourist magnet. Another natural by-product of its origins—real, fantastical, and everything in between—was the very large tribe of New Age devotees drawn to the area. However, within this group was another, far older one, so well hidden as to be virtually undetectable: the region’s very ancient wizarding community had insinuated itself so successfully into the larger populace that they had all but vanished from public view. From the outside, the casual visitor couldn’t distinguish between the serious practitioners with real magic and the ones who only deluded themselves into believing they had it or wished they did. Outsiders lumped everyone together in a cheerful heap labelled “New Age,” and thus, the wizarding community had been able to live peacefully and flourish, undetected, for many years.

The town was alive with shops offering everything from a wide range of supplies for practicing witches and wizards to books on mythology, shamanism, standing stones, and other ancient mysteries of all sorts, aromatherapy products, body piercings and tattoos, crystals, Green Man plaques, candles, jewellery and swords, just to name but a few.

Strolling along the High Street was an eye-opening experience. Unlike Diagon Alley, itself one of the most blatantly quirky of magical places but hidden from Muggle eyes, Glastonbury was unabashed about its nature. Every shop front seemed to be attempting to outdo the next, to catch the eye in a proud embrace of alternative lifestyles and spiritualities and a quite open acceptance of all the most ancient of Mysteries and Magicks.

“Merlin, look over there!” he whispered, starting to point. Hermione pushed his hand down and held it.

“Not polite!” she giggled. “Where?”

“Over there,” he repeated. “That bookshop across the road. See that man, the one with the red beard? I know him! I’m certain of it! He’s a stockholder in my father’s company. I saw him at a party at the house once. Look, that woman he’s talking to… she can’t be magical, I don’t think!”

Hermione tried to look discreetly, glancing quickly and then averting her eyes. “No, she’s a Muggle, you’re right.” And then she looked again and her jaw dropped. “Hang on a minute, Malfoy—I think they might actually be married!”

It was very likely true. The couple had moved closer together and kissed quickly, flashes of wedding rings evident on both their hands as they embraced, and then disappeared inside the shop.

“Unless he’s just bonking her on the side,” Draco mused. “Even so. The way everyone mixes here… well, I’m just…”
“Gobsmacked?” Hermione laughed, and then dropped her voice. “Me too, a bit. It’s certainly
different to what we’re used to, isn’t it? I mean, if they *are* married, they must still be discreet about
the fact that he’s a wizard and all. They would have to be. I don’t suppose that any of the wizards
and witches here go round advertising that fact. Still, I know what you mean. It’s… rather nice,
really, in a way—don’t you think?”

She slanted a look up at him and smiled. Draco shook his head with a grin, still somewhat
nonplussed, and took her hand, and they set off once again.

Where to stop first? The possibilities were all tantalising. Hermione dragged Draco into Star Child
Gifts so that she could sample some of the aromatherapy products they had on offer.

“Mmm,” she grinned, pulling the stopper from a small bottle of pale amber-coloured oil and sniffing
delicately. “Vanilla. Lovely!” She thrust the vial under Draco’s nose. “Like it? Should I buy some,
do you think?”

Visions of warmed, fragrant, flavoured oil being smoothed over bare skin filled his head suddenly,
and he nodded enthusiastically. “Tell you what, Granger. Let me buy it for you. A present.”

“I think it might be more of a present for you!” she chuckled, handing the bottle to him.

“Too right!” he muttered, taking out his credit card. “Anything else you fancy? Solstice gift. My
treat.”

Twenty minutes later, they walked out with an array of scented and flavoured oils, a bottle of
cocoanut body lotion, some bubble bath made with pear extract, Hermione’s favourite apricot-
'essence shampoo, and a couple of bars of organic soap, one in honey and almond and the other in
lavender and rosemary.

“Happy Yule,” Draco said, satisfied. *I shall just have to sample a bit of that later.*

“Thank you,” Hermione sighed, squeezing his hand and reaching up to give him a quick kiss. “I love
this sort of stuff!”

Wandering off into St Johns Square, they discovered Profound Piercing. Hermione looked
mischievously at Draco.

“I’ve always wanted to get my belly button pierced, you know,” she said. “What do you think?”

“Hmm.” Draco considered it for a moment. “Might like that, actually. Me, I mean. On you.” He
looked at her. “You serious, then?”

“Well… sort of,” she admitted, and looked at him sharply. “*Should* I, do you suppose?”

He laughed and took her arm. “Yeah, why not? Go for it!” He lowered his head to whisper in her
ear. “It’ll be dead sexy!”

Before long, they were done. It hadn’t been bad at all. Draco had been fascinated by the process and
had watched avidly, whilst Hermione had screwed her eyes shut and held her breath. But it had been
over before she knew it, and cleanly done, and now she was armed with a spray bottle of purified
water/sea salt with a special fungus and bacteria-killing ingredient, which she was to apply several
times a day in addition to careful cleaning of the area and use of an aftercare lotion.

She wasn’t the only one. Draco now sported a tiny, diamond-like crystal stud in his left ear. He’d
done it on a whim, though secretly, he’d always thought it would be rather fun to have a pierced ear,
and she’d insisted on treating him to it. Fair was fair, after all.

Back in the High Street, there was so much else to look at. They wandered up and down, perusing the shop window displays, and spent time in two bookshops, both alluring. In The Psychic Piglet, Draco pulled Hermione over to the audio section where he’d been spending time, fascinated, and plonked headphones on her, so that she could also enjoy the hypnotic drumming of Mickey Hart. She closed her eyes, smiling faintly, lost in the ancient, primal syncopation. Draco watched her closely, intrigued by her response.

Eventually, they wound up in Benedict Street, drawn by the lure of Witchcraft Ltd., where they promptly lost themselves wandering amongst the robes, cauldrons, potions, wands, sets of runes and scrying mirrors for divination, all of which beckoned. Whilst Draco examined a book on megalithic Europe that had caught his eye, Hermione disappeared into another part of the shop, gathering up several items on her way to the register, and reappeared a short time later, a smugly secretive grin on her face.

Draco looked up from the book and saw the glint in her eye. “Well, what’s got you looking so bloody pleased with yourself?”

“Oh, nothing,” she sighed, idly glancing at the cover of the book he held. “I’m done here. What about you?”

“Think I’m finished too, actually.” He checked his watch. “It’s nearly half three. I’d like to go up to the Tor. You up for it, then?”

“Yes, please. We could watch the sunset from there. It would be lovely, today especially,” Hermione said softly. “Let’s go.”
A shuttle bus for the Tor left every half hour from a car park near the entrance to the famed Glastonbury Abbey. There had been posters advertising the shuttle in several shop windows. It wasn’t far, just a quick walk round the corner to Magdalene Street. The Abbey itself rose up, mysterious and beautiful in its fragmented state, surrounded by a lovely park, striking in its winter desolation. The bus engine idled as a number of interested passengers climbed aboard. It would be a mere £2.00 round trip for each of them.

They hadn’t been at the Tor long, exploring for perhaps only fifteen minutes, before the winter sun slipped down below the horizon. The late-afternoon clouds were suffused with peach and mauve and gold in fiery streaks that lit the lower horizon as the sun, now in a final blaze of power on this most brief of his days, erupted in a fireball before sinking out of sight. This mystical place, inextricably linked to centuries-old stories of the famed Isle of Avalon, was the perfect spot from which to see out the light of the Solstice sun and welcome the rising of the lady moon as she took her place in the night sky.
The Abbey ruins (photo by Rebecca Patrick)

Steps leading to the Tor (photo by Rebecca Patrick)
They stood watching the dying of the light, each with an arm around the other’s waist.

“Happy Yule, Granger,” Draco said quietly, tightening his embrace.

“Solstice blessings,” Hermione replied, resting her head against his shoulder. “I’ve had a wonderful day.’

“Me too,” he agreed, “but it doesn’t have to be over just yet, you know. I’ve an idea.”

They took the bus back down into town, and Draco led Hermione up Magdalene into Northload Street. There, at number eight, stood a quaint, whitewashed, two-storey hotel with red awnings above the windows and over the doorways.
She looked at him, a question in her eyes, and he smiled. “It’s just…I thought maybe we might book a room. Is there any way you could stop?”

“Well…” she began, thinking hard. “They do know I have a friend from college who lives not far from here. I could tell them that I rang her up and she drove in to meet us for dinner, and invited us to her house. But what about you? You’ll have to do a Floo call at least, won’t you?”

“Nope,” Draco smirked, waving his hand. “Already seen to. I told my mother this morning that I might be spending the night with a friend, the same one I saw last week. She wasn’t too pleased that I’d be away for Solstice, but…” He shrugged. This was his decision. Over the past year, he’d gradually grown used to making them for himself, and he found he rather liked it. He wasn’t about to begin backtracking now.

“Well, at least you weren’t lying, anyway,” Hermione remarked. “You sure it’s okay?” At his nod, she grinned. “Right, let’s see about that room, then. And afterwards, let’s eat! I’m starved!”

The Hawthorns offered not only rooms, but a cosy restaurant and bar with deep burgundy walls and dark ceiling beams. The specialty was ethnic cuisines, and Draco had his first ever taste of curry that evening. He wasn’t entirely sure he approved.
It had been a long day and the room looked awfully good to both of them as they finally unlocked the door and came inside for the night. Dropping his jacket and parcels, Draco launched himself onto the bed, landing in the centre with a deep sigh. He opened his arms in invitation, and Hermione plopped down beside him, snuggling into his embrace.

“Mmm,” she sighed. “This is nice…” She buried her face in his side, scrunching her nose deeply into his shirt and tickling him. He laughed, wriggling away from her for a moment, and then pulling her back in close.

Several hours later, Draco opened first one eye and then the other on a darkened, quiet room. For a moment, he had no idea where he was, and then he became aware of gentle, even breathing by his side, and a mass of soft, curly hair partly covering his chest. There it was again, that intoxicating scent of apricots. Carefully, he slid the fingers of one hand in and began a gentle massage of her scalp; sighing contentedly, she snuggled down more deeply.

Gingerly, he rolled her off his chest and onto her back, and began slowly unbuttoning her shirt, one small, pearly button at a time.

Her skin was warm and soft as he laid the flat of his hand lightly on her bare midriff beneath the bra. As quietly as possible, he leaned over and kissed her there, his lips skating in a delicate pattern over the smooth surface of her flesh. Her chest and abdomen rose and fell rhythmically.

Blessedly, the bra she wore had a front clasp, and now he carefully unhooked it and spread the bra cups to either side. Her breasts were as beautiful as he’d remembered, and as he slid down a bit so that his head was level with her chest, he wondered how he’d done without the sight, scent, feel and taste of them for an entire nine days. He was beginning to wonder how he’d manage from here on, for more than a couple of days at a time. It was becoming increasingly difficult, when all he really wanted, he found, was to have her there in his bed at night and then wake up next to her in the morning.

No doubt about it. He had it bad.

Even in sleep, her nipples were incredibly responsive to his touch. A light flick of his tongue and then another, a kiss as gossamer as a butterfly’s touch, and they were already firming. It was all he could do to hold back, keeping his touches soft and sensuous, when what he really hungered for was to take each one in his mouth and suck it hard. He longed to squeeze each breast, crush them together so that her nipples stood straight up, and then plunge his mouth down on each one, suckling and laving and burying his face in their lush sweetness. Just the thought of what he desired from her was turning his cock almost painfully hard inside his jeans.

Rolling away from her for a moment, he wriggled out of his clothes, breathing an immediate sigh of relief. She’d sighed softly at the loss of contact, and now he returned to her, slowly unzipping and then pulling down her jeans. Then it was just a matter of those little knickers, that tiny garment that was barely there as it was—a “thong,” did she call it? Whatever its name, he made short work of it, and then commenced dropping light kisses randomly on the smooth skin of her belly and upper thighs.

“Draco…” She was still half asleep, her voice soft and drowsy.
“Yes?”

“I love you.”

There was an instantaneous clenching in the pit of his stomach as a wave washed over his entire body, and its heat made him shiver. He took one breath and then another, willing his heart to stop banging uncontrollably in his chest.

Did she realise what she’d just said?

Granted, it had been said in sleep and unintentionally, but even so, it was still something she must feel. It had to have come from somewhere. In somno veritas, he thought wryly.

He’d wondered how he would feel when this moment came, for he had known for some time that for him at least, it would—had known, when he was being completely truthful with himself, that he loved her and had done for a while. The feeling had come on so gradually, so quietly. He wasn’t even certain when she’d crossed that line from Best Friend to Essential Person. But it had become clear to him in the past several weeks, since they’d left Oxford and he’d found himself missing her so dreadfully.

He would tell her. Very quietly. Now, when it would be easy—well, easier, anyway. A sort of trial run. See how the words felt as he rolled them around his mouth. She was half asleep anyway and might not even hear.

“I love you too.”

In the darkness, as he held his breath, his words hanging precipitously in the air, a tiny, wayward frisson of panic erupted in his stomach, and suddenly, he wished he could somehow suck those traitorous words back down and keep his own counsel just a little longer…because this was different to anything he’d ever done. Never before in his life had he felt so exposed. It wasn’t the words themselves. He’d said them before. But their utterance had been that of a callow, untried boy as guilty as every other male his age of confusing hormones with love.

This was different and he knew it.

Suddenly, he felt her hand in his hair, smoothing and stroking.

Lifting his head, he peered at her. Her face was indistinct in the dimness of the room, but he could see that she had sat up and now she opened her arms to him. In a heartbeat, he was lying alongside her, their bodies pressed tightly together, warm flesh connecting, moulding, each bend and curve and dip of one body filled by the corresponding fullness of the other, like puzzle pieces fitting perfectly together.

There were no other words between them, only the softest of sighs between kisses, as the last hours of this longest night of the year ebbed, and the grey dawn seeped in to cast its wan light over their forms.

* 

Hours later, Draco awoke to find himself alone in the bed, the covers twisted and tangled around his lower body haphazardly. Raising himself up on one elbow, he looked around.
“Granger?”

“In here!” Her voice came from behind the door to the en-suite. “I’m having a bath! Come join me!”

The small room smelled a lot like the aromatherapy shop and for good reason. Hermione had decided to try out some of the products Draco had bought for her. She sat in a tub filled with creamy bubbles that smelled faintly of ripe pears. In her hand was the bar of honey-almond soap, which she’d begun to use to lather her body. Her hair was frothy with clots of apricot shampoo.

“This bath stuff is divine!” she told him.

Draco dipped one foot into the water and shook his head. “I’m not sure about this, Granger. I’ll smell all… fruity!”

She laughed and rubbed her soapy foot against his calf suggestively. “Oh, come on… it’ll be fun! It’s so relaxing!”

He knew he couldn’t say no. Carefully he stuck one foot into the tub and then the other, lowering himself into the hot, foamy water. He sat down in front of Hermione, and she looped her legs around his, pulling him close, and began massaging his shoulders and neck.

Her fingers felt amazing, intuitive. Knots and kinks he didn’t even know he had were being soothed and relaxed. Then her fingers moved up the back of his neck into his hair, and she began to wet it down, preparatory to washing it. The apricot shampoo smelled fresh and delicious, and he surrendered utterly to the marvelous massage she gave his scalp as she carefully lathered and then rinsed his hair. He leaned his head on her shoulder, his back pressed into her breasts as her body cradled his.

“Your hair’s getting quite long,” she murmured, moving those talented fingers gently along his hairline, smoothing the silver-blond hair off his forehead. “I like it.”

He smiled at that, his eyes closed, and sighed as her hands smoothed their way down from his forehead to his cheeks, along the column of his throat, and finally reached his chest, where they moved in idle, soapy circles across his pectoral muscles, skimming his nipples, and then dipping down to splay themselves across his abdomen. Just beyond them, the crown of his erect penis was bobbing insistently above the water line.

“Be warned, Granger,” he said mildly, his eyes still shut. “If you go any lower, you’ve had it.”

A moment later, her hand had closed around his cock and she’d given it a firm upward stroke. Quick as a wink, he turned around, pulling her forward against him so that her legs wrapped around his hips, her most private parts pressing delightfully against his swollen member.

“Mmm, am I being punished for something? Because if I am, please tell me what it is so I can do it again,” Hermione teased.

She rubbed against him, and he reached down between her legs to stroke her clit, letting just the tips of his fingers enter her and then slide out again. He was rewarded with a small, throaty moan and so he did it again and then again, until finally, she spread herself with her fingers and eased onto him, taking him in a bit at a time.

“You’re already doing it,” he groaned, cupping her breasts and squeezing them as she began to rock against him, providing perfect friction. “Oh yeah, just… just like that… don’t… stop…”

She didn’t stop, and before he could delay it, the orgasm that had begun to build deep in his testicles
spiralled out of control. His balls tightened painfully, but it was an exquisite pain, and then it spread, unstoppable, moving like liquid fire along the length of his shaft, finally exploding inside her. It felt to Draco as if he would never finish emptying himself. The quivering spasms continued as every last bit of semen was wrung from him.

“Wow…” Hermione breathed, falling forward against his chest finally. “That was…”

“Yeah… it was,” Draco said weakly. He could still feel a tingling in his cock as it slipped out of her, utterly spent, and then he realised. “Shit, I’m sorry… I couldn’t stop it… you didn’t…”

The water was tepid now, the bubbles all gone, as she faced him, her hands on his shoulders. “It’s all right,” she said, her voice gentle. “It was still lovely. You’re lovely.”

He had never thought of himself and that word in the same sentence before, and yet, coming from Hermione, he thought he knew what she meant by it. Because he felt curiously… pure, somehow, around her, and capable of giving as well as receiving.

“I meant what I said last night, you know,” she continued softly.

His head snapped up and he looked right into her eyes, which were wide open and bravely gazing back into his.

“And… I heard what you said.”

She’d been awake. She’d known exactly what she was saying and had chosen to say it. And now she was telling him again, in the light of day. And she had heard him. Now he couldn’t take it back. He didn’t want to anyway. He knew that. Threading his arms around her, he drew her back into his lap, the water sloshing around them and some slopping over the side onto the floor. Holding her close, he simply nodded. For once in his life, he was speechless.

Later that same morning, they decided to skip breakfast in the hotel and eat instead at a pretty little café they’d noticed the day before in Magdalene Street: the Abbey Tea Rooms. There was something left undone that both were eager to accomplish before going home.

Over steaming mugs of creamy hazelnut coffee, chilled orange juice, and fresh scones with strawberry-rhubarb jam, Hermione pulled a shopping bag out of a larger bag of purchases and handed it to Draco.

“Here, Malfoy,” she said cheerfully. “These are for you. Happy Solstice! I’d meant to give them to you yesterday, but somehow the timing just didn’t work out.”

Draco grinned, feeling strangely shy all of a sudden. Presents—for him. “When did you have a chance to do this? I was with you the whole time. I don’t remember you leaving to go anywhere on your own!”

Hermione sat back and grinned. She was obviously very pleased with herself, he noted, and looked adorable.

“You had your nose in a book—what was it? Something about megalithic Europe, I think—and so I
just nipped into the front of the shop and bought… well, what I bought… whilst you were still busy reading.”

_The Megalithic European_ by Julian Cope. Right. Must remember to pick up a copy of that book before leaving today.

He reached into the bag and pulled out a rectangular parcel wrapped in blue tissue paper decorated with silver spirals and tied with a bright, curly ribbon. It was the first of several.

Pulling on the ribbon, he carefully opened the paper and there was the very book he’d just reminded himself to buy. He looked up at her, amazed.

“You clever, sneaky girl! Thank you so much, this is fantastic,” he said, shaking his head in wonder and pleasure.

“There’s more!” she urged, her eyes shining. “Open the next one!”

This time he wasn’t quite so careful with the wrapping paper. One good tear and it was off, revealing a black leather journal with the most exquisitely detailed etching of a dragon rising into full-winged flight before a castle. Inside, the creamy, blank paper was handmade. A long thin parcel turned out to be a packet of brand-new quills along with a bottle of black ink. “Number One: Hecate’s Cauldron,” the label said. “Dark of the Moon; Reflective work; Releasing negative energy; Healing old emotional wounds.”

“I… I hope that’s okay,” she said, looking down at her folded hands for a moment before meeting his gaze again. “It’s just… I thought that maybe you might like to write in a journal once in a while, and that this ink could help make it even more… well… productive. I keep a journal, you know, and it’s great having a place where I can just say whatever I want, no matter how I’m feeling.”

He reached out for her, covering her hands with his own across the table.

“It’s more than okay. It’s brilliant. Thank you, Granger. Really. I love it. You chose the dragon on purpose, didn’t you?” he asked, smiling.

She nodded, her cheeks pinking pleasurably.

“Now yours!” Draco announced, and he reached down into his own shopping bag for a small box, also gaily wrapped and tied with bright ribbons. “Here.” He pushed it across the table to her and she picked it up, intrigued.

“Oh, but you’ve already given me all those lovely aromatherapy things,” Hermione murmured, as she carefully pulled off the ribbon and took apart the folds of the wrapping paper. Inside, there was a plain, black gift box. She glanced up at Draco, smiling shyly, took a breath, and then lifted the lid.

Lying on a bed of black velvet was a perfectly wrought necklace in the shape of three moons: a full one in the centre, flanked by a crescent on each side. The orbs were of beaten silver and they hung from a delicate chain that would look like spun moonlight against Hermione’s skin.

She sat back with a small gasp of delight. “This is… oh, Draco, thank you! It’s beautiful! Wherever did you find it? And Merlin-- when?”

He sat back too, folding his arms across his chest with a cocky grin. “Piece of cake, Granger. Remember when we first arrived in The Goddess and The Green Man yesterday? You wanted to look at a book and I said--”

“You said,” Hermione said slowly, remembering now, “that you wanted to buy something for your
mother.” She looked at him, eyes narrowed slightly. “That wasn’t true, was it.”

Draco chuckled. “Not strictly, no. I mean, as it turned out, I did find something for her as well, but it was you, really.”

With great care, she lifted the necklace out of its box and held it out, the chain glinting in the morning sunlight. “Help me put it on?”

His fingers tangled in the small tendrils at the back of her neck as he closed the clasp, and then they rested briefly on the warm skin there before he moved around to view it from the front.

“How does it look?” she asked, smiling, as her own fingertips danced over the silver moons.

“Perfect. Like it was made for you,” Draco pronounced. And it really did suit her. It had been an excellent choice.

Hermione leaned in and brushed his lips with her own, murmuring her thanks, and then sat back, her hand stealing up to pat the necklace every now and then.

Draco smiled at that, and took a quick sip of his coffee. “Look… um… I was wondering… have you got plans for New Year’s Eve?”

Hermione shook her head. “Nothing definite. One of my friends said something about a party, but nothing’s been decided.” A tiny smile quirked the corners of her mouth. “Why? Got something in mind, then, Malfoy?”

“Yeah, actually. My parents will be throwing their annual New Year’s ‘do’ and I can’t exactly skive off that. I’m expected to be there. Usually I just get good and pissed as fast as I can. But… well… I thought maybe… if you’re free, that is… I could duck out early and we could see each other-- go somewhere, maybe.”

Hermione thought for a minute as she spooned a dollop of jam on the remainder of her scone, and then a slow smile lit her face. “Hang on… I’ve just remembered something. My parents will be out for the night. I mean the whole night. They’re going to a party at my aunt and uncle’s house in Surrey. And they’re stopping for the night, so they won’t have to drive home late if they get a bit plastered. You could…” She leaned in and ran her pointer finger lightly up his arm. “…come over after you’ve made an appearance at your parents’ party. If you want to, that is.” She blushed slightly at her flirty brazenness and made to take her hand away, but Draco quickly captured it in his own.

“I could,” he agreed, moving closer to nuzzle the soft skin of her neck, his warm, ticklish breath raising gooseflesh. “Shall I?”

“Ten o’clock?” Hermione whispered, a sudden flutter in her stomach moving up to suffuse her cheeks with heat as he nipped at her and then soothed the spot with the tip of his tongue.

“I’ll be there.” His words lingered as, one finger under her chin, he turned her head to his, and then they lost themselves in a kiss that rendered coherent thought impossible.
Draco’s dragon journal and Hermione’s triple moon necklace

A cream tea at the Abbey Tea Rooms, 16 Magdalene Street
The next eight days passed in a tortuously slow round of banal activities. There were the obligatory family visits for Hermione, during which she had to put up with the irritatingly precocious behaviour of her younger cousins. For Draco, equally trying times were spent in the company of one or both of his parents, parrying questions designed to chip away at the barricades he’d erected against their curiosity. He escaped to the refuge of his room whenever possible and stayed there as much as he could.

Both of them gratefully dived into assigned and suggested readings for the forthcoming term as well. They’d deliberately chosen to sign up for another shared paper, this time Introduction to Literary Studies. Consequently, as both began to make their way through the reading list set in advance by the English faculty, a series of questions and comments were ferried back and forth by Paladin, who, Draco joked, could likely fly the route between Castle Combe and Watford in his sleep by this time. Currently they were reading Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Year’s end approached. Both Hermione and Draco were counting down the days. Not only would it bring New Year’s Eve, but it would signal the imminent return to university and the life there that both had come to really enjoy and value.

A keen awareness of the waning days of the year was not only the provenance of Draco and Hermione. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy knew only too well that their son had been at home for close to a month, and yet they were no closer to learning the truth of his potentially disastrous liaison with this unknown girl than they had been when the stink of the first rumours had made itself known.

On Sunday morning, the thirtieth of December, the Malfoys were enjoying coffee and biscotti for elevenses as the pale winter sunshine slanted across the richly worked Turkey rug in the blue drawing room. Narcissa had the seating plan for their New Year’s Eve party on her lap, and now she scrutinised it yet again with the gravity and attention of an army general planning a manoeuvre.

The mantel clock ticked on, its relentless staccato the only sound aside from the occasional hiss and crackle of the hearth fire.

Lucius took a small sip of the steaming brew and set his cup down again carefully.

“So…” he began.

His wife raised her eyes from the parchment in her lap and regarded the source of the interruption. She raised a questioning eyebrow.

“So…” Lucius repeated. “I presume that you have no further intelligence to share regarding our son’s extra-curricular excursions?”

Narcissa laid the parchment down and sighed heavily. “None, I’m afraid. Though not for lack of trying, as you know. I’ve never known him to be quite this secretive. Not with me, at any rate.”

She hadn’t intended to be critical, but the inference was clear. Lucius set his mouth in a grim line and nodded, acknowledging the truth of it. The inability to communicate openly with his son was a source of continuing frustration for Lucius. But it was a condition many years in the making, and it often seemed as if tearing their relationship down and then rebuilding it from scratch would require far more effort and commitment than either had the heart or the stomach for at this point. It seemed more realistic simply to accept the walls between them as a fait accompli. There didn’t seem to be much real choice in any event.
Ah… yes. Quite.” He paused to shake off the small prickings of regret that hovered persistently at the periphery of his thoughts. “Well, then, perhaps we must simply continue biding our time. After all, we’ve heard absolutely nothing more in the last three weeks to substantiate the initial information that Elspeth so kindly provided. Your own suspicions are based merely upon maternal instincts—fine as they are, of course, don’t misunderstand me-- and a locked door.”

Narcissa prickled for a moment, but much as she would have preferred a way to argue the opposite, there was an impeccable logic to Lucius’ words that she couldn’t deny. She had been biding her time for weeks now, to no avail. It appeared as if Draco would return to university the following week, leaving his parents none the wiser, but a good deal more worried. The girl’s intelligence was not at issue. If Draco were truly taken with her, she would have to be reasonably bright. But the idea that he might already have formed a serious attachment to a girl lacking the lineage, the breeding, and the social skills to hold her own in their stratum of society horrified Narcissa.

And then an even worse scenario presented itself to her: what if the girl had managed to snag Draco merely by virtue of her physical appeal alone? And what if, Merlin forbid, he’d got her pregnant and she’d trapped him with the threat of public humiliation if he abandoned her? It would be just like the social-climbing little slag to do something so devious and low!

Steady on! Narcissa mentally shook herself. Things were getting a bit out of hand—that imagination of hers needed reining in! Nevertheless, the sick headache she’d had the week before was threatening to return, and she hurriedly downed the rest of her coffee and stood.

“I suppose you are right,” she acknowledged somewhat stiffly. “Please excuse me, Lucius. I have some last-minute party details I must attend to.”

With that, she gathered her papers and marched out of the room, determined to blot out this last conversation with as much party-planning minutiae as she could manage. However, her efforts would prove to be in vain.

An hour later, Missy the house-elf knocked on the door to the master bedroom and entered timidly to stand before her mistress, holding a folded piece of paper in her small hand.

“Pardon, Mistress,” she squeaked. “I is laundering the clothes and is finding this in Young Master’s trouser pocket.” The little house-elf held out the folded paper and lowered her head, not meeting Narcissa’s eyes. “Should Missy be giving this to Young Master?”

Narcissa plucked the paper from Missy’s outstretched hand. “No, no, you did right to bring it to me. Thank you, Missy. You may go.”

When she was once again alone, Narcissa carefully unfolded the paper and studied it. It was oddly written, and contained a strange string of numbers and letters, and a reference to “Exp. Date” that made no sense at all. However, there were three pieces of information that made perfect sense to her:

*The Hawthorns Hotel*
8 Northload Street
Glastonbury

And

*22 December 1999*

and the signature at the bottom, beneath the strange numbers:

*Draco Malfoy*
It was clearly a hotel receipt of some sort. So much for staying at the home of a friend from university. An obvious lie regarding his whereabouts last weekend. Far more likely that this “friend” had been with him in the hotel in… where was it? Ah. Glastonbury. Yes.

It had suddenly occurred to her that she was not without resources in the circumstances, and silently, she thanked Missy for the discovery of the hotel receipt. It might just prove to be a blessing in disguise.

Instantly, she went to her desk to find the contact information for a few acquaintances she was fairly sure still lived in Glastonbury.

Two hours and three Floo calls later, she had further confirmation of the mystery girl’s existence and a more complete physical description, but frustratingly, still no knowledge of her identity.

Perdita Cosgrove had been a fellow Ravenclaw in Narcissa’s year at Hogwarts, marrying and moving to Glastonbury not long after that to open up a shop. She’d done a fair bit of impressive work in both Potions and Herbology at school, and so, not surprisingly, her shop specialised in essential oils, herbal lotions, soaps and shampoos, soothing herbal elixirs for headaches and insomnia, and herb-filled sachets for pillows and scenting drawers and wardrobes. Yes, she assured Narcissa, she had certainly seen a young man of Draco’s description—and here, Narcissa had been most detailed—and Merlin, yes, she did recall a young lady too, for whom, if memory served, he had purchased a number of lovely items. Longish brown hair, a bit curly, pretty face, brown eyes. She remembered the eyes particularly, as they had been large and expressive when Perdita had applied a small amount of a soothing lavender oil to her temples to demonstrate its healing properties. No, she had not overheard a name.

Alice Pilson had been a plain, mousy little thing a year behind Narcissa in Ravenclaw. She’d practically worshipped the beautiful older girl, and would have done anything Narcissa had asked of her back then. Of course, such a situation never came up, because Narcissa had barely noticed the drab little hanger-on. However, she seemed to have come into her own in the nearly twenty-five years since they had left school. Now, as owner of Profound Piercing, not only did she oversee the myriad body piercings and tattoos that people came in requesting, she had several of her own in a variety of unusual locations. She’d also turned her hair bright magenta. Narcissa had very nearly not recognised her when her head had popped through into Alice’s fireplace.

Amazingly, Narcissa struck pay dirt a second time, too, discovering that her son and his erstwhile girlfriend had indeed stopped at Profound Piercing as well. Alice made a point—rather gleefully, Narcissa noticed—of describing the beauty and refined behaviour of the unknown girl, and then casually added the fact that she’d impulsively chosen to have her navel pierced. Alice had correctly judged that such information would not sit well with the conservative Narcissa. (The fact that her precious son now sported a tiny stud in his left ear was a small tidbit of information she decided she’d let Narcissa discover on her own, if she hadn’t noticed already.) So very sorry she couldn’t be more helpful…

The third Floo call had been largely fruitless. It was to Derek Fancheon. Ginger-haired and brilliant at school, a Slytherin in Lucius’ year and a friend as well, something had happened after they’d all left school to change him profoundly. He’d ended up marrying a Muggle, so the common gossip went, and the last anyone had heard, he was running a bookshop in Glastonbury. They’d actually seen him once since. Before his unfortunate marriage, he’d made a small killing investing in Malfoy Enterprises stock, and had actually shown up for the sake of form—briefly and alone—at one of their parties. It was this windfall, after all, that had made the bookshop possible.
He had been surprisingly cordial to Narcissa when her head popped up in his small hearth, disturbing his lunch. If Draco and this girl had been in his shop, he hadn’t seen them, he assured her. But then, he had been in the back room a good deal of the time, doing a stock check. They might have popped in without his knowledge.

Narcissa was disappointed. If there were one type of shop in which she would have sworn Draco would spend time, it was a bookshop. And here, of all places, was where a sighting could not be substantiated.

Still. All of this put together was evidence to bring to Lucius, the most damning being that hotel receipt. And so she had done, interrupting him in the middle of a peaceful perusal of the newspaper by the fireside in his panelled study.

He had fingered the receipt, turning it over and over and studying it as if to assure himself that it really was what it seemed to be. At last, he cleared his throat to speak. His tone was dry.

“Enterprising, is he not?” His eyes flicked up to his wife’s face briefly. “Call him downstairs, Narcissa. I think it’s time we had a talk.”

There was a definite sense of foreboding for Draco as he walked into his father’s study. His mother sat primly in one wingchair. Lucius himself was seated in its twin, facing opposite. He gestured for Draco to sit on the sofa between the two of them, and warily he did so, the leather cushion making a slight whooshing sound as it compressed beneath his weight.

Wordlessly, Lucius handed the incriminating hotel receipt to his son, who took it and skimmed it in a glance, feeling himself blanch and hoping it wouldn’t be noticed.

He looked up, and his gaze locked with his father’s. He swallowed. “Yes?”

“What is the meaning of this?” Lucius asked, his voice not much louder than a whisper and dangerously calm.

“It’s… what you see. Clearly.” His attempts at buying some time were fairly feeble and he feared they would collapse before very long.

Lucius stood then, and moved directly in front of Draco, who resisted the urge to look up. The physical proximity was daunting, exactly the effect his father wanted.

“Do not toy with me, Draco. I believe you already know what a mistake that can be. Explain yourself. Now.” He took a step back and resumed his seat, folding his hands in his lap and fixing an unwavering gaze on Draco.

“Well, I… I was in Glastonbury last weekend. Obviously.” Draco stared down at the receipt, cursing himself for not remembering to take it out of his pocket and wondering how the bloody fuck his parents had come into possession of it. Part of his brain raced to put together a reasonable explanation. The other knew it was probably already futile. “Change of plans. Last minute. And… um… my friend from uni… Ian, his name is… it got late, you know, and we… we were feeling a bit manky… too much to drink, you see… so… so… we got a room in the hotel so we could sleep it off. That’s it. That’s what happened.” He exhaled a pent-up breath and chanced a look at his
parents, who had caught each other’s eye briefly and now presented twin expressions that were unreadable. He soldiered on with a smile that was all bravado, and stood.

They sat there, unmoving, impassively stony-faced, eyebrows slightly raised. He began sidling to his left, then, working his way round to the other side of the sofa, with the ultimate aim of a quick escape. If his parents were silent now, he knew better than to believe it was because he was miraculously off the hook.

He’d only been gone a minute before Narcissa turned to Lucius. “You know he’s lying, of course.”

“Of course. But he does think rather well on his feet, you have to give him that.” *Of course he does. No great surprise.* Pushing aside a small, rather perverse nugget of pride that threatened to bring a traitorous grin to his face—Narcissa would most definitely not appreciate *that*, he reckoned— he continued. “It appears we’re no further along than we were before, except now, we know that this affair…”— Narcissa winced at that word— “Sorry, my love, this… relationship of his must be fairly serious. A night in this hotel plus dinner cost him a pretty packet, I can tell you!”

“How much?” Narcissa asked, concerned.

“In Muggle currency, it came to £100. Twenty Galleons, in other words.” Lucius had had to become familiar with the world’s currencies in his business dealings and now his quick mind was able to do the more common conversions fairly easily. “A nice piece of change.”

“What can we do?” Narcissa wailed. “He’s so headstrong!”

“He is that,” Lucius mused, nodding. “I confess, I’m stumped for the moment, Cissa. We’ve simply got nothing hard and fast to go on at this point. It’s all hearsay, albeit fairly reliable hearsay. By the way,” he said mildly, walking her to the door. “Did you notice? Perhaps not. His hair is rather long these days.”

Narcissa turned. “Notice what?”

“He was wearing an earring.”

TBC

**Chapter End Notes**

A/N: Continued heartfelt thanks to my betas, kazfeist and mister_otter, who are extraordinary: sharp-eyed, meticulous, totally engaged, and very responsive and supportive—in other words, everything a writer could possibly want! Love to you both!

Thanks also to everyone at HP_Britglish, for their generous help and patience with my many questions!

Thanks to Robin J., for his much-appreciated Britpickery!

Thanks to moonjameskitten, as always, for her lovely banner, which adds so much to each chapter and provides me with ongoing inspiration as I write.
All of the Glastonbury shops mentioned in this chapter are real. The wizarding proprietors, however, are not, though I suspect there are folk very like them around town!

Mickey Hart has put out many solo CDs (my favourite is Planet Drum), but he is probably best known for being the drummer for the Grateful Dead.
The Die is Cast

A Writer of Fictions
By Eilonwy
31 December
Monday evening

Draco lay stretched out on his bed, arms pillowed behind his head, listening. Beyond the quiet confines of his bedroom, Malfoy Manor was humming with activity. In just a couple of hours’ time, the house would be filled with people: close friends of his parents he’d known virtually his entire life, business associates of his father’s, Ministry officials Lucius felt it worthwhile to keep on the good side of, major stockholders in Malfoy Enterprises. In addition, there were influential members of society in business and the arts, both pureblood and not, the Malfoys making every effort to very visibly support the Ministry’s policies with regard to rapprochement between the various segments of the wizarding community.

At the moment, Draco could picture precisely what was happening downstairs. House-elves were rushing about getting the last-minute details of the party in order. Exquisite foods would be cooking in the large kitchen, white wines and vintage champagne would be chilling whilst reds would soon be decanted, bottles of choice Old Ogden’s and fine, old brandies were being set out along with crystal in a variety of sizes and shapes appropriate to the drink. As always—because this party was an annual event at Malfoy Manor and an invitation a prized commodity—the Grand Ballroom was set with tables all very elegantly appointed with the best silver, crystal and china, and adorned with lavish but tasteful floral arrangements. The Great Hall would receive the guests first, for drinks and hors d’oeuvres of all sorts, those tiny, delectable finger foods that Draco often couldn’t identify but that melted quite agreeably in his mouth. He could hear the musicians tuning up their instruments even now.
It was one of Narcissa’s particular pleasures to oversee all aspects of the party. She’d decided years before that it was a good outlet for her artistic potential, sadly untapped, and so she threw herself into the planning and executing of everything from the colour scheme of the linens to the menu to the accompanying floral arrangements, with renewed verve every year. The menu was one of her particular passions. Truth to tell, she loved to cook but so rarely got the opportunity. Consequently, she’d long ago decided to dispense with the services of a hired party planner, even though Wilhelmina Carstairs, the premiere choice amongst the best wizarding families whenever they had an event for which to plan a lavish meal, had long been eager—anxious, even—to put together a menu for the much-touted Malfoy New Year’s Eve bash. The menu was Narcissa’s province alone, and the compliments that were invariably showered on her both during and after the party were just so many feathers in her cap.

Draco lay there, thinking and planning. It was close to six now. He’d have a good, long, leisurely soak in the tub. Afterwards he’d shave, and then dress for the evening. The guests would start arriving at about eight. He’d be right downstairs in the entrance hall with his parents to greet them, like the well-bred scion of an ancient wizarding family should be. He had a strong suspicion that at least one of those guests whose blue-blooded arses he’d be kissing was the very person who had likely twigged his parents to the fact that he’d been in Diagon Alley with a girl. Assuming that was what had indeed happened. But odds were, it was.

He’d dearly love to have known who it was. However, the fact that he would very likely never know did not disturb him much. The damage had been done. Now it was just a matter of controlling it. And he would be damned if he betrayed the slightest concern or even awareness of the situation to any of these people. He knew their sort only too well. He’d grown up with them and he knew the depth to which their self-serving arrogance and elitism could extend. He was a product of it. He’d perpetuated it himself for too many years of his young life.

No, he’d smile and chat pleasantly to everyone, spout the usual tosh and laugh at the usual inane jokes. And he’d be able to do it because he would know that ten o’clock would see him slipping quietly away, ostensibly to use the loo if anyone happened to ask. Soon after, he’d be in Hermione’s house. And nobody would be the wiser.

He smiled with satisfaction as he reflected on the beauty of the plan, taking particular pleasure in the complete irony of it. He glanced at the bedside clock. A quarter past six. Time to get the show on the road.

Nine o’clock found Draco surrounded by a throng of his parents’ friends, all of whom seemed inordinately taken with the very fact of his attendance at Oxford. Most often they were surprised, sometimes curious or even intrigued, and occasionally appalled, though that last response was thinly veiled, the only clue a slight curling of the lip along with the requisite raised eyebrow. Gritting his teeth, he held his own, smiling agreeably and forcing himself to give polite, well-modulated replies to the many questions. It occurred to him that it was very like being grilled by a well-meaning, doddery old aunt who hadn’t seen him in ages—times about a hundred. He also felt rather like he’d just come back from an expedition roughing it in a remote and very backward tribal culture, and now all the refined, civilised folk were clamouring for him to explain the strange ways of the natives.

“Draco, dear!” Elspeth Parkinson gushed. “However did you live without magic for such a long time!” She looked around at her cronies and gave a light trill of laughter. “I’m sure I couldn’t manage it.”

“It really wasn’t so bad, Mrs. Parkinson, once I got used to it. Not bad at all,” he replied, and turned to pluck a slender flute of champagne from a silver tray on the nearby buffet table. He studied the effervescent liquor in the light of the many floating candles for a moment and then took a sip. “In
fact, I expect I must have seemed a bit of a tosser sometimes, trying to learn how to do my own laundry or order take-away or shop for a few groceries in the supermarket. The Muggles were remarkably tolerant.” *Much more so than I ever would have been in the past.*

“What is a ‘supermarket’?” somebody wondered.

“What in Merlin’s name is ‘take-away’?” somebody else muttered.

“I heard that the Goldstein boy is getting on quite well at University College, in London. Imagine. Though of course he’s not actually living amongst Muggles. I don’t suppose, Draco,” said Sylvia Goyle, “that you are in touch with Anthony… are you?”

“No, we were never friends at school,” Draco replied shortly, slight annoyance briefly clouding his eyes as he tossed down the remainder of his champagne. The implicit criticism was fairly plain. He gave a furtive glance to his watch. 9.15. They would be heading into the Grand Ballroom momentarily for dinner. Fortunately, Theo Nott, Greg Goyle, and Blaise Zabini were all in attendance—probably forced into it by their parents, Draco thought sourly—so at least he had three mates with whom he could get a little bit of a buzz going before making his getaway.

All the offspring of the Malfoys’ closest friends—those who’d had their arms twisted sufficiently, that is, or in the case of the girls, those who were still hoping to catch Draco’s eye—were seated at the same table. Pansy sat with Millie Bulstrode, Portia Nott, Eliza Goyle, Angeline Parmentier, and Lydia Farnsworth. Ordinarily, the ratio of females to males at the table would have delighted Draco as much as it clearly did his friends. Except that none of these girls held the slightest interest for him anymore, nor ever did, really. Well, let them twitter and giggle and bat their eyes as much as they wanted. No doubt Theo, Blaise and Greg would be eager candidates for a hook-up. Fine with him. He had plans of his own.

Everyone had divided themselves up according to sex, with a nearly even split down the middle of the large, round table. All the girls were together on one side and were busy chatting animatedly amongst themselves. On the other, Blaise and Greg flanked Draco, with Theo over to Blaise’s right. They’d turned their chairs away from the table so that they could face each other, whilst waiting for dinner to be served. A clutch of glasses were lined up on the table behind them, magically replenishing themselves at their owners’ requests.

“Why do you keep doing that, mate?” Blaise asked pointedly. He waggled a finger at Draco’s wrist.

“Doing what?” Draco decided to play dumb and see where the question was leading.

“That! You jus’ did it again!” Blaise was slurring his words slightly. He never had been very good at holding his drink, Draco remembered.

“Just checking the time, mate,” Draco said smoothly.

“Why?” Theo had leaned in. He was curious too. Perhaps this had something to do with that girl Draco had used him as a cover for. “Going somewhere?”

“Yes.” Draco sat back and waited, smiling serenely.

“Don’t play with us, you wanker! Where and who? Details, man!” Blaise was a lot more sober suddenly.

Draco thought for half a second and then came to a decision. “Got a private little party of my own a bit later, if you must know…” he began, enjoying dangling them just a bit longer.
AND?” his friends cried in unison.

“Fuck’s sake!” Theo hissed, his face very close to Draco’s. “I covered your arse, Malfoy! The least you can do is tell us!”

Draco grinned. He’d just downed another shot of firewhiskey and was feeling no pain. “Okay, but you’re not gonna believe it.”

All four of them leaned in together for the big revelation. Blaise, Theo and Greg looked at each other, and then back at Draco. “Who?” they whispered.

“Granger.”

You could have heard the proverbial pin drop.

“Hang on,” Blaise said slowly. “You’re saying…you’re saying that you and Mu--Hermione Granger…” His voice faded away as he sat back, gobsmacked.

“Yep,” Draco said cheerfully. “That’s the one.”

Theo shook his head in disbelief and let out a low whistle. “Fucking hell, Draco…”

Greg could only utter one word: “How?”

A sudden, searing recollection of the horrific fire and Hermione’s part in saving his life flashed into his mind at the mention of her name.

“Well,” Draco began, his voice dropping to just above a whisper. “Ran into her at uni the first week of term. I’d seen her around before that, ‘cos we’re in the same college, you see. Like being in the same house. Had a lecture together and shared a tutorial. So I… asked her out for a coffee. On a whim. Not sure why, exactly. Familiar face from our world, maybe? But she looked really good, too, you know? Whatever… Anyway, we had coffee. We talked. We actually talked. I liked that. So… I… asked her to my room.”

At this, the three others shared a significant glance and then directed their gaze back to Draco.

“Go on, mate,” Greg urged. “Did she come?”

A few chortles at the innuendo, and then silence.

“She must have done, you twat!” Theo elbowed Greg good-naturedly. “Otherwise tonight wouldn’t be happening! Then what, Draco?”

This story was beginning to take on epic proportions as Draco’s audience sat, transfixed, their dinner forgotten. Across the table, the girls had begun to notice the four boys in a huddle and were feeling a bit neglected. One of them began to protest, only to be silenced by an agitated, backwards wave of the arm from Blaise.

“Yeah, she did. And we talked some more. Long story short, over time, we got sort of… well… close. Yeah, close. I mean, for starters, we had this joint assignment so we had to spend a lot of time together…”

“Nice bit of manoeuvring, Malfoy,” Blaise snorted. He still couldn’t wrap his mind around this news. It was surreal.

Draco shook his head and laughed. “No, actually, that was her idea. Took me by surprise, but I…”
well, I was intrigued. Thing is, she was really… well, she listened to me. Didn’t throw the past in my face. And she could have done. She had every right, considering I was a total shit to her for years. Well, anyway—the upshot is, I’ve been, you know … seeing her.” Then, Oi. Not a word. To anyone. My parents’ll go spare.”

The others nodded solemnly. It would go no further. Slytherin’s honour.

He sat back and folded his arms, waiting for the inevitable final question. It took about ten seconds. Theo nipped in with it first.

“You shagging her, then?”

Draco Malfoy had a code of honour, even amongst Slytherin brothers. He never kissed and told. And he certainly wasn’t about to begin now. He merely gave them a lazy smile, looked at his watch —fifteen before ten—and stood.

‘Scuse me. Need to have a piss.”

And then he smiled again, winked, and walked quickly out of the room, leaving his friends to look enviously after him, and then speculate feverishly about how much he was getting, whether she was any good, and bloody hell, were her tits as gorgeous as they’d hinted at being, beneath her robes? Mudblood Granger. What the bloody fuck was he thinking? They’d never have predicted this in a million years.

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Draco stood in the en-suite adjoining his bedroom and gave himself a last look in the mirror. He’d just taken a rather disgusting Sober-Up potion to clear the firewhiskey cobwebs from his head, and then he brushed his teeth quite thoroughly, splashed some cold water on his face, and ran a comb through his hair. Oh yes—one more thing. Bit of cologne— not too much, don’t want to overpower her —there, very good. He’d changed out of his dress robes and into those snug-fitting, black jeans Hermione liked so much, topping it off with a cream-coloured, cashmere turtleneck jumper. Very soft, very sensual to the touch. She would like it, he was certain. He reached down and patted his pocket, smiling. There, hardly more than the size of a penny, was the chilled bottle of Krug Brut Grande Cuvée that he’d magically Shrunk and stealthily pocketed earlier in the evening, well before the guests had started to arrive.

Right, then. Ready. Closing his eyes, he took a breath and vanished.

Back at their table in the Grand Ballroom, Lydia Farnsworth suddenly looked around and said querulously, “Where’s Draco anyway?”

The three boys’ eyes flicked briefly at each other, and then Blaise replied, “Oh you know him. He’s so vain, he’s probably washing his hair again or something. He’ll be back.”

“Shite, Zabini, what a load of utter bollocks!” Theo hissed. “Is that the best you could come up with?”

Mollified for the moment, however, Lydia turned back to her dinner, deciding to focus her flirting skills on Theo, with whom her mother had tried, unsuccessfully thus far, to match her up.
The lights were low in the sitting room when Draco appeared there seconds later. A good fire crackled merrily in the hearth, and candles were lit all along the mantel, carefully set amongst the holiday greenery. A festively decorated evergreen tree stood in one corner.

Hermione had been sitting on the sofa, waiting, and now she stood.

“Hey,” she said, and took his hands. “You look so nice.” She leaned closer and sniffed around his neck. “Mmm, you smell good, too! What is that, anyway?”

He laughed. “Hey, leave off! That tickles! It’s called Cool Water. Bought it at Tesco just before we left Oxford. I was saving it.”

Hermione sniffed again, burying her nose in the skin just below his ear. “Spicy… I like it!”

“Well, thanks, glad you approve,” Draco said with a cheeky grin and then his voice dropped, turning husky. “So, Granger… got a kiss for me?”

Hermione looked up into his smiling eyes, threw her arms around him, and pressed a fervent kiss on his mouth.

“Hmm. That’s more like it,” he teased. “So—what’ve you got planned for tonight then? Wild, decadent sex in every room?” He smiled wickedly, waggling his eyebrows as he tightened his arms around her waist.

“Well, not every room… I do have to be able to sit at the kitchen table every morning and look my parents in the eye, you know!” Hermione laughed, threading her fingers through his belt loops. “But somehow, I think we’ll manage.” One hand slid over his back pocket and she stopped.

“What’s this?”

“Right—almost forgot. I brought a bottle of bubbly.” Draco drew the tiny bottle out of his pocket and muttered a quick spell to bring it back to its proper size. He held it out to Hermione. “It’s a really nice one. I don’t think it’ll be missed, though. They had a slew of them for the party.”

“Oh, lovely-- thanks! I bought some today, so we’ll have lots!” Pleased, she took the bottle and stuck it in the ice bucket on a small table nearby, where the second bottle was already chilling. Then she went to the tree and picked up the one remaining present beneath it.

“Before I forget—this is from my parents. Here,” she said, handing it to him as they sat down together on the sofa. “No clue what it is. Mum didn’t tell me.”

Draco was momentarily stunned. A gift from the Grangers. It was totally unexpected. Roughly five inches by eight in diameter, the gift was wrapped in silver tissue paper and tied with a forest-green ribbon also edged in silver. Draco wondered if Hermione had mentioned his house colours or if Claire had a phenomenally good memory for that sort of thing. Either way, it was a very sensitive gesture to have made.

“Shall I open it now?” he asked, fingering the package.

She nodded, settling herself next to him and tucking her legs up underneath her. “Please! I’m dying
“Okay,” he smiled, and carefully undid the wrapping paper and the ribbon. It was a book, he wasn’t surprised to discover, but the choice of book was a pleasant surprise. It was *The Winter King: A Novel of Arthur*, the first of Bernard Cornwell’s Warlord Chronicles series. He glanced quickly at Hermione.

“How did your mum know I’m into Bernard Cornwell now?” he asked, narrowing his eyes, a corner of his mouth quirking up.

Hermione shrugged, smiling, and said carelessly, “Oh, well, I might have mentioned something about it when she asked me what you’re reading these days.”

“I see!” He nodded, and opened the book to look at the frontispiece. There was an envelope stuck inside. A card, he presumed, and opened the flap to look. There was indeed a festive holiday card wishing him a happy new year.

“Oh, may I see it, please?” she asked, and he handed the card over.

Whilst she was busy reading it, he picked up the book once again, and something fell out. It was another envelope, a bit smaller than the last one. He opened it.

Inside was a copy of the photo of Hermione he had been so taken with at dinner that night two and a half weeks earlier. Stuck to the back was a post-it with a scrawled message from Hermione’s mother.

“Because you liked it so much. Fondly, Claire.”

There she was again, that tiny, innocent girl entranced with the rose she was holding, the summer sunlight dancing off her hair, her expression so very serious. He knew that expression. He’d seen it often—when she was hard at work studying or writing, whenever she read a book that utterly enchanted her, when she was absorbed in trying to work out a problem, that expression was there.

Quickly, he replaced the photo in its envelope and slipped it into his back pocket for safekeeping. Hermione need not know. She’d probably be embarrassed that her mother had given it to him. He mustn’t forget to send a note of thanks. With a grin he couldn’t repress, he turned to her.

“What now?”

“Well,” she said slowly, “Food, I thought… have you eaten? Something for afters, at least? We’ve all sorts of good stuff in the fridge!”


Her head shot up from his new book, which she’d been idly examining. “You did? Who?”

He took the book from her, placed it on the coffee table, and then pulled her into his lap before continuing. “Well,” he said, beginning to play with one of her curls, “there was Zabini, and Nott and Goyle as well. That’s it.”

She twisted around to look at him squarely. “Why? Not that I mind, but... well, I didn’t know you’d planned to, that’s all.”

“I hadn’t, actually. But Theo knew I’d been seeing somebody. Remember I told you I’d used him as a cover the day we spent in London? Tonight... well... we’d been drinking a bit, and Blaise noticed
me looking at my watch a few times. Asked me why. I said more than I should have, I suppose… said I had somewhere else to be. After that, they wouldn’t let it go until I told them. But you know what?” He looked her in the eye and grinned. “I’m glad I did.”

“But… what if it gets back to your parents?” Her mouth was turned down slightly in a worried frown.

“If it does, it does. It’s bound to eventually. Though it would be better if it came from me, of course.”

“Maybe,” Hermione mused, “you’re almost hoping it does come out some other way. You’re off the hook then. It’s a fait accompli.”

Draco shot a quick glance at her. “Hmm… you might be right. I have to admit I haven’t exactly been looking forward to that particular conversation. Not because I’m ashamed of us or anything!” he hastened to add, looking at her quickly to make sure she wasn’t upset. On the contrary, she seemed positively sanguine now.

“I know that,” she smiled, and squeezed his hand. “Don’t worry. It’ll be okay. Come on, Malfoy—let’s see what we can scrounge from the fridge!” She slipped off his lap and pulled him up from the sofa.

And with that, they pushed the troubling conversation out of their minds.

* * *

“Some lovely apple tart. We could have that with cream later. Part of a roast chicken. Mm, that looks good. Here,” she said, handing the covered plate to him. Onto the centre island it went, along with other assorted dishes she’d already salvaged from the well-stocked fridge. “Ooh, spinach salad, yum.” She turned to him. “Do you like spinach salad, then?”

“I might do. Let’s have it and I’ll give it a try.”

It became a sort of impromptu picnic by the fireside. Hermione spread out a tablecloth on the floor and then they set out the roast chicken, the salad, a wedge of cheddar cheese and some biscuits, a bit of leftover fettuccine Alfredo, and a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, nicely chilled, to add to the bottle Draco had brought.

Finally, sated and quite full, Draco leaned back on one elbow, a glass of champagne in hand, and sighed. “That was a feast, Hermione! Brilliant. So much better than the posh, tarted-up food at my parents’ thing.”

“Really?” Big smile.

“Really.”

* * *

Two hours later—
The many candles on the mantel flickered, their spicy aroma scenting the air. The fire was burning low in the grate. Hermione had turned all the lamps off and now the two of them snuggled under a shared quilt on the sofa, watching old movies. Hermione’s legs were flung over Draco’s as they stretched out onto the coffee table. They’d polished off the apple tart, liberally slathered with thick cream (one bowl straight from the fridge, two spoons) as well as the champagne Draco had brought, and were now well into the second bottle. “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” had just ended. It was always one of the Grangers’ favourites and Hermione’s as well, having grown up with old Monty Python reruns on the telly. Thinking about it, they couldn’t help laughing again.

“What about,” Draco sputtered, “when the Black Knight gets all his limbs chopped off and that bloke-- you know, the one who plays King Arthur-- says, ‘Look, you stupid bastard, you’ve got no arms left!’ And the knight says, ‘Yes I have,’ and then…”

“And then King Arthur says, ‘Look!’ and the silly knight says, ‘It’s… it’s just…” At this, Hermione started giggling uncontrollably and couldn’t get the words out.

“Just a flesh wound!” Draco gasped. “And… and the knights who say ‘Nih’ and demand a shrubbery! A shrubbery!” He leaned back and laughed helplessly, tears starting in his eyes.

“Ah,” Hermione said, when she could speak, “but don’t forget about ze French taunters atop ze castle, eh?” She pointed a finger at Draco and said sternly, in a ridiculous French accent, ‘I fart in your general direction, you son of an English pig-dog!’ ”

“You do, eh?” Draco cried, clouting her with a sofa pillow. “Well, now, that’s a bit rude!”

She came right back at him with a good pillow-smack to the head (“Oi! Watch the hair!’) and then it degenerated into a general tickle fest.

Finally, he had her pinned, both of them breathing hard.

“You are not acting like a gentleman,” Hermione announced primly and then giggled and let out a small hiccup.

“I beg your pardon, my girl. I am acting very much like a gentleman,” Draco informed her solemnly. “If I were not, I’d have had all your clothes off by now.”

It was true. She was wearing a clingy little red Henley top, ribbed with a scoop neck, and a denim mini-skirt over a pair of black Capri leggings.

“Of all your--” The last button came undone, and he parted the two sections of the shirt as far as they would go. “Clothes.”

He’d been eyeing her breasts appreciatively for some time, particularly when her nipples would harden suddenly. They drew his gaze like a moth to a flame. A couple of times she had caught him staring, and she’d coloured, dropping her eyes. But she’d been smiling too. Now, with that final word, he swiftly pulled the shirt down just enough to bare her breasts completely, and dipped his head to tickle first one erect little bud with his tongue and then its twin. She sighed pleasurably and
arched her back. He kissed both breasts once more, and then trailed soft caresses up her throat to her jaw and her chin, finally reaching her mouth—and then he had an idea.

“Come,” he said quietly, lifting himself off her. “By the fire is nicer.” He picked up the quilt and spread it out where the tablecloth had been, prodded the logs a bit so that the fire flared up again just a little, and then held out his hand to her. She sank down onto the quilt and in the firelight, she was more beautiful than he had ever remembered seeing her. Her skin looked like gilded ivory and her eyes were bright and lustrous, the lights from the flames kindled in them. Glints of reddish gold sparked in her hair.

He reached for her, drawing her into a deep and hungry kiss, and then their hands were everywhere at once, frantically pulling and tugging on clothing, fumbling with zippers and buttons, shedding every stitch with a speed neither knew they were capable of.

The fire produced a soothing heat as they sat, lulled into sudden quiescence after the feverish activity, their naked limbs illuminated by its flickering glow. Draco leaned over and stroked Hermione’s cheek, and gazed at her. He felt he could truly breathe here, with her, and yet, paradoxically, as if he couldn’t quite get enough air into his lungs. Slowly and with great delicacy, he traced a path on her soft skin, and then, cupping her cheek in his palm, leaned in and claimed her mouth.

When, an hour later, a deliciously drowsy and quite delightfully relaxed Hermione sat up and glanced at the mantel clock, her eyes widened and she clapped her hand to her mouth in consternation.

“Merlin, it’s past one! Oh no, we’ve missed it!”

“Have we?” Draco had been comfortably stretched out by her side, curled around her from behind. “Ah well…” He took hold of her hand and pulled her back down into the snug position she’d just vacated, her back pressed into his chest and his cock nestled against her bum and beginning to stir again. “Happy New Year, love.” He threaded an arm around her and wriggled against her contentedly, dropping a kiss onto her shoulder.

She pressed a kiss into the palm of his hand. “Happy New Year, Draco,” she murmured. “Gods, it’s 2000! I can’t believe it. Oh, I wish we hadn’t missed it!”

“But we didn’t, not really. It’s all in front of us, don’t you see? The whole new year. What’s the difference if we missed the exact moment? I’d much rather,” he whispered, nuzzling the back of her neck, “have been doing what we were doing at the time… Do you remember what that was?”

“Not exactly,” Hermione admitted, and then a sly smile crossed her face. “Remind me.”

“Well… I believe I was doing a bit of this—” he pinched her waist, making her squirm. “And a little of this—” Again, another tickle, this time under her ribs. “And oh yeah, some of this too—” He crooked his fingers under her left arm, her most ticklish spot, and she struggled in his grasp, laughing, until she’d twisted around to face him.

“Okay, okay, I get it!” she giggled. “We were otherwise occupied!”

“And most enjoyably so,” he murmured, moving closer for a kiss, then another, and a third. “Mmm… you taste like apples and cinnamon and champagne…” He paused to lick his lips, suddenly thoughtful. “Hermione… when do you expect your parents home?”

“Tomorrow—well, that is, later today—middle of the afternoon sometime.” She reached up to stroke his hair, brushing it out of his eyes. “Why?”
“I thought… well, I could stay…if you want me to, that is,” he replied, looking intently into her eyes.

“I want you to,” she answered simply, a slight blush staining her cheeks. “Would you like to go upstairs now? My bed is much more comfortable than the floor. We can tidy up later.”

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Noon on New Year’s Day found the two of them sound asleep in Hermione’s bed, buried under the floral-print duvet. Downstairs, the quilt was still spread on the sitting room rug. In the kitchen, dirty dishes waited in the sink. Two empty champagne bottles stood in a pool of tepid water in the ice bucket.

Richard and Claire Granger had enjoyed the New Year’s Eve party they’d been to, and had been thoroughly grateful not to have to face the M25 late at night after a generous amount of drink. However, morning saw them eager to make a start towards home, and so they had bade their hosts goodbye, with thanks, and piled into the car.

Traffic was decent, none of the nutters who had probably populated the roads in the very early morning hours of the new year, and they pulled into their own driveway at twenty-three minutes past twelve.

The garage stood off to the side of the house just beyond Hermione’s bedroom windows, and the sound of a car door slamming reverberated through the heavy haze of sleep fogging her brain. She opened one eye. The next sound caused the other to fly open in alarm. It was the unmistakable sound of a key turning in the front door lock.

She shot up in bed, frantically clutching Draco’s bare shoulder and shaking it.

“Wake UP!” she hissed, in a complete panic. “My parents are home EARLY!”

Draco peered up at her blearily, his recalcitrant brain refusing to process this information so early in the day after a proper New Year’s Eve blowout. Which last night into early this morning had most definitely been.

“Malfoy, PLEASE!” Hermione sounded on the verge of both hysteria and tears. “Don’t worry about the mess, I’ll take care of that! Just go!”

Downstairs, Claire and Richard had come into the sitting room and taken in the scene. One plus one most definitely added up to two, and they glanced warily at each other, Claire trying hard to suppress a most un-parental twitching of the lips as her eyes traveled around the room and then up above their heads. Richard, on the other hand, looked disturbed and began to walk towards the staircase landing. Quickly, Claire grabbed his wrist to stop him, shaking her head.

“Richard, don’t! Give them a minute!” she whispered. “Remember when we were their age, and you…”

“Okay, okay,” he sighed, defeated, and sat down on the sofa instead, trying not to look at the quilt on the floor.

“Hermione,” Claire called out as she, too, sat down, her voice trilling musically. “We’re home, sweetheart!”
Upstairs, Draco hurriedly yanked on his jumper and jeans, though not his boxers. They had mysteriously gone missing. He was still sticky from their most recent lovemaking sessions, during which some of those scented, flavoured oils he’d bought Hermione in Glastonbury had finally been put to excellent and very tasty use, as well as what was left of the very rich and decadent chocolate Hermione had bought in Notting Hill. In addition to this, between their vigorous activities and the usual movements during sleep, his hair now stuck up in several different directions. He ran a hand through it in a failed attempt to calm it down.

Hastily pulling on his shoes over bare feet (his socks having gone the way of his boxers, apparently), he stood up, his heart racing. Hermione, two spots of pink high on her cheeks, grabbed him in a fierce hug.

“Happy New Year, Malfoy!”

“Happy New Year, Granger!”

Their mouths met in a frantic crash of a kiss and then separated with a pop as they pulled apart.

“I--” he began.

“Me too!” she breathed, kissing him again rather desperately, and then gave his bum a swat. “Now please go before they find you!”

When Claire and Richard knocked on her door thirty seconds later, he was gone.

* *

The drapes were drawn in his bedroom when he reappeared there seconds later. It was so dim that his eyes needed a moment to adjust.

He found himself in the middle of the floor near to the foot of his bed, and gratefully, he began to move in that direction, intending to undress and have a long bath followed by an invigorating shower. He smelled like a fruit basket and a sweet shop combined: passion fruit, cocoanut, raspberry, vanilla, and chocolate—and he reeked of sex. There had been rather a lot of it over the course of the night and into the early morning hours. The night had been young at half past one, when they’d made their way to Hermione’s bedroom.

In one fluid move, he peeled the cashmere jumper away from his sticky skin, pulled it over his head, balled it up, and threw it onto the bed, and then went to take off his jeans. He’d got the button undone and the flies halfway unzipped—very carefully, mind, so as not to cause himself a painful injury-- when he heard a faint “ahem.”

He froze.

He had an audience. An audience of two, to be precise.

His mother sat on the small sofa adjacent to the fireplace and his father sat alongside her, their backs very straight, their feet planted firmly on the floor, and their hands in their laps.

“Good afternoon, Draco,” Lucius said pleasantly. “How nice you’ve decided to come home after… how long has it been now?… a mere fourteen and a half hours after disappearing from a very
important social occasion for our family, one that means a great deal to your mother. Just as a matter of interest and oh, say, a bit of idle curiosity, where exactly have you been?”

Slowly, he pulled up the zipper once again and sank down on the end of his bed. *FuckFuckFuck!* Relief that he hadn’t actually dropped his trousers and been caught totally starkers flooded him. He was already embarrassed enough, and felt rather like a helpless animal caught in a hunter’s trap. This one had been very neatly sprung, he had to concede. What was it that desperate animals did sometimes to free themselves—gnaw their trapped legs off? He wondered what the human equivalent might be.

“I… um…” he started, his ordinarily agile and inventive mind truly drawing a blank this time.

“Goodness,” Narcissa interjected delicately, “whatever is that odour? Have you been rolling in a bin of rotten fruit and…” She sniffed again. “What is that? Chocolate?”

The two of them leaned forward in their seats and trained their gaze directly on him. Instinctively, he leaned back a bit.

“Well?” Lucius’ tone remained quite cordial, but there was a steely undertone that Draco knew well.

“I… um… dropped in on a friend I’d promised to see… didn’t expect to be gone long… got drunk… New Year’s Eve and all that… passed out and didn’t wake up till just before, and then I just… I just Apparated home.”

“Ah.” Lucius smiled, and gracefully splayed his hands on his knees. “So it was a young wizard friend, then? Who, if I might ask?”

Now Draco was really stuck. All his friends had been at last night’s party. He scrambled to come up with a name that would be reasonable in his parents’ eyes. One dropped into his head like a gift, and silently he blessed Nott’s mother and her annoying gossip. This small bit of it might just save him now.

“Uh… uh… Goldstein! Anthony Goldstein. Right. You remember him, don’t you—Ravenclaw, very bright chap, he’s at University College in London now.” He leaned back against one of the bedposts, the oils on his skin causing his back to slide on the wood.

“Anthony Goldstein. Yes. Quite. The young man you told Sylvia Nott you weren’t in touch with because you hadn’t been friendly at school. Same fellow?”

Draco looked askance at his father, who merely shrugged, saying, “She just happened to mention it in conversation.”

Now he really was trapped. He sat there, his mind shutting down in numbed protest at the two-pronged onslaught, and merely gaped.

“Nothing you have just said makes the slightest sense, particularly in light of the condition in which you have returned home. It appears you are naked beneath your outer clothing. Have you misplaced your underwear? You have an enormous love bite on your neck, and another on your chest. You stink to high heaven of Merlin only knows what, but unless you are gay—” Lucius paused and leaned a bit closer, looking at him intently. “Are you gay?”

Draco shook his head in shocked silence.

“As I was about to say, no self-respecting heterosexual man allows himself to be doused in such effeminate scents *unless* he is with a woman and engaging in rather… *creative* sexual activities. Is
that what you have been doing? *Do not lie again, Draco.* It will be only too apparent if you do.”

“Yes, Father. That is what I have been doing.” Draco repeated dully.

“Who is she?”

“Nobody you know, Father.”

“Ah, yes, I see.” Lucius’ tone was strident with triumph. “Some cheap, nasty little slut, then, out to get as much as she can from a naïve boy like you! Is that the way of it? Is *that* the sort of woman with whom you’ve been consorting these past several weeks?”

Draco’s face had begun to flush with anger. He knew that at this juncture, he could opt to lie baldly and allow his parents to believe whatever rubbish they had concocted. But somehow he just couldn’t bring himself to do it, not anymore. He had to tell the truth because it was a truth that had come to matter a great deal to him. And he wanted to be able to look at himself in the mirror too, and feel proud of what he saw.

“No,” he replied in clipped tones. “That is *not* the way of it. She is neither cheap *nor* a slut, as you so crudely put it. She is brilliant and… and beautiful… and very fine!”

“Who is she? Who are her people? How do you know her? Where is she from?” Narcissa’s questions came faster than he could respond.

“We met at uni. She’s from Hertfordshire.”

“Ah!” Narcissa cried smugly. “I knew it!”

“I have known her for eight years, actually. We were at Hogwarts together.”

Now, with all the other puzzle pieces in place, Lucius knew the answer to the final question even before his wife posed it. Out of curiosity, months before, he had looked into the question of how many students in the university prep class at Hogwarts had been accepted to Oxford. There had been only two. His son was one.

“Her name?” Narcissa asked, her voice deadly quiet.

Draco took a deep breath. “Hermione Granger.”

Narcissa sank back on the sofa, stunned. “Hermione Granger,” she repeated, and she thought a moment. “Harry Potter’s friend? The Mud-Muggleborn you always said you *hated*?” She thought a moment longer, and then her face lost whatever colour had still been there. “The girl Bellatrix tortured here? *That* Hermione Granger?”

He nodded. “Mother, I she… she isn’t what I used to think at all. I was wrong.” He took a breath and forged ahead. “I was wrong about a lot of things. I hated watching Bellatrix torture her. I hated all of it. You *know* I did. It made me *sick*. I still haven’t forgiven myself for so much of what I did back then. But she… she *has*. I was a right bastard to her for years because I thought all that pure-blood shite was true. I believed it all for so long. And I did what I was told, even when it stopped making sense to me.” Agitated, he raked a hand through his hair and continued, his voice low. “I tried not to let on. But… by seventh year, I wanted *out*, and… well… Severus Snape helped me.”

The look of utter shock on his parents’ faces stopped him for a moment, but then he pressed on. He had to say it now, whilst he still had the nerve.
“Surely you must know by now that Snape did not really serve the Dark Lord. It was always Dumbledore. And Severus… he saved me twice when I needed him… not just when you asked him to, Mother. Even then, it was Dumbledore trying to save me as well. Yes, Dumbledore. He made Snape promise to kill him because somehow he knew what Voldemort had planned for me, and he knew… he knew I wouldn’t be able to go through with it. Didn’t want me to. He was already dying and he knew that too. He sacrificed himself. For me.” He looked fiercely at both his parents. Narcissa gazed back at him, trance-like, her eyes huge with horror. Lucius stared at Draco with obvious skepticism etched in his face.

“I didn’t know any of that at the time. I just knew I was going mad with all of it, and Snape… Snape offered me a way to get myself out.” Draco forced himself to look his father in the eye. This next would be the hardest part of all. He took a steadying breath.

“I helped the Order with information. Through Snape. Whenever I could. That’s right.” There was defiance in his eyes now as he regarded his father, who was now utterly dumbstruck, and then Draco sighed heavily. “I don’t expect you’ll ever forgive me, but I had no choice.”

He plunged on. “And it was the same with Oxford. I had to go, do you see? I was suffocating here! I had to get away, figure things out for myself. On my own. And Hermione has been a big part of that. So now you know all of it. Except for one thing, the most important thing of all.” He looked down at his hands folded in his lap, and swallowed hard. “I love her. She is kind and compassionate, and… and decent. She has been my friend, the best one I’ve ever had. I love her, and amazingly, she loves me too. If you force me to choose between her and you, I think you know what my decision will be. Please don’t push me to that.”

He lifted his chin resolutely, defiance in his eyes. It had been the longest speech he’d ever given his parents, and it amounted to no less than an ultimatum. He felt a bit shaky now that he’d finished, a bit incredulous that he’d found the courage to say all those things. He held his breath, waiting for his parents’ response.

Glancing at each other, they rose from the sofa and silently walked out of his bedroom, leaving Draco behind in some turmoil. He felt fairly sure they had retreated to the privacy of their bedroom to talk. He was not surprised. This was their way. He knew by the end of the day, he’d have their reaction one way or another.

Soaking in a hot tub, he pondered it a bit more. What of the revelation of his turn in seventh year? What were they thinking now? And what were they likely to say to him? And--would they try to force him to choose? Despite the very bad blood that had plagued his relationship with his father for years, it would not be easy to cut all ties with his family—with his mother. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that. But could they accept Hermione the way the Grangers had so clearly accepted him?

Later, as he stood directly under cascading streams of hot water in the shower, letting them inundate his head and shoulders, he tried very hard not to think at all, but just to feel. It was good just to blot it all out for a while and simply enjoy the sensation of fingers of hot water loosening the muscles in his neck, shoulders, and back.

Clean, dried off, and dressed once again, he wandered downstairs, hoping for something ready-made to eat. As luck would have it, a late lunch had been laid on the sideboard in the dining room, and Draco suspected it had been his mother’s doing. He ate his soup and sandwich alone, his parents nowhere in sight. The house felt very big and very empty, in such stark contrast to the atmosphere in Hermione’s home. While he rather enjoyed the quiet, the growing sense that he was being deliberately shunned began to bother him, despite himself.

At five o’clock, a knock on his bedroom door disturbed his reading, which had been lacking in
concentration in any case. He opened the door to find Tibby prepared to deliver a message. Unscrolled, it read, “Please come down to the blue drawing room. Your father.”

There was no ignoring that summons. He walked quickly down the curving staircase and into the oak-panelled drawing room so beautifully decorated with blue accents.

Lucius and Narcissa sat together on the red, floral-print sofa facing the fire, their backs to him as he entered the room. He seated himself adjacent to them on the smaller, pale-blue sofa. There was a palpable moment of silence before Narcissa spoke. When she did, her tone was cool and impassive.

“If we are to meet your young lady properly, hadn’t you better bring her round for tea tomorrow?”

The Blue Drawing Room
“Dear Hermione,” read the message he’d hastily scrawled to her afterwards. “My parents know. It’s a long story. Tell you everything when I see you. Thing is, they want to meet you. They’ve asked me to bring you to tea tomorrow. I could come and fetch you. Will you? Please say yes. Draco.”

Paladin returned at eleven that night with her brief response.

“I’m a bit scared, to be honest. But yes. Hermione.”

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Half past two the following afternoon found Draco standing next to that same rose trellis near the Grangers’ kitchen door. For some reason, his heart was in his throat, though he supposed that if anyone should feel that way, by rights, it was Hermione.
The door opened on the third knock. Hermione stood there, her cheeks flushed and her large, dark eyes unnaturally bright. She wore a pearl-grey, brushed-corduroy pinafore over a black turtleneck jersey and black tights. On her feet were a pair of simple, black heels.

“Hello,” she said, and reached for Draco’s hand, pulling him inside. They sat down on a pair of tall stools at the centre island. His gift from her parents, forgotten in the mad rush to leave the day before, lay on the countertop, waiting for him. Absently, he rested his hand on the book’s cover.

“What happened after I left yesterday? Did they…?”

“They’re out, actually. And they knew. I’m sure of it. I mean, gosh, the evidence was everywhere. But they were really cool about it. Sat me down and gave me The Talk …” Here, Hermione rolled her eyes. “Oh, you know, the usual parental lecture about ‘not under their roof’ and carefully considering the consequences of my actions and all that. But my mum—she’s great. I really think she understands. I would wager anything she had a talk with my dad beforehand to calm him down. The thing is,” she wailed suddenly, “we’d have had everything tidied up if only they’d come home when they were supposed to!”

Draco grinned ruefully. “Well, just count yourself lucky you didn’t have to deal with MY parents. They were actually sitting in my room fucking waiting for me when I got home!”

Hermione sucked in a breath. “Gods, Draco… What did they say?”

Draco laughed mirthlessly. “Oh, well, first off, what do you ‘spose they thought when I turned up smelling like a bloody chocolate garden, sticky as shite and with two honking great love bites? I didn’t even see them sitting there in the dark until I’d stripped off—”

Hermione blanched, her hands flying up to her mouth. “Not all the way, thank Merlin!” Draco chuckled. “But nearly. It was obvious to both of them that I’d arrived home without my underwear. Did you find my stuff, by the way?”

She nodded. “It was under the desk. Lucky I found it before my mother did! Anyway, what happened then?”

“Well,” he said, tracing a soft pattern on the back of her hand as it rested on the counter between them. “Father started questioning me about where I’d gone and whom I’d been with, and basically, I was backed into a corner practically from the off. He caught me in one big lie. Shite,” he muttered now, more to himself. “How the fuck could I have said I’d been with Goldstein of all people? I should have known that somehow, Father would’ve got wind of what I’d said to Nott’s mother!

“Ah fuck, whatever… Anyway,” he continued, oblivious to Hermione’s confusion, “once he knew I’d lied about who I’d been with, he got serious with the attack. Described the physical state I’d come home in—said I ‘stank to high heaven,’ pointed out the love bites…” Draco cringed, remembering that one. “And—get ready for it—asked me if I were gay! Because of the body oils! Because, as he put it, no self-respecting straight bloke would use such stuff except whilst having kinky sex. And then, then he went straight for the jugular. Made me admit that’s exactly what I had been doing, and then he accused me of having been with a common slag.”

Hermione had gone very pale. She studied her hands, now clammy. “What did you say?”

“I… I couldn’t bear him saying or even thinking such awful things. So I told him it wasn’t true, that you—well, he didn’t know it was you yet—were beautiful and wonderful. And then my mother
wanted to know about your background and that. I told them I’d met you at uni and where you were from. I think I knew at that point that I was going to spill. I didn’t care anymore what they thought. I still don’t. I told them… Oh…” He sighed. “I said a lot of things. Told them it was you.”

He gave a short laugh. “Totally gobsmacked, they were. It was almost funny. Then I had to tell them the rest—about Snape and what I did seventh year, the lot. Because it’s part of how you and I … well, it’s all connected. And you know what?” He tipped her face toward him with a light finger to her chin. “I’m glad I told them what I’d done. And… and I told them something else too. Told them I love you. It’s all out in the open now. They can bloody well take it or leave it. And me too. Can’t be arsed anymore.”

Hermione was staring at him, wide-eyed and suddenly quite flushed. “Did you really say all that?”

He nodded, and took her hand, playing absently with her fingers. “Yes, and I meant it all too.” He sighed. “So that’s it then. I think they finally get that I’m not giving them much choice with this. They either try to respect my feelings or I’m out of there.” He gave her hand a quick squeeze and picked up the book. “So, love— ready to face a couple of dragons?”

She hopped off the stool and smiled tremulously. “Ready as I’ll ever be. Come on.”

He caught her around the waist and pulled her to him. “Wait. Before we go… you look really nice, did I tell you that?”

She shook her head, smiling.

He leaned down and whispered “Well, you do,” and his breath was warm on her skin. And then he kissed her. “For luck. We’ll need it!”

The low coffee table in the yellow drawing room was set with Narcissa’s fine, bone-china tea set, elegant white dishes patterned with bright, spring flowers. One cut-glass plate held tiny, triangular, crustless sandwiches, and another offered an artful arrangement of small, flaky pastries and cakes. The teapot steamed next to pale lilac-coloured linen napkins, cups, saucers, small plates and silverware, and a vase of cut flowers mirrored the beauty of the china.

Draco had Apparated them both into the entrance hall just inside the heavy, oaken front door. Now he tightened his arm around her waist, and checked that she was all right. She was awfully pale, he noticed. Nevertheless, she smiled faintly and gave a small nod, and together they walked toward the drawing room.

Just outside the double doors, Hermione pulled back, suddenly rigid.

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t this one, I made sure,” Draco whispered. “It’s okay.” The horrifying memories associated with one of the other drawing rooms in the Manor were intruding painfully on both of them suddenly. He thanked the gods he’d thought to ask that their meeting be in this particular drawing room—smaller, certainly more cosy, and filled with a warm light streaming from the western and southern exposures onto the buttercup-yellow walls. Nothing at all like the room Hermione was remembering.

He pushed the doors open and they walked in. Lucius stood near one of the tall French windows, a
pensive expression on his face, while Narcissa sat in an upholstered chair next to the fire. Narcissa rose and took two steps towards them.

Draco brought Hermione within arm’s length of Narcissa, while Lucius stepped into place beside her.

“Mother, Father… may I present Hermione Granger? Hermione, my… my parents.”

It was a singularly awkward moment. Where did one begin, when there was so much history that might be addressed and yet would not be—could not be, just yet. An uncomfortable awareness of this descended on the four of them in varying degrees. They stood like statues, seemingly unable to move or speak, until Narcissa broke the silence by extending her hand rather formally.

“How do you do, Miss Granger?”

Carefully, hesitantly, Hermione touched her fingertips to Narcissa’s and then quickly drew her hand back. “How do you do, Mrs. Malfoy…” She cast a furtive glance at Lucius. “…Mr. Malfoy. I’m… I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

A lie convincingly told. Not that Draco blamed her. He kept his hand on her back, commencing an unobtrusive massage beneath the screen of her hair.

Lucius had schooled his features into a distant cordiality. “Good afternoon, Miss Granger. Welcome to our home,” he said with customary formality, and extended his hand to Hermione. She laid her fingertips in his palm a bit nervously, and he held them for just a moment before backing away to sit beside his wife.

Gratefully, Hermione sank down in one of the chairs opposite. Draco was close by, to her immediate left. His presence was a steadying influence—she could sense the strength he was trying to send her.

“Tea, Miss Granger?” Narcissa leaned forward to pour. Hermione nodded. “How do you take it? Cream or lemon?”

“Cream, please,” Hermione all but whispered, and swallowed hard. “No sugar, thank you,” she added at Narcissa’s questioning glance.

“Sandwich? Or perhaps a slice of lemon sponge?”

Hermione had absolutely no appetite for food at this moment, but she didn’t wish to offend in the first five minutes. She accepted the lemon sponge, and took a tiny bite.

“It’s lovely, thank you,” she managed. “Oh, I nearly forgot—I’ve brought you something…” Reaching into her purse, she drew out a tastefully wrapped box. “Truffles. My mother makes them every year. I hope you like them.”

Narcissa’s eyebrows rose slightly, and she gave Hermione a faint smile. She had not been expecting such a gesture. “Why, thank you, my dear. That was very kind.” Taking the box from Hermione, she unwrapped it and laid it open, on the table. The truffles, dark and rich in their fancy paper wrappers, gleamed in the firelight. Draco leaned forward immediately and plucked one up, popping it into his mouth.

“Mmm,” he said, chewing. “D’licious!” Its exquisitely creamy ganache centre melted in his mouth, very pleasant memories immediately springing to mind.

Hermione looked at him gratefully, her cheeks pink, and took a sip of her tea.
Once everyone had had their tea and something to eat, Lucius cleared his throat. “I understand, Miss Granger, that you are a student at Oxford with our son.”

Hermione nodded politely. “Yes, that’s right,” and then couldn’t resist adding, “I really love it there.”

“Won’t you tell us more about it?” Narcissa asked. Here was a first, small inkling of the girl’s spirit. Despite herself, Narcissa was intrigued.

_Surely Draco has told you himself? Or… perhaps not._ “Well, for starters, it’s a beautiful place. Very old. Mediaeval. Hertford is one of the oldest colleges. It was founded in 1282. I read that in a history of the university.”

Draco felt his lips twitch. That was Granger all over.

“Do tell,” Lucius remarked, and took a sip of tea. “Please… continue. I suspect we shall learn far more about it today than we have done in the last three months from Draco.”

Hermione glanced quickly from Draco to his parents and back again. At his slight nod, she took a breath. “Well,” she said again, “the architecture is lovely and rather eccentric in places. Our dining hall is located in a building that appears to wrap around itself in layers. You go up a winding staircase to reach the dining hall itself. And… and every student has a slot in the porter’s lodge for notes and letters from other students. It’s called the ‘pigeon post.’ Oh, and there’s a lovely bridge that spans two of the buildings. The Bridge of Sighs, it’s called. It’s supposed to look very like a bridge in Venice. Oxford… well, Oxford is just a beautiful place altogether. Magical, really, in its way.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow. “Is it now? How so?”

Draco opened his mouth to speak. This was beginning to have the earmarks of one of his father’s interrogations, which always began mildly enough and then somehow degenerated into a verbal trap, and he would not allow Hermione to be subjected to that. However, she forestalled him, squeezing his hand quickly. She was all right.

“Well… there’s a sort of strangeness and… I don’t know… a sense I always get that something unusual is around a corner, waiting, something I can’t quite see but I feel it… the spirits of all the brilliant scholars who’ve left a bit of themselves behind, maybe… I love the thought of that.”

“Ah!” Narcissa sighed before she could stop herself. Hermione’s words had painted a vividly inviting picture, and she found herself thinking back on her own life. Studying in a place like that was something she could easily have imagined herself doing, had the climate been different for young witches and wizards twenty-five years earlier. Of course, no such option had existed for young pure-blood witches, only marriage. She realized with a start, looking at Hermione, that this girl was only a few years younger than she herself had been when Draco was born.

“Are you aware, Miss Granger, that there is, in fact, a wizarding community within Oxford?” Lucius inquired, setting down his cup and saucer.

“Yes, I did know that, Mr. Malfoy. But I wanted to be like any other student. I wanted to have the same challenges. I didn’t want to be different.”

“Ah, but you are different, Miss Granger, and from what our son has told us over the years, I gather that indeed, you are quite exceptional. Do you not feel it a betrayal of your gifts to ignore them in this way?” Lucius sat back, his arms folded.

“Father,” Draco began. “I don’t think—”
“Draco, I believe the young lady is quite capable of answering for herself-- are you not, Miss Granger?”

“It’s all right, Draco,” Hermione told him quietly, putting a hand on his arm, and then to Lucius she said, “Yes, you’re right. I am quite capable of speaking for myself.” She sat up a bit straighter in her chair and her voice wavered only slightly. “And no, I have never felt it a betrayal to live as a Muggle whilst at uni.

“One point of this programme is to foster understanding, not only of Muggles, but between people within the wizarding community as well, by exposing young wizards and witches to the non-magical world. That knowledge can then be used to create real tolerance towards those of us who are not pure-bloods. If Draco and I used our magic, we could never fully participate in the life of the university, for one thing. We’d always be separate. And that would defeat one of the purposes of our being there.” She paused and gave a cheeky little grin. “Besides, it’s rather fun doing things the Muggle way sometimes.” She hoped her little attempt at humour hadn’t fallen flat as she watched Lucius’ face.

Lucius quirked an eyebrow. He had no faith whatsoever in the truth of that last statement, nor in the general principles that guided the Ministry in this project, and no real interest in testing them either. But he had to hand it to the girl. She had acquitted herself quite well indeed. He sat back with an enigmatic “I see.”

Meanwhile, Narcissa had been looking Hermione over, and she was admittedly impressed with the girl’s appearance as well. Lovely face, not too much makeup; nice, simple dress—suitably modest, yet stylish, well made, and attractive. Altogether she presented a picture of refinement and good taste. She could easily have been mistaken for a young lady of pure-blood background.

It was difficult, almost impossible, to believe that this poised, well-groomed, articulate young woman was the same terrified, dishevelled girl she had watched being Crucio’d again and again eighteen months before. She recalled, suddenly, a snippet of an impression she’d had at the time: that this Hermione Granger girl had backbone. She’d stood up to the pain Bellatrix had inflicted so relentlessly on her and had not been broken, though her screams had been truly terrible. Narcissa shut her eyes for a moment against the memory, as if in doing so, she could somehow exorcise it from her mind.

Astonishing that fate—that most ironic of forces—should have brought this particular girl back into all their lives. She looked at her son. He, in turn, was looking at the girl, and in his eyes, Narcissa could see a softening, a vulnerability, that she hadn’t seen there since his earliest childhood. A certain self-imposed veil had been lifted, and the warmth that she had always believed was still behind it shone through now. The look in his eyes, unguarded as he gazed at this girl, was rather breathtaking, in fact.

“More tea, Hermione?” she asked, and this time, her smile was genuine as she reached over and selected a truffle from the box.
The Yellow Drawing Room

Narcissa’s Spode china for breakfast and tea

Claire Granger’s holiday truffles
“Granger, I’ve got to say—you amaze me,” Draco sighed later. “You’ve already got my mother in your pocket, and my father is well on his way to being wrapped round your little finger. It’s just a matter of time. I know him. It might not seem like it now, but did you see the look on his face when you defended our choice to live as Muggles at uni!” He shook his head and laughed as, wrapped in warm cloaks, they strolled along the paths of the Lady Garden, brittle with ice and frost-bitten leaves and twigs.

There was a stark, white beauty in the desolation of bare branches and shrubs and the cold, marble statuary that gazed down on barren flower beds. They’d finished their tea, and Narcissa had suggested that perhaps Hermione might like to see a bit of the grounds before she went home. It had been a lovely day, and now, the last rays of the setting sun cast pale orange streaks across the lawns. They’d taken their leave of the Malfoys, Hermione extending her hand with her goodbyes somewhat more confidently than when she’d said hello an hour before.

She slipped her arm through his as they walked. “Oh, I don’t know. I doubt I convinced him of anything.”

“But you weren’t intimidated.”
“Are you serious, Malfoy? I was scared to death!”

“Even so. You didn’t back down. Oddly enough, he probably respects you for that, I think.” Draco kicked a pebble with the toe of his boot, and it went skittering into the shrubbery. “It wasn’t something I was able to do when I was younger. Wish it had been.”

Hermione sighed and gave his arm a squeeze. “I’m sure you couldn’t have done other than you did, Draco. You can’t compare one polite conversation between strangers to dealing with a parent, somebody who has such a lot of power and influence over you. Especially when you were younger.”

They walked on for a few moments in silence, and then she continued.

“You don’t honestly believe that my parents behave towards me when we’re at home the way they did towards you. I mean, of course they’ll be far more reserved and polite in company. They tease me all the time, argue with me, put me in my place if they think my head has got a bit big.” She gave a rueful laugh. “And trust me— there is a line I do not cross with my parents, my dad especially.”

“Hmm.” Draco thought about what she had said. He’d always been so wrapped up in his own skewed family dynamic that he’d never stopped to seriously consider what those of other families might be like. He felt just slightly better—lighter, somehow. As they walked on in the gathering twilight, he slipped his arm around her, pulling her closer.

The Lady Garden in snow, Malfoy Manor

That night—

Narcissa sat at the antique table in the mirrored dressing room, unpinning her long, blonde hair from its chignon. Soft and fine, it was still lovely in middle age, one of her best features and Lucius’ own favourite. She regarded her reflection pensively as her hair tumbled down around her shoulders. Picking up her hairbrush, she began drawing it down in long, vigorous strokes. So absorbed in her own thoughts was she that she failed to hear Lucius as he entered.

His hands were on her shoulders, pressing in a light massage. She leaned her head back slightly, sighing.
“That feels lovely,” she said. He continued for a moment longer and then his fingers stilled on her skin.

“He seems…” Lucius began.

“Happy,” Narcissa finished, and reached up to cover one of his hands with her own. She gave it a light squeeze and stood.

They climbed into bed and blew out the candle, and Narcissa moved to lay her head on her husband’s chest. He wrapped an arm around her and for a minute, they lay in comfortable silence. Moonlight touched pockets of the room with a milky sheen.

Lucius’ voice broke into the silence suddenly. “He betrayed me, Narcissa.”

She sighed wearily. “We’ve been over and over this today. He didn’t. Oh, perhaps in a very narrow sense, he did. But it’s as he said, Lucius. He had no choice. He had to start doing what was right for him, finally. You will never know how deeply all of it affected him. You were not here to see him when he came home after sixth year. And I think, to be honest, that even if you had been, it would not have made any difference. You were too afraid of the Dark Lord. I’ve told you-- Draco had lost weight, he wasn’t sleeping. He looked gaunt, Lucius. He literally hibernated in his room that summer. I will never forget it. I was worried sick when I sent him back to school again. And you know well how distraught he became as time went on. Eventually, you saw that for yourself.”

A much heavier, more oppressive silence now lay between them.

“Lucius, you must forgive him. You must. He’s trying so hard to be a man he can be proud of. I believe this girl has a lot to do with that. If she can forgive him, should not his own father be able to do the same?”

A pause.

“Besides… he was right. You know it. You’ve said yourself-- more than once in the last year-- that the Dark Lord was totally mad, and merely using all of us. We were all expendable. Look at the way he so casually murdered Severus.”

“Severus betrayed him.”

“Oh, but Voldemort did not know that.” Narcissa raised herself up on one elbow and looked at her husband in the dim light of the bedroom. “You’re only upset because Draco turned and chose a path opposed to ours. Your ego’s been bruised. But it wasn’t done out of spite. It was out of need. Let it go, Lucius. Please. Let it go now. You must.”

His silence was disturbing, but she knew better than to push any further just now. There was something else that needed discussing in any case.

“What do you think of the Granger girl?”

“Does it really matter what I think, Narcissa? He’s as much as handed us a fait accompli.”

“Of course it matters. It matters to him-- a great deal, I think. He loves this girl. And I believe I can see why, Lucius.” Her voice was suddenly steely. “I have no intention of losing my son. We will open our home to Hermione Granger and we will make certain our son knows she is welcome. We will be cordial to her at the very least. If you feel you are incapable of doing this, then I shall carry on without you, on my own. But you will not impede me in this. You walked away from our son once. I shall not make that same mistake now.”
Lucius stared at the canopy overhead, his features composed, but in the half-light the moon cast, Narcissa could see the pain his eyes betrayed. Her heart broke for him, and she leaned over, brushing her lips over his. His arms slid around her in response, and he drew her close. The comfort they took in each other then bespoke the passion that had not flagged over the years, and was a balm for old heartaches that had not yet healed.

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy’s bedroom

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hugs and boxes of Claire’s truffles to my fantastic betas, Kazfeist and mister_otter, for quick, incisive reads and very valuable feedback!

Thanks to moonjameskitten, both for her beautiful banner, as always, and for her fantastic dramione manips as well. She took the headshots and pics of outfits I sent her, and worked her incredible magic to create what you see here with Hermione and Draco. Sathy, I can’t thank you enough!

Thanks to everyone at HP_Britglish for answers to questions that ranged from what to call the “fly” on men’s trousers to what to call women’s dress shoes other than “pumps” to whether one “gets the show on the road”… or says that same thing some other way.

Those of you who’ve already read “Baby Days” and “Baby Days 2” know that the house serving as Malfoy Manor is the magnificent Broughton Castle, in Banbury, Oxfordshire. It is home to the Fiennes family, of which Ralph Fiennes (Lord Voldemort) and his brother Joseph (Will Shakespeare, “Shakespeare in Love”) are members. Scenes from “Shakespeare in Love” were actually filmed at Broughton. The “Blue Drawing Room” is actually the Oak Room at Broughton. The “Yellow Drawing Room” is part of an estate called Les Prévanches, in Boisset-les-Prévanches, France.
The Lady Garden is a garden of that same name at Broughton. The Malfoys’ bedroom is really “Queen Anne’s Room” at Broughton, so called because Queen Anne of Denmark slept there in 1604.

http://castles-galore.com/cgi-bin/picdisplay.cgi?rsh-eng.c00136&ca (Broughton Castle, Oxfordshire)

The truffles may be found at Nonnie Waller’s Traditional Southern, at http://www.nonniewallers.com/. Sinfully delicious, I’m sure!
Absentmindedly, Hermione tapped the feathered end of the quill against her bottom lip. She’d already crumpled three failed letters into tight, little balls and tossed them into the wastebasket. A cup filled with pencils and Biros stood on her desk, but she found she was so in the habit of using a quill that she much preferred its fluid style and the distinctive sound it made against parchment. Quill or pen, though, it didn’t matter in this case. Nothing was helping her to find the words she needed to tell one of her oldest, best friends about her special, new one.

Because he really had very gradually become just that in her life. She would never have imagined, sitting in the uni prep class at Hogwarts a year ago, that the tall, blond boy who had hitherto delighted in plaguing her would, inexplicably, choose to keep so very much to himself, virtually ignoring her—and then, surface again at Oxford a year later, only to reveal yet another side of himself never before shared with anyone, least of all her. He seemed to be a chameleon.

When she really stopped to reflect on it, what she’d learned about Draco Malfoy in the last three months was nothing short of astonishing in the small details. It wasn’t that he was now somebody else—it was that he was somebody more. And, in a way, less as well. Because there was a raw, painful piece of him that had begun to dissipate. He’d shown her bits of it, but it seemed to her that
she could feel it receding. Sometimes it seemed not to be there at all anymore, but she knew that was an illusion. Yet it had grown a bit smaller, its hold on him just a little weaker.

And of course, now what they shared had gone beyond simple, platonic friendship to something deeper and more profound.

But how to get all of this across to the two people whose understanding she needed most? Sighing, she dipped the quill into the inkpot and once again began the first, halting words of her letter to Harry.

Draco had already tried much the same thing in a letter to Pansy. Truly, there had never been anything more between them than a longstanding friendship since earliest childhood— and a lot of wishful thinking on her part and that of their respective mothers. Nevertheless, he felt somehow that she of all people needed to understand about his feelings for Hermione Granger. In the end, though, the letter had been a dismal failure. He couldn’t find the right words.

On Thursday evening, the third of January, he scribbled a quick, disgusted note to Hermione.

“Sorry, the letter thing just wasn’t on. Everything I wrote sounded treacly or just plain daft. D.”

His answer came back early the next morning. Paladin’s insistent tapping on the windowpane woke him at seven. It was just becoming light outside, and he sat up, rubbing his eyes blearily. Then he heard a furious flapping just outside the window, and a rhythmic tapping on the glass. Jumping out of bed, he drew the drapes aside and opened the casement. A tired and cold Paladin hopped inside and perched on the back of the desk chair, shaking off his feathers in a huff and then preening himself. Draco smiled, and reached inside the top drawer of his desk to withdraw a handful of his owl’s favourite treats. Mollified, Paladin folded his wings and snatched each treat with delicate precision from his master’s palm, gulping them down with relish. Then, wearily, he closed his eyes.

Meanwhile, Draco had removed the message from his leg, and now he broke open the seal and unrolled the parchment scroll.

“Dear Draco, I know we agreed it was time to tell our friends about us. But I’m having just as hard a time putting it into a letter as you are. Anyway, look— I’ve had an idea. What about showing them instead of just telling them? We could arrange to get together for drinks somewhere — you know, a New Year’s celebration, at the Leaky Cauldron, maybe? Or that new place, the Pestle and Mortar? — and invite our friends. (Harry, Ginny, Ron, Neville and Luna—that’s about it for me.) Then they’ll see us together. And the best part is, we’ll be in public, so Ron will have to behave himself. What do you think? Hermione xxx P.S. Am I being a horrible coward for wanting to do it this way?”

Draco laughed softly and shook his head. So like Granger to worry about being weak in some way. Sitting down at the desk, he drew out one of the new quills she’d given him as a Solstice present, chewed thoughtfully on its clean tip for a moment, and then dipped it into the inkwell.

“Shame on you, Granger! What happened to all that famous Gryffindor bravery? (I’m just having you on a bit. Of course you’re not being a coward, you silly girl!) Your idea makes perfect sense. We really only have tomorrow night, though. You’re leaving for Oxford on Sunday, and I’ll be going back on Monday. I’ll find out if Pansy’s free. Zabini already knows, of course, but maybe I’ll invite him and maybe Nott and Goyle as well, just to round things out. Can’t very well throw Parkinson into a den of lions all by herself, can I? Doubt I’ll be much help -- think I might have lost a bit of my Slytherin edge, what with spending so much time consorting with the enemy (ha ha). The Pestle and Mortar sounds good. The Leaky’s getting a bit old. Anyway, let me know if we’re on for tomorrow, and what time. Draco xxx (Wish you were here and in my bed right now, so I could give you those kisses in person.)"
Late that afternoon, after Paladin had had a long, restorative sleep, Draco sent him out to Hermione with his reply. The tawny eagle owl returned very late that evening with a brief but encouraging reply.

“We’re on for tomorrow night! Nine o’clock at the P and M. As for my Gryffindor bravery, it seems to have deserted me. A bit of Slytherin subterfuge would come in useful though! I don’t think I’ll ever be quite ready for this… Hermione xxx (Wish I were there too.)”

Saturday afternoon
5 January

A door slammed, startling Narcissa just as she was preparing to slip a long-stemmed, tangerine-coloured rose into a cut-glass vase to join an assortment of hothouse flowers she’d cultivated in her conservatory/greenhouse.

“Draco? Is that you, darling?” she called, separating the stems so that they fanned out in the vase, their blooms a bright and fragrant reminder of summer in the dead of winter.

The doors to the blue drawing room were flung open suddenly, and Draco stood there, broom in hand. He wore faded jeans and boots, with a warm, navy, hooded fleece layered over a turtleneck jumper and a thermal shirt. Leather gloves protected his hands and a knit cap pulled well down over his ears had kept his head warm.

“Hello, Mother. Been out flying,” he said, leaning his broom against the doorframe and sauntering in to flop down on the red, patterned sofa. Merlin, he had missed that in the last several months! “I’m starving. Anything to eat?”

Narcissa smiled. Some things never changed no matter how much time passed. “I’ll send for tea. It’s nearly time anyway. Missy!”

The diminutive, sweet-faced house-elf appeared instantly and offered a small curtsey. “Yes, Mistress?”

“Tea, Missy. A full cream tea today. And be sure to include the salmon mousse on toast that Master Draco likes so much, and elderberry jam for the scones.” Narcissa nodded to indicate she’d finished, and Missy dropped another quick curtsey and vanished.

Moving to sit beside her son, Narcissa folded her hands in her lap and regarded him thoughtfully. He would be leaving for Oxford so soon, now, and there were so many things she wanted to ask, so many things she wanted to tell him.

“Good flying today?” she began instead.

He nodded, pulling off his cap and gloves, dropping them on the sofa beside him, and then stripping off his jumper, along with one of the thermal shirts. He flopped back into the sofa cushions, and ran a hand through his hair, rumpling it even more. It fell back over his eyes in a pale, feathery fringe.

“Brilliant. Couldn’t really stay up for very long, though. Bloody freezing out there after a while. But
I had to get into the air, just for a bit anyway.”

The tea things arrived just then, and Narcissa had them set on the low table in front of the fire. She poured a cup for Draco, adding milk and a bit of honey, as he liked it, and handed it to him along with a plate of assorted, neatly trimmed, crustless sandwiches. Amongst them were his favourites: salmon mousse with tomatoes and watercress on toast points.

“Thanks, Mum,” he sighed, and took a bite, chewing contentedly and chasing it down with a gulp of hot, sweet, milky tea.

Narcissa looked up sharply from her tea. He hadn’t called her “Mum” since he was a little boy, and rarely even then.

“Your Miss Granger seems a very well bred girl, for a --” she started once again and then stopped short.

Draco stopped chewing and looked at his mother. He’d expected this conversation two days before, and when it hadn’t come, he’d wondered if perhaps Narcissa had decided to spare him. Good save, Mother. Points for that. No doubt his father would have gone right ahead with the rest of the phrase. Draco decided to give his mother the benefit of the doubt, and resumed eating.

“Thanks, I’m glad you like her.” He darted a quick, assessing glance at her face then. “You do like her…?” he trailed off, suddenly uncertain.

“Yes,” Narcissa replied. “I must confess that I do. She… interests me.” Taking a sip of her tea, she leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs in an elegantly fluid movement.

Draco grinned in spite of himself. “She has that effect on people.”

“More than that, though, I can see why she’d interest you,” his mother continued, pausing briefly to sip her tea. “She’s obviously very intelligent, articulate, and well-mannered. I suspect that she challenges you-- that she’s feisty, doesn’t back down. You need that. Beneath the poised exterior, I have the sense that she is a very strong young woman. Am I correct?”

He decided to speak frankly. “She’d have to be strong to endure what was done to her in this very house. Not to mention all the years before that, when she had to prove herself again and again, because of people like me.” He said that last with a self-deprecating sneer. The words were like ashes in his mouth.

Narcissa sighed. It was difficult to argue with a point that was essentially irrefutable. If he had been beastly to this girl in past years, it was because he’d been taught and encouraged to do so by his family. And if Lucius had actively inculcated the more virulent strains of prejudice and encouraged behaviour that was of necessity cruel because of the nature of the beliefs that informed it, Narcissa was at the very least a passive participant in the lessons. Very much a product of her upbringing as well, she’d stood by and allowed them, even supported the broader notions of pure-blood superiority, though she never really agreed with the more extreme solutions to the problem of magical folk with blood that was less than pure.

“Draco,” she said quietly. “All that is over and done with now. You said she has forgiven you.”

“Yes. I believe she has, though I haven’t asked her in so many words regarding the way I treated her at school. That is still something I must do.”

“Yes, you should.” And so must we at some point. “However, if she can accept you, surely you can accept and forgive yourself, finally.” Narcissa looked pointedly at Draco then. He was staring down
at his plate, his second sandwich untouched.

“Draco, we want you to know,” she pressed on, suddenly sensing that he might bolt at any minute, “that Miss Granger is welcome here. If she is important to you, then we will make an effort to get to know her better.”

Draco stared unabashedly at his mother for a moment, and then asked with some skepticism, “‘We’ as in both you and Father?”

“Yes,” Narcissa said firmly. “Your father too. Give him a chance, Draco. He has a lot to sort out. Perhaps someday he’ll tell you about it. For now, suffice it to say that he is rather bitter about many things, and yet, he’s not one to easily let go of feelings and beliefs that are long held. Despite all that, I do think your Miss Granger surprised him. She was not what he had expected — nor what I had expected either, frankly. I believe that in time, she will grow on him.” She paused and the corners of her mouth turned up in the beginnings of a smile. “And… I will help in whatever way I am able.”

This was surely more than Draco had anticipated, and he felt a curious constricting sensation in his chest. “Thank you, Mother,” he said softly. “That means a lot to me.” He put his plate down on the table and stood, feeling a sudden need for the solitude of his room. “Will you excuse me, please?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

He moved to leave the room, and then stopped suddenly by her chair, dropping a swift kiss on the top of her head. She watched him go, sitting very still even after the doors had clicked shut behind him. She had said what she needed to say. It was a first step.


At fifteen before nine, Draco began a quick search for at least one parent. He found his mother first, in the master suite. She was relaxing on the chaise by the fireside, absorbed in a book. At the sound of the door opening, she looked up.

He popped his head round the door and flashed a grin at her. “Going out, Mother. Meeting some friends.”

“I see. Come in, darling.” Narcissa laid the book face down in her lap, gesturing, and smiled brightly. “Where will you be, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Diagon Alley, actually. We’re meeting up at the Pestle and Mortar.”

“Hmm… well… have a care how much you drink, please.” Her tone was mildly admonitory. “Who else will be there— aside from Hermione, I assume?”

Draco nodded and made an offhand gesture as he perched at the end of the chaise. “Oh, Blaise, Pansy, maybe Greg and Theo…” His voice began to trail off. Clearing his throat, he continued. “…Potter and a Weasley or two… Longbottom… Lovegood…”

Now Narcissa did quirk an eyebrow as she bit her lip. “I see.” Well, that should be interesting. “Have a good time, dear.”

Draco reached over to give her hand a quick squeeze and then he was gone.
His mother watched pensively as the door closed behind him. On the other hand, perhaps a bit of drink would take the edge off what had every chance of being an entirely awkward, possibly even explosive situation.

She sighed and picked up her book again, shaking her head. There would be some very strange bedfellows at that table and no mistake.

The Pestle and Mortar was dimly lit by an array of floating candles and the light from fires in two hearths, one in the bar and another in the main dining room. Draco Apparated to a spot in a hallway separating the two areas. Looking around, he slipped his cloak and gloves off, folding them over his arm. Merlin, he was tired suddenly! Must have been the flying earlier in the day. He leaned his head back against the wall and let his eyes drift shut.

Just as the warmth of the room began to lull him into a light doze, he felt a tap on his arm. He opened his eyes and looked down to find Hermione, her eyes shining and a huge grin lighting her face.

Without waiting, she threw her arms around him, wrapping him in a fierce hug.

“Oh! I’m so glad to see you!” she breathed against the wool of his jumper.

“It’s only been three days, Granger,” he chuckled. “Just couldn’t live without me, eh?” He wound his arms around her, resting his cheek against the top of her head, and breathed in the familiar, piquant apricot scent.

“I’m really glad to see you too,” he sighed.

They stood that way for a full minute, and then Hermione pulled away and looked around a bit furtively. “Is anybody else here yet? Maybe we oughtn’t stand here like this.”

“Why ever not? I thought that was the whole idea, them seeing us!” Draco pulled her back to him, bringing his mouth close to hers. “I’m ready to show them all exactly how I feel.” Her lips were soft and tasted of watermelon lip gloss as he caught her mouth in a light kiss, and then a second, this one more exploratory as he tasted her slowly and deliberately.

“Mmmpphh! Malfoy!” Hermione struggled against his kisses, but he could tell she was smiling too. “Wait!” She pushed herself out of his grasp, leaning back against the opposite wall, and took a deep breath. “No snogging now!” she said sternly. Draco grinned and bent to retrieve one of his gloves, which had fallen to the floor a moment before. He leaned over, his back to the front entrance.

“Oi!” A familiar voice assailed them both. “Hermione!”

Ronald Weasley strode towards Hermione, apparently unaware of Draco’s presence as he approached. “It’s great to see you!” He reached to envelop her in a bear hug, a big smile on his face, when Draco straightened and turned back around.

Ron’s face went through a series of expressions, the speed and variety of which would have been comical had any of them felt like laughing at that moment.

“Hermione?” The exclamation had become a question, confused and suspicious. “What’s he doing here?”
“He’s with me,” Hermione said matter-of-factly, stepping back from her friend’s embrace. “Breathe, Ronald.” Inside, her stomach had turned to jelly, and she tightened her jaw and forced a smile as she moved back to stand beside Draco, taking his hand for good measure.

Ron looked from one to the other, his eyes travelling from their faces down to their clasped hands and back again, and those same expressions repeated themselves, but this time far more slowly. His mouth fell open slightly and then set itself in a grim line, while his brows shot up through the mop of ginger hair and then dipped, becoming furrowed.

“What d’you mean, he’s with you?” he asked, his voice unnaturally calm.

Draco could feel Hermione’s hand tightening around his. She began to squeeze his fingers rather hard. He cleared his throat. “It’s just what she said, mate. I’m with her. She’s with me. We’re together.” His voice was controlled, pleasant even.

“Right, I need a beer!” Ron muttered, running a hand distractedly through his hair so that it stood out from his head, and he turned towards the bar and took two steps.

Mate?

Then he pivoted back to face them. “Let me get this straight. Together together?”

They nodded.

“Bloody hell…”

That was it. Turning on his heel, he walked to the bar and ordered a pint, taking a long pull from it as soon as it arrived.

In the meantime, Hermione and Draco shared a quick, wary glance. One down, five to go.

They decided to sit down, and chose the nearest empty table, a large round one in a secluded corner. They didn’t have to wait long.

Blaise was next to arrive along with Theo and Greg, and two of them slid into the seats immediately to Draco’s left.

“Cheers, mate,” Blaise said with a cocky grin. This was old news to him. He’d had five days to process it, after all. It didn’t even seem quite as bizarre as it had done upon first hearing. He nodded his head in her direction, giving her a quick once-over at the same time, and then flashed her a brilliant smile. “Miss Granger. Pleasure.” Draco was right. She did look good. Very good in fact. Lucky bastard.

Draco frowned. Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t you, Zabini?

“Malfy!” Theo waved from the bar, where he was placing his drink order. He joined them a moment later, drink in hand, and slid into a chair opposite Hermione and Draco.

“Draco,” Greg said affably, nodding, and then caught Hermione’s eye. “Gr-- Hermione.” It was the first time they’d seen each other since that awful night eighteen months earlier, when he and Draco had nearly died in that fire, and Potter, Weasley and Granger had plucked them up out of the roiling chaos and flown them to safety on their brooms.

Hermione simply smiled at both of them, not betraying the slightest unease at any possible recollections, and then darted a nervous glance in Ron’s direction.

Over at the bar, Ron had noticed the three new arrivals and his eyes bugged out a bit more.
Blaise stood again. “Can I get you lot anything?” He turned in Ron’s direction and chortled. “Weasley, I see you’re already set.”

Ron glowered and turned his attention back to his glass, tipping up its amber-coloured remains in one gulp and slamming the glass down on the countertop.

“Weasel— Weasley’s in a bit of a strop, it would appear,” Draco observed mildly. “Reckon we’ll just let him be for now. Pint for me. Oh, and some crisps, and maybe a bowl of nuts,” he added. “Granger?”

She nodded. Far from making a scene, Ron wasn’t even talking to her. It looked like being a long night. A pint would do. For starters.

Five minutes later, Neville Longbottom walked in with Luna Lovegood on his arm. They’d just begun going out, and there was still a certain awkward newness to the way they were, physically, around each other. Luna spotted their familiar faces in the corner and she smiled and waved. Apparently, she wasn’t terribly put off about the fact that there were four former Slytherins at the table and they outnumbered the Gryffindors.

“Oh, Hermione!” she said excitedly, as Hermione rose from her seat to give Luna a hug. “Happy New Year! It’s wonderful to see you!” She sat down on Hermione’s right and patted the seat next to her. “Come on, Neville. Why, hello, Draco. You too, Blaise. Theodore. Gregory.”

Draco smiled, and nodded. “Hello, Luna.” Loony Lovegood and Longbottom—both of them a bit daft in their own way. A match made in heaven, surely.

Blaise tipped his glass in Luna’s direction and grinned, while Greg raised a hand in greeting.

“Hullo, Hermione… everyone,” Neville said somewhat warily as he eyed Draco, Blaise, and Greg, and slowly sat down. They returned the greeting and then returned to their conversations. Somebody put a glass of ale in front of him and he picked it up automatically and took a healthy swig.

Greg, Theo, and Blaise cast quick looks at each other and then at Draco, but he shook his head slightly. Apparently, they were the only ones who knew so far.

Three still to arrive. It was now twenty past nine. Suddenly the door burst open and Pansy appeared. She spotted Draco immediately and rushed towards the table, oblivious at first to the company surrounding him.

“Draco!” she cried. “There you are! I’m so sorry I’m late!” She got within a foot of the table and suddenly stopped short. “Oh! Blaise! What are you doing here? Theo? And… Greg? I didn’t know you’d be here!”

And then it seemed as if very abruptly, she became aware of four other people she knew, three of them former Gryffindors, one a Ravenclaw.

‘Have a seat, Pans,” Draco grinned. He’d have laughed out loud at the situation that was unfolding —viewed one way, the whole bloody thing was absurdly funny, really-- had not so much been riding on it for him and for Hermione. “What do you fancy? Oi! Weasley! Quit arsing about over there and bring Parkinson a pint!”

Ron’s head snapped up from the glass he’d been morosely contemplating and swiveled around. He stared at Draco. What presumption, ordering him about! He’d a good mind to walk out right now.

Instead, he found himself ordering another drink and bringing it over to the table where Pansy
Parkinson sat, her dark hair still cut in the neat, little fringed bob that fell to her jaw line. She looked up at him as he put the pint glass down in front of her, and he noticed how very blue her eyes were, in striking contrast to her dark hair.

“Thanks,” she said uncertainly, as Ron backed away and found a chair, pulling it over to the table next to her. It really was the only open space.

“I wonder where Harry and Ginny are?” Hermione murmured, picking at a bowl of cashews and peanuts in the middle of the table. “Um… Ron… have you any idea?”

Ron frowned. “No.” He was still put out by the earlier revelation and not terribly inclined to carry on much polite conversation with her.

A small knot clenching in her stomach, Hermione looked away. She glanced around the pub, her eyes lingering on the front door, and then she looked at Draco. Beside her, he was calm and implacable. Feeling her gaze, he turned his head ever so slightly, slanted a smiling glance and a wink her way, and then slid his hand over the table’s surface until it reached hers. Covering it with his own, he slowly and quite deliberately threaded his fingers firmly through hers. Then he gave her hand a squeeze.

The meaning behind the gesture was unmistakable. Pansy and Neville goggled.

While not surprised anymore, Blaise, Greg and Theo were still a bit taken aback at the visible proof of what Draco had told them on New Year’s Eve. On the other hand, Luna seemed completely unfazed; instead, there was a secretive and rather satisfied smile on her face. Ron simply refused to look.

It was to this tableau that Harry Potter and his girlfriend, Ginny Weasley, arrived thirty seconds later, expecting to find only her brother and their good friend, Hermione Granger.

Instead they found a table full of people, a history of enmity between some of them, and dead centre, the pair with the most bitter history of all: Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger. And they were holding hands.

Harry stopped short, Ginny bumping into him from behind.

Hermione attempted to pull her hand away, but Draco held on tightly. Swallowing, she smiled and said, her voice shaking only slightly, “Hello, Harry… Ginny! You made it! Happy New Year!”

“Hermione, what…? I thought… What’s going on?”

Looking directly at Harry and Ginny, Draco gave Hermione’s hand yet another gentle squeeze. Bolstered, Hermione replied, “Well, see, we thought… Draco and I… that it would be fun to get together with our closest friends to toast the New Year.” She picked up her glass and raised it slightly in their direction.

Masterful bit of dissembling, that. She had more than a bit of Slytherin in her, whether she realised it or not. Hastily, Draco bit back a grin.

“Draco and you…” Harry repeated slowly. “Hermione… what the hell are you on about?”

Behind him, Ginny was staring completely open-mouthed at the pair of them. Then she snapped her mouth shut, leaned in and whispered in Harry’s ear. He leaned his head back slightly to listen, and then faced front again, narrowing his eyes.
“You… you’re…” he began. “Are you? Is it true, then?”

Draco nipped in ahead of Hermione this time. Looking around at all of their friends, several of whose expressions wavered somewhere between shock and dismay, he nodded somberly. “Yes. It’s true.” He took a breath and pressed on. “I am in love with Hermione. And she loves me, too—don’t you, Granger?” He turned to her fondly, and she nodded, colouring. “It’s that simple,” he continued. “We… we thought you all should know, and this seemed a good way to go about it. Appropriate too. New beginnings for the new year and all that. It’s really about time.”

Pansy had sat back in her seat, eyes wide. She was virtually dumbfounded, a rarity for her. Now she shook her head and grinned in spite of herself. “Draco Malfoy, you sly thing! Was she the reason you bunked off early from your parents’ party?”

Draco merely smiled. The smirks on Zabini, Nott, and Goyle were equally hard to miss.

“And you three knew, didn’t you!” she cried.

Sheepishly, they nodded.

“Hmm!” she huffed, folding her arms.

“Merlin…” Harry murmured, sinking into a chair next to Ginny. “How?”

Somebody pushed a pint of dark, rich ale at him, and gratefully, he took a swallow.

Hermione took up the tale then. “We were both in that uni prep class Hogwarts gave last year, though we didn’t say two words to each other the whole time. I knew I intended to try for Oxford. I had no idea that he did as well. And then… well… we ran into each other the first week of term. I was shocked to see him. Turned out we had a lecture together and a tutorial as well, and… you know… we worked really well together and got on and spent a lot of time talking, and just sort of… became friends.” She paused and smiled at Draco. “Really good friends.”

“And it was all downhill after that,” Draco teased, and got a kick under the table for it.

“Seriously, though… that’s how it started. And now… well…here we are.” She sighed as she sat back, giving everyone a hopeful smile before taking a sip of her drink.

_Bloody. Fucking. Hell._ Of all people in the universe -- _Malfoy!_ Harry stared at his old friend, disbelief still protesting in his brain.

He took a large gulp of his drink.

\*

An hour and a half later—

“… and then… and _then_ she said in that voice of hers—you remember—she said, ‘It is absolutely uncanny, Mr. Potter, the way your dreams and those of Mr. Weasley are so very similar night after night! The two of you have clearly got a connection from a past life that is manifesting itself in your dreams!’ And then she looked at me through those thick specs of hers—I mean, she was a sodding
inch from my face, I swear! — and said, ‘We must investigate the connection together! I shall expect the two of you here tonight after supper with your dream journals. In the meantime, I must prepare!’”

Harry sat back, his face flushed with mirth, and wiped his eyes. Laughter bubbled up all around him. Everybody remembered their eccentric Divination professor, Madame Trelawney, all too well. Harry’s imitation had been absolutely spot on.

“What happened, Potter? Did you and Weasley show?” Draco leaned back, flinging an arm around Hermione, who was comfortably snuggled against him, her head on his shoulder. He had quite a nice little buzz going, and he was enjoying it.

“Oh, we went all right,” Ron chimed in. His third pint glass was down by half. “Silly cow made us sit there half the night with our hands on her crystal ball and our eyes shut, while she communed with whatever spirits she fancied she’d got hold of. Told us we’d been twin sisters separated at birth and our souls were reaching out and trying to make contact at night in our dreams!” Ron snorted and took a swallow of his beer. “Never heard such absolute rubbish. Totally round the twist, that one.”

Pansy giggled and moved slightly closer to him. “I bet your real dreams must have been a lot more interesting.”

Ron turned to look at Pansy, surprised and then flattered at the attention. He grinned. “Too right they were.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Still are.”

Pansy laughed and drained her glass. “I’d like to hear about those sometime.”

Over Hermione’s head, Draco exchanged glances with Blaise and both grinned. Interesting development. Who would have thought it, indeed.

Ginny extricated herself from Harry’s loose-limbed embrace and stood suddenly. “Right, time for a visit to the ladies’. Anyone care to join me?”

It was like a well-timed cue. Before anyone knew it, all four girls were moving in the direction of the door with a drawing of a forest nymph on it.

“What the fuck is it about the ladies’ that women seem compelled to go as a pack?” Blaise mused. “We don’t do that!”

Neville nodded. “Like a magnet, it is. They can’t seem to help themselves!”

“It’s very simple,” Draco replied, with lazy self-assurance. “They do it so they can talk about us blokes.” He put his glass down with a resounding clink. “Can’t very well do it in front of us, can they. Need someplace private. I’ll wager that right now, they’re in that little room giggling and trying to worm details out of Hermione, or maybe…” He looked with an evil smile at Ron. “Just maybe Pansy’s their target now, eh?”

Ron coloured, but he was grinning. “And if she was?”

Draco raised his glass to Ron. “I’d say more power to you, mate.”

The table erupted in laughter as Ron raised his glass in response and tossed back its contents.

Meanwhile, in the ladies’, the four girls were busy brushing their hair and freshening their makeup.

“Okay, Hermione, spill!” Ginny said sternly. “I mean, for Merlin’s sake—you and Malfoy? Details, woman!”
“Right! What’s been going on?” Luna chimed in, pressing closer. Her big, blue eyes were wide with curiosity as she adjusted the dragonfly clip in her hair. “Not that I’m surprised, really. I remember how he used to look at you.”

“I’d rather like to know that myself!” Pansy remarked, giving her hair a quick brushing. “I mean, I’ve known Draco just about all my life, practically since we were in nappies, and I had no idea he was seeing you.”

“It’s really just as I told you before…” she began.

“That isn’t what we’re asking, and well you know it!” Ginny exclaimed, exasperated.

“Oh,” Hermione said, flushing. “Well… I… he’s so not what I ever thought about him all those years at school. There’s so much more to him! I suppose he realised there’s more to me than he knew as well. We talk a lot, you know? I know he trusts me, because he’s told me a lot of very private things. And I’ve told him things too. It’s just so… comfortable is the best word for it, really, but-- not like an old shoe, I don’t mean it that way…It’s just that being with him, I can really be myself. I mean…” She blushed again, dropping her gaze. “I… I love him… but the thing is, I really like him as well. And I know he feels the same.”

She glanced at the others with a wistful smile. “You know the sad bit? We actually have a lot in common, and I think we could’ve been real friends years ago, if… well… if all that pure-blood rubbish and house rivalries hadn’t got in the way. You’re right, Luna -- he’s rather liked me for a long time, he told me so. But he couldn’t let himself feel that. It went too much against everything he knew.”

She turned to the mirror and smoothed a curl into place, and then turned back. “He’s… I don’t know… I can’t say he’s perfect. Neither am I. It isn’t that. But we’re a really good fit. It just feels right. And…and I love him. I really do. He touches me. He’s always with me… here.” She laid her hand on her heart. “Does that make sense?”

The other three nodded solemnly. A quiet moment passed while Hermione’s words were digested. Then Ginny grinned, a wicked twinkle in her eyes. She was determined to get the answer to that other question, the one they all wanted to know about.

“So. What’s he like then?” she said, sotto voce.

Hermione laughed, her face pink. She waited for a moment, capitalising on the drama of the pause, and then leaned closer to her friends, her own voice dropping to a whisper. “Bloody. Amazing.”

There. That should do it. Grinning, she reached for the doorknob.

* * *

It was very late. The pub had nearly emptied out. Time, finally, to go.

Fairly well pissed by now, everyone shrugged on their outerwear and headed for the Apparition point outside in a rather uncoordinated shamble. Harry lagged behind to talk to Hermione, cornering her by the door.

“Look,” he said. “I jus’ want to say… I mean… well… Shit, Hermione. I just want to say it’s your
life. And if… if, you know, he makes you happy — if he really does—then I’m happy for you. I mean it.”

“Me too.”

Ron stood quietly behind Harry, looking sheepish.

“I was a bit of a wanker earlier. Sorry. It was just such a…”

“Shock?” Hermione smiled ruefully.

“Yes. That’s it. A shock. I mean… fuck’s sake, Hermione… we’re talking about…”

“Malfoy. Yes, I know.” Draco was waiting for her just outside the door. But this was important.

“But… yeah, you know… well, it’s what Harry said, and all. Just want you to be happy.”

Ron stared down at the floor, unable to meet her eyes.

Tears were starting, and Hermione threw her arms around both her old friends, hugging them fiercely.

“He makes me very happy indeed,” she whispered, pulling them closer. “Thank you for this.”

When Draco poked his head around the door, he saw the three of them huddled together, arms around each other, and he smiled to himself. It was what he’d hoped for. He wondered if he’d get that same understanding from Pansy.

He didn’t have long to wait for an answer. Blaise, Theo, Greg, and Pansy came up behind him, and she tapped him on the shoulder. Rather unceremoniously, Theo and Blaise pulled Greg off to the side.

“Knut for your thoughts,” Pansy said mildly.

“Think I’d pay a Galleon for yours right about now,” Draco replied, chuckling.

“Well, if I’m going to be totally honest… I can’t say I didn’t feel just a tiny bit disappointed at first. That, and incredibly surprised. I’d never have imagined… well… I suppose I’d still held out some small hope that maybe…oh, it’s silly, really. Deep down, I knew it was never going happen between us. And honestly, I think a big part of me didn’t want it to, anyway. The truth is, I love you, Draco—but not in that way. I tried to make it be that, but it just wasn’t, and never could be. I know that. I want to love somebody the way I know Hermione loves you.”

He looked sharply at her then. “Did she tell you that?”

She smiled and squeezed his hand for a moment. “Yes, you prat, she did. But she needn’t have done. I could see it for myself. It was written all over her face.”

Her words ignited a warmth in his chest, and now he felt it spreading through his veins right down to the tips of his fingers and toes. He found he had no words at that moment. So Pansy reached up and kissed his cheek.

“Be happy, my friend,” she said. “You deserve it. Happy New Year!” With that, she turned, walked to the Apparition point, and vanished.

He looked at the spot where she had been, sighed with satisfaction, and then turned to his friends,
who had returned to stand alongside him.

Blaise got straight to the point. “How did your old man take it?”

Draco snorted. “You mean, once he knew it was Granger? Not as badly as I expected, actually. Fairly sure my mother had something to do with that. But I told them this is how it is. Take it or leave it. If he gives me any grief, that’s it. I’ve got my own money now. I can leave.”

The other three glanced quickly at each other, eyebrows raised.

“We had tea, for fuck’s sake!” Draco continued. “I felt like shit, subjecting Granger to that. But there was no way around it. She was brilliant though. A real trouper.” He grinned, remembering. “And now my mother’s said that Hermione is welcome at the house. Welcome.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Bloody hell,” Blaise murmured.

“Indeed.” Draco nodded. “You’ve got it in one.”

“Well, good luck, mate,” Theo sighed. “Though I really don’t think you’re gonna need too much of it. Sounds to me like you’ve got this one well in hand. For now, anyway.” He laughed, and clapped Draco on the back. “Cheers!” In the next moment, he had vanished with a pop.

“Yeah, best luck, Malfoy.” Greg stuck his hand out. “I like her. She’s all right.” Even as he turned to go with Blaise, an uncomfortable sense of business left undone tugged at him. He stopped.

“Hang on a tick, Zabini.” He waited for the door to open once again.

Hermione appeared within a minute, flanked by both Harry and Ron, with Ginny on Harry’s other side. They all leaned in and kissed her, and then Ginny turned to her.

“I’m so happy for you!” she said very quietly, and gave Hermione a hug. “It’s wonderful! He seems really, really different now.”

“Thanks!” Hermione hugged her friend back, the tears threatening to well up once again.

In the meantime, Harry had walked over to Draco.

“Just… take care of her,” he said quietly. “I love her a lot. Don’t want to see her get hurt. I know… I know that you love her too. Be good to her, yeah?” He stuck out his hand and Draco grasped it.

“I will. And Potter…”

Harry stopped. “Yeah?”

“Thanks. For my life. I never had a chance to tell you that.”

Harry inclined his head and the beginnings of a lopsided grin lifted a corner of his mouth. For a long moment, the two young men regarded each other. Then, they dropped hands and Harry took a step back. Looping his arm through Ginny’s, he Apparated them away.

Only Ron remained. He took a step in Draco’s direction, but stopped when Goyle shuffled over to them.

“Look,” he said, clearly uneasy. “Just wanted to say… thanks. For… you know… You didn’t have to do it, and I’m not sure I’d have done the same. But… well… fact is, I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t
“Thanks, Goyle,” Hermione said gently. “Ron?”

Ron nodded, accepting the hand that Goyle offered, first to Hermione and then to him.

After he left, Ron walked over to Draco.

“Look…” he said, taking a deep breath, his demeanor suddenly quite somber. “Hermione means a lot to me. Don’t… don’t bugger it up, all right? ” His voice trailed off. He knew what he wanted to say, but somehow words had deserted him suddenly.

“I won’t,” Draco said quietly.

“Right, then. Well… g’night,” Ron said, nodding. A moment later, he, too, had gone.

The narrow lane in which the pub stood was deserted now, and it had begun to snow lightly. They stood under the eaves, watching tiny snowflakes wheel and swirl crazily, illuminated by the light from candles enclosed in the glass boxes of the street lamps. It was preternaturally quiet. Not a soul was in sight, and the new snow muffled all sound.

Draco opened his arms to Hermione and wrapped her in the outer folds of his cloak. The cold, snowy air was sobering the two of them up rapidly. She turned and leaned back against his chest; his arms slipped around her waist, hugging her to him, and she covered them with her own, her eyes drifting shut for a minute.

“What did you think? Not too bad, yeah?” she asked, threading her fingers through his.

“Not bad at all,” he replied, burying his face in her hair and dropping a kiss on the top of her head before resting his chin there. “Actually came off rather well, I thought.”

“Yes, it did, rather, didn’t it! I’m amazed!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Me too,” Draco admitted. “Could’ve been a right balls-up. But everybody was very cool about it.” He gave a short laugh. “Well, except for Weasley.” Tightening his arms around Hermione, he bent to kiss the side of her neck.

A small thrill shot through her at the touch of his cool lips on the sensitive skin just below her left ear.

“Yes…” she began, and realised she’d lost her train of thought. “What… what were you saying?”

Draco laughed softly. “Weasley,” he whispered in her ear, and touched the very tip of his tongue to her ear lobe.

“Right, yes. Ron.” Her breath slid out of her in a sigh. “What about him?”

He said nothing, instead continuing his gentle assault on her neck, moving lower and lower until, turning her to face him, he’d reached her mouth. For just the briefest moment he paused, his breath and hers rising in steamy clouds between them, and then he caught her mouth in a searching, soulful kiss that promised to go on forever.

Suddenly, though, he broke away and swiftly unfastened his cloak, holding it open.

“Open yours too,” he told her. “I’ll keep you warm.”

Trembling slightly, she obeyed, and then stepped into the shelter he offered. Muttering a quick
“Subiungo!” to secure his own cloak around the two of them, and an additional Warming Charm to create a bubble of comfortable air around them, he drew her close, his hands buried in the luxuriant hair at the back of her neck.

“Mmm…” he sighed contentedly, kissing her again, and now he ran his hands lightly down the front of Hermione’s jersey. There were annoying little buttons that needed undoing, and this he proceeded to do as his mouth and tongue kept hers busy.

“Clever girl,” he said softly, once he’d parted the two halves of her jersey and found her bra. “A front clasp. Well done.” In a trice, he had the bra unhooked so that it, too, fell away to either side.

His hands felt like heaven on her bare skin as they enveloped her breasts, and then began a slow, deliberate, circular stroking, his fingertips gliding over her nipples and teasing them into firm, tingling buds. Already there was a ticklish, rippling heat growing between her legs, and she pressed her thighs together to relieve it.

There would be no relief, however, not yet, only a heightening of the sensations, as Draco dipped his head down inside the tent-like cloak and took one of her nipples between his teeth, biting it gently and then soothing the sensitive tissue with a curl of his tongue.

“Oh…” she hissed. “Do that again!”

“A pleasure, my lady,” he murmured, and repeated the act, lavishing his attentions on each breast in turn.

Finally, she couldn’t bear it any longer, and brought his head back up so that she could take his soft mouth with hers. As they kissed, he carefully manoeuvred them around so that now, she was leaning against the wall of the building. The kisses were long, exquisitely deep exchanges, alternately hungry and tender.

She could feel him pressed, hard and heated with desire, against her abdomen, and she found herself reaching for the button and then the zip on his jeans. He smiled against her mouth as he realised what she intended, and felt himself grow harder still, in anticipation.

Her hands were warm as she freed him from the confines of his clothing, pushing his jeans and boxers aside just enough that she could explore where she chose.

Supple fingers stroked his cock whilst the other hand kneaded the firm, smooth cheeks of his bum and then returned to his balls, cupping them and then caressing them as she worked his cock harder.

He threw his head back and moaned softly. *Just there, yes!... that feels so good… ah, don’t stop, love… don’t ever stop…*

It didn’t take long. Without warning, a sudden tightening deep inside his testicles ignited in a fiery rush along the length of his penis, exploding in a shower of semen in her hand and on their clothes.

Hermione smiled up at him in the dim light and popped a finger into her mouth.

“Gods, that was phenomenal!” he whispered. “Your turn now, love.”

A quick Scourgify and both were clean and dry, and before she knew it, he had her jeans open, one hand disappearing down into her delicious warmth.

“Oh… Hermione…” he breathed.
He took her mouth again in a series of soft, sweet kisses as his fingers discovered the soft, downy place between her legs, its folds slippery with want. He began stroking her, sliding his fingers in and then withdrawing them to stroke the tiny, pulsing bud, coating it with her wetness. His other hand rested on her chest, his fingertips moving over her breasts in steady, gentle, tickling circles.

Hermione’s eyes were closed and her head lolled back, soft moans silenced by his mouth on hers.

In those moments, everything around her stopped. There was nothing but the slick, feathery sensation of his insistent fingers on the most intimate parts of herself. She needed him to touch her there, he mustn’t stop… What had begun as a tiny thrumming deep inside her was now on the verge of igniting and consuming her.

One final flick of her engorged clit and she was clenching around his fingers, her spasms squeezing them in rippling waves. Throwing her arms around his neck, she held on tightly as her heart slowed from its frantic banging in her chest and its roaring in her ears. She wanted nothing more than to feel the whole of him pressed against her.

When, finally, her breathing had calmed, she stepped away and began buttoning her clothing. They still stood within the warm confines of his cloak.

“Let me,” Draco said softly, and gently pushed her hands away so that he could finish buttoning her jersey. She stood still, arms at her sides, and as he pulled the zip of her jeans up, she threaded her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. She could hear his heart beating steadily.

“I love you so much,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” came his voice from above her head. This time, it wasn’t tentative. It was clear and strong.

She looked up in surprise. “I thought… I didn’t know you’d heard me.”

He gave her a cocky grin. “Oh, I heard. I always listen when women make declarations of love to me.” He leaned down and nuzzled her neck. “Plan to hold you to that, y’know.”

She giggled. “It goes both ways, y’know.”

“Counting on it, Granger.”

The long vacation had finally come to an end. Trunks were packed and goodbyes were said. On Sunday, the Grangers drove Hermione back to Oxford, and she spent that day unpacking and settling back into her little room in Staircase 2. As she arranged her collection of framed pictures on the chest of drawers and on the desk, she added a pair of them in a simple frame, taken the night Draco had come to dinner. At the time, she’d been embarrassed and had protested, but Richard had insisted. An amateur photographer, he’d just bought himself a new camera and was dying to try it out.

He’d taken shots of Claire, Hermione, Claire with Hermione, Claire with both Hermione and Draco, and then several of Hermione and Draco alone. A few had turned out especially well, and these he had made copies of and given to her before she left.
There were two in particular that she especially loved. Richard had snapped a few spontaneous shots in addition to the posed ones, one of them taken whilst Draco was leaning over Hermione at the dining table as they looked at the old photo album. She’d just turned her head to look up at him, the two of them laughing at the old photo on the page in front of them. A moment of pure, shared pleasure caught on film.

The other was a nice shot of the two of them on the sitting room sofa together, pleasantly relaxed after a couple of glasses of wine. Draco had thrown his arm around Hermione’s shoulder and she’d nestled in close, their hands entwined in her lap.

But there was a third, one she’d taken herself with a magical camera on New Year’s Eve. They’d been sitting on the sofa watching Monty Python and sharing the leftover apple tart topped up with double cream. Playfully he’d dabbed a bit of the cream on her nose, and in retaliation, she’d painted a moustache and goatee on him. Just then, a particularly funny bit of the film had come on and he’d thrown his head back in helpless laughter. She’d managed to capture her handiwork and his subsequent laughter forever on film. She would cover it over with the sofa shot, and just enjoy the moving picture when she was alone.

A pretty double frame made from fired clay and dressed in a cobalt-blue glaze had caught her eye in the local stationer’s, and she’d bought it, setting the three pictures inside. Now, standing back and viewing this newest addition to her collection, she smiled with satisfaction.

Draco would be returning to Oxford the following day. There was something she must do before that. The rest of the unpacking would keep. Leaving her open trunk and belongings scattered about the room, she slipped out.

*  

The 2.13 from Bath seemed shorter, somehow, than its hour and thirty-four minutes. The countryside, frosted white from the recent snowfall, whizzed past the grimy train windows, but Draco didn’t notice any of it. He was deep in thought about the eventful weeks he’d just passed at home.

It had been a slightly uneasy parting. Much remained unsaid between him and his parents, his father particularly, despite—or perhaps because of—everything that had transpired in the past five weeks. He’d sensed that his mother wanted to say more as she handed him a wrapped cake, one of his favourites, and then hesitated for a moment before putting her arms around him.

“Have a good journey back, darling. I’ll miss you,” she said in his ear. “Please write.”

“Will you write back this time?” he’d asked. During the vacation, he’d gone into Castle Combe with her and shown her once again how it was all done, how easy it really was. He’d even bought her a large supply of postal stamps and a box of envelopes.

Lucius knew about this now, but he wisely refrained from commenting or objecting. It was important to Narcissa to be in touch with their son. One day, he’d even looked at the box of stationery on her writing desk in the drawing room, idly turning over the stamps and envelopes and studying the paper on which Draco had written his address at Oxford. Curious, the way Muggles sent their post. He wondered about the speed and efficiency of such an operation. Perhaps he’d test it sometime.
“Yes, dear, I will. I promise. And do please convey my — our regards to your young lady.” Narcissa had kissed him and then stood back, her eyes suspiciously bright.

He’d nodded, smiling, and turned to his father then. Lucius stood there, ramrod straight, his expression impassive as it so often was around his son.

“Well…” Draco said uncertainly, “goodbye, Father.” Tentatively, he put his hand out.

Lucius moved forward to accept his son’s outstretched hand, holding it for just a moment beyond the handshake.

“I…” he began, and then words simply failed him. A rather stiff “Goodbye, Draco, safe journey” were all he could manage.

A moment later, Draco had Disapparated. Gone for another two months’ time.

He played the scene back in his head as the train sped along, as well as other images that returned as well: the dinner at Hermione’s house and her parents’ warmth and hospitality; that photo of Hermione that Claire had slipped into their Yule present to him (he had that safely tucked up in the book and would look at it frequently, he knew); Notting Hill and Glastonbury (he reached up to touch the tiny earring briefly, and smiled); the very best New Year’s Eve he’d ever had, followed by the very worst New Year’s Day; the evening of the Big Disclosure at the Pestle and Mortar. How odd, he thought, to be on actually decent speaking terms with both Potter and Weasley and the other Gryffindors, too, after so many years of open hostility.

The train pulled into the station at Oxford five minutes early, and he dragged his canvas trunk and rucksack off the train and onto the platform, scouting about for a taxi. Before long, he was on his way back to Catte Street.

Passing through the porter’s lodge, he stopped to pick up his keys and check to see if there were anything in the post for him. As it happened, there was. A medium-sized parcel waited for him there, and he took it, tremendously curious about its contents and who might have sent it.

Back in his familiar room in Staircase 5, he dumped the trunk and rucksack on the floor and eagerly sat down on his bed to open the cardboard mailing box. It was one of the sort that mail-order companies sending books and CDs used, though it was a little bit larger, and it was somewhat tricky to get open at first. It had come from Amazon and he was puzzled; he knew he hadn’t ordered anything before leaving for home, and certainly had no way of doing that once he was there.

He managed finally with the help of a pair of scissors, pulling the top off triumphantly. There, in two sealed plastic bags, were a t-shirt and a pair of pyjama trousers.

He ripped open the plastic and shook them both out of the bags to have a better look and his eyes went wide.

The shirt was black, and had a picture of a knight wearing a squared-off, brass helmet with a rectangular eyehole. Where his arms should have been, there were only gaping, bloody holes, and alongside this gruesome image were the words “It’s Just a Flesh Wound.”

The pyjama bottoms were black as well, and had drawings all over of a soldier’s face with a long, curled, pencil-thin moustache and a strangely egg-shaped helmet on his head, along with the words “I Fart In Your General Direction.”

Granger.
He sat back, laughter exploding out of him, and as he did so, a card fell from the folds of the pyjama trousers. Still laughing, he opened the envelope. The message consisted of a single line:

“I expect to see you in these tonight.”

Jumping up, he hurried out of his room in search of a certain very audacious ex-Gryffindor whose command he had every intention of obeying.
Draco’s “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” pyjamas

Chapter End Notes

A/N: My thanks and gratitude always go first to my wonderful betas, kazfeist and mister_otter. It’s such a comfort knowing they’re there and so supportive, and have judgment I can always trust.

Continuing thanks to moonjameskitten for her very beautiful banner and manips!

Continuing thanks, as well, to everyone at HP_Britglish for their wonderfully helpful answers to some fairly obscure questions.

If you’re interested in ordering Monty Python pyjama bottoms or t-shirts for yourself, you can find information at:

Subiungo—Latin for “to attach, to join.” Never having studied Latin, I am relying on an online Latin-English dictionary, which is not exactly a foolproof method. If I’ve mangled the conjugation or context and somebody can help me correct it, I’d be most grateful. Thanks!

Disclaimer: All this belongs to JKR with the exception of Richard and Claire, Oxford, the plot, the pyjamas, and Subiungo! I make no money from this story.
Saturday
16 February

By the time bars of thin, milky light had begun to seep through the window blinds, the snow had already been falling steadily for six hours. It came down in heavy, blinding curtains, obscuring the trees, shrubs, buildings and paved walkways that formed the landscape outside Hermione’s window. There was virtually no sign of life—nothing but the white snow sky and the swirling masses of flakes that fell silently, blanketing the world.

At just past eight, Hermione stirred. The room was chilly as it so often was, and she burrowed further down into the bedclothes to try to find a warm spot.

An arm snaked its way around her waist, pulling her back firmly against its owner’s chest.

“Hey, where’re you going?” a sleepy voice asked petulantly.

Hermione smiled but said nothing, merely wriggling comfortably into the warm, delicious maleness of the body wedged against hers.
They slept a bit longer, wrapped in the snug cocoon of Hermione’s duvet, as the snowstorm continued, unabated, rendering the world a silent faerie realm of white. Nine o’clock came and went. The room was much brighter now, but it was the brightness of snow light, not of sunshine. The snow still fell in fat, round flakes.

“Granger.” The voice was muffled by layers of bedclothes. “Granger, you awake?”

“I am now.”

“Good. I’m famished. Got anything to eat?”

“Always thinking of your appetite, Malfoy!”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Well, all right, maybe I am. But there’s nothing like good food and a good f--”

“Hey!”

“Sorry, love. What I meant to say was that good food and the amorous attentions of a warm, beautiful, and incredibly sexy woman are two of life’s greatest pleasures for me.”

“Ah. I see. In that order?”

“Not necessarily. ‘Course…” He paused. “I am speaking in the abstract at the moment, as there’s no food in sight.”

Another pause.

“And… the beautiful, sexy woman?” Hermione raised an eyebrow.

“Right, yeah… Know of anybody?”

“Oh-h! You!” She grabbed a pillow and rounded on Draco’s hapless blond head. In a flash, he had vanished beneath the covers, pulling her down under by the ankles and proceeding to tickle her mercilessly.

Her shrieks, his shouts, and their combined laughter were muffled to some extent by the duvet. Next door, however, in room six, Gemma Martin looked up from her desk where she was reading, her coffee mug halfway to her lips. She grinned and shook her head. They emerged, flushed and dishevelled and a bit breathless, still laughing.

“Not fair!” she protested, shaking her head and running a hand through her hair to push it out of her eyes. “Since when is biting allowed?”

“Depends on where one’s being bitten, I’d say,” Draco replied lazily, raking a hand through his own hair and smiling with annoying nonchalance. “In this case, the rather delectable target presented itself to me on a platter, so to speak.”

“Hmm!” Hermione winced slightly as she gingerly felt for the tender spot on her bum. “I bet you left teeth marks!”

“Oh, I do hope so,” he laughed, fending off another smack of the pillow to his head. “Now, now,
control yourself, Granger. I prefer my brains inside my head rather than leaking out my ears. Got an essay to write later. I believe…” he continued, stretching lazily as he leaned back against the pillows, bending one leg at the knee and extending the other one straight out, completely at ease with his nakedness. “…the subject was food.”

“Cheeky,” she muttered. “Well, I’ve all sorts of stuff, actually. Mum keeps sending care parcels full of goodies. Thinks I’m starving here, apparently. Let’s see…” She slipped off the bed and crouched down, pulling a long, shallow plastic box out from under the bed.

“Right. We’ve got… all sorts of biscuits, instant cocoa mix, tea, coffee, instant soups, a jar of honey, some peanut butter… some packets of sugar… jam… granola bars, Weetabix, cornflakes… tuna fish, crabmeat salad, and pasta salad in tins…”

“And pheasant under glass, too, I suppose?” Draco deadpanned. “What about milk, then?”

“In the fridge down the hall. If somebody hasn’t nicked it, that is.”

Draco’s head suddenly appeared alongside hers as he leaned over the side of the bed. “On second thought, Granger…come back to bed. We can eat… food… anytime.” He winked, his grin rakish.

Marvelous idea. She hopped back into bed, pulling the duvet over the two of them like a cloak, and snuggled close to him.

He was warm and smelled so good. She marveled at the fact that Draco Malfoy smelled so incredibly nice just about all the time, and it wasn’t his soap or the hint of fresh, light cologne he wore. It was simply a clean, natural, very masculine scent embedded in his very pores. She’d read somewhere about pheromones in the natural world—how potent they were for mammals and insects in the mating season, for instance—and knew that this attraction was precisely that, and every bit as primal. Old-fashioned, very powerful chemistry, and utterly irresistible.

All she wanted just then was to bury her face in his skin and simply breathe him in. She hovered above his chest near to his arm, which rested at his side. Happily, she sniffed him there, pressing her nose into his warmth. She was dangerously close to his very ticklish armpit.

“Hey! Your nose is bloody freezing!” Draco exclaimed with a shout of laughter, his eyes flying open in surprise.

“I know! I’m trying to warm it up!” Hermione pushed her nose in harder, making him laugh again, and now he twined his arms around her, pulling her flush onto him, tangling their legs together. It was quite cosy under the duvet, and when he kissed her finally— a slow, meltingly sensuous joining—food was totally forgotten.

* *

Draco’s head popped through the neck opening of his t-shirt and he pushed his arms through the sleeves, and then began pulling on the pyjama trousers Hermione had bought him. They were a nice, soft, toasty flannel and had the dual benefits of keeping him warm whilst making him laugh.

“Weetabix,” he said suddenly. “And tea. What’ve you got at the moment?”

Hermione turned. She’d just slipped into an oversized tee and a pair of soft, baggy sweats, and was
taken aback by the apparent randomness of the comment.

“Oh!” She thought for a minute. “Well, chamomile, and some Earl Grey. A bit of Yorkshire Gold, too, I think. Care to try something new for a change?” She grinned and raised a questioning eyebrow, though she was fairly certain of what he’d say. She’d learned that Draco was very much a creature of habit.

He stood and padded over to her, his toes curling in the soft pile of the rug, and slipped his arms around her from behind, nuzzling her neck. “Nope,” he said cheerfully. “You know what I like. I’ll get the kettle going whilst you get the milk. Don’t really fancy walking down the hall in this get-up, much as it would no doubt give your friends a thrill.”

He flashed her a cocky grin, swatted her bum, and went to fill the electric kettle at the small sink.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Incorrigible. That’s what he was. And utterly charming. And he knew it.

After a quick breakfast, they were lingering over their tea and watching the snow fall when there was a knock on the outer door.

“Hermione!” It was Alison from room two downstairs. “Come outside! Snowball fight! Holywell against NB!”

“Oh…” Hermione looked at Draco, torn suddenly. She’d been planning to settle down to some serious work this morning, on an essay their shared tutor, Dr. Madox, had assigned them. And she’d been hoping to persuade Draco to do the same. It was for Intro to Literary Studies, required for both of them in their first year, and they’d been set an assignment that was due in five days’ time. They’d do separate essays, but each was counting on the benefit of the other’s perspective on the text. “Oh, but…” she began again. “I wanted… I was going to…”

“Merlin, Granger, there’s loads of time yet. Nothing to worry about. Can’t let Holywell down, now can we? Where’s your quad spirit? Draco chided with mock sternness, the corners of his mouth quirking in an impish grin as he tossed back the remainder of his tea and set the mug on the desk. He began stripping off his pyjamas and pulling on boxers, jeans and a warm jumper. “Where are my socks, d’you know, love?” He stopped suddenly and straightened, twisting round to look at Hermione, who was standing stock still. “Quit faffing about, woman, and get some clothes on! We’re needed!”

There was no getting out of it, she could see, and from the looks of things outside the window, nobody else was trying either. A fair number of Holywell residents had already begun to stream out of the five staircase entrances, some sensibly bundled up against the cold and snow, which was still coming down, and others ridiculously and quite unconcernedly underdressed. Everybody seemed giddy with excitement though.

There was a party atmosphere in the air, a certain exhilaration akin to that which small children feel when school is cancelled unexpectedly because of just this sort of heavy snowfall. It was as if all bets were off and they were suddenly free to just go out and play. It hadn’t taken long for the idea of an inter-quad snowball war to take shape and spread, Holywell against New Quad. There was talk that after that, the victors would send a challenge to Old Quad. How precisely the winner would be determined was rather sketchy at the moment, but nobody seemed terribly concerned about that anyway—more than likely, whichever side had more people still standing who could still feel their fingers and toes.

Draco buttoned his jacket, pulled a knitted cap down over his ears, threw his woollen muffler round his neck and wrapped it securely, and grabbed his gloves.
“Ready, Granger?” He glanced out the window every five seconds, it seemed, practically champing at the bit to get outside. Things were hotting up out there already, with the two sides consolidating. It looked like good packing snow too, judging by the round, hard missiles that were already being stockpiled on both sides of the quad.

Still just slightly disgruntled but also feeling a guilty thrill of excitement, Hermione yanked a woollen cloche hat over her curls, pulled her mittens on, and grinned.

“Let’s go!”

The battle cry had managed to raise about twenty denizens of each quad, a fair number on a snowy Saturday morning when many people were very happy just to be enjoying a lazy lie-in.

Hermione had spotted a couple of the girls from her staircase and had gone over to talk to them for a minute, leaving Draco to begin packing snowballs on his own.

“Oi! Malfoy!”

Draco turned. Approaching him and waving was Tony Spencer, who lived across the landing from him.

“Wasn’t sure we’d be able to pry you out, not with your track record!” Tony gave a knowing smirk. “Hardly seen you lately, mate.”

“Oh, I’ve been around,” Draco said carelessly. “Just been busy. Got more important things to do than arsing about with you lot.”

“Fuck you, Malfoy!” Tony was cheerful. “What about this, then? Fucking brilliant. We can take that lot, easy.”

Draco nodded. “Reckon so.” Then he grinned evilly. “Care to make a small wager on how long it takes us to put them away?”

Tony’s smile was lazy and self-assured. “Oh, I think I can manage a small wager. Say… a fiver?”

“You’re on,” Draco agreed. “But… seeing as I’m eminently fair-minded, what say we up the ante to ten and extend our little wager to… ah, Applegate!”

Draco hailed another of his floor mates as Mark Applegate drew closer. He had just opened his mouth to say hello. Now he shut it again, eyeing Draco with a touch of suspicion born of a certain familiarity with his friend’s creative and quick mind.

“Yeah?” he asked carefully.

“Got a proposition for you, mate. We’ve got a small wager going, Spencer and I— ten pounds on the best guess at how long it’ll take before we wipe the floor with NB. I say half an hour. Spencer here reckons twenty minutes tops. Care to add something to the pot?”

“Applegate goes out on a limb,” Draco snorted. “Right, thirty pounds in the pot.” He glanced around, surveying the immediate area for other potential takers.

“Look at them,” Susan Croft laughed. She, Hermione, and Maggie Stewart, all of Staircase 2, had been chatting some small distance away, their cheeks rosy with the cold. Maggie and Susan were neighbours one floor above Hermione. In addition, Suze was currently going out with Tony and Mags with Mark, the two relationships having come about in the course of a single, rather raucous party between the staircases one night in the previous term-- so they were well aware of the boys’ frequent and seemingly indiscriminate propensity for laying odds. “They just have to bet on everything! Next thing you know, they’ll be wagering on how many tenths of an inch of snow have collected on a particular dustbin!”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I know! I wouldn’t put it past any of them! Of course,” she added with a wink, “whoever collects might just take one of us out on the winnings…”

The girls laughed and bent to roll some snowballs.

The battle began in earnest five minutes later, when snowy missiles began to fly furiously in every direction. The snow was dry and perfect, and a well-aimed snowball packed quite a punch.

Draco had turned to gather together more snow when he took one, hard, in the back. Turning around, he spotted a gleeful high-five between two residents of NB Quad. Quickly, he pushed two large handfuls of snow together, packed it tightly, and in one fluid movement, let fly with it, hitting his attacker squarely in the chest. He answered the look of surprise with a complacent grin and got ready to fire off another.

Hermione was busy fending off attacks of her own. She’d just been belted in the shoulder rather painfully—that would be a bruise later, she knew—and was desperate to avenge herself. Rolling the biggest snowball she could throw, she lobbed it off in the direction of her assailant, a tall girl with red hair stuffed into a black woollen cap, and managed to knock the cap clean off and deposit a fair bit of snow in her hair at the same time.

“Hermione! Over here!”

Hermione turned from her labours to see Draco waving furiously at her. She grinned and waved back, and then ran in a rather ungainly fashion, given the amount of snow on the ground, to join him. He gathered her in a quick hug, their breath coming in steaming clouds in the crystalline cold, their noses and cheeks apple-red.

“I saw that, you know,” he laughed. “Bugger me, Granger! I’m glad you’re on our side! Wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of one of those! You’ve got quite an arm, you have!”

Hermione smiled complacently. “Practice, that’s all. Lots of snowball fights in Stratford Way, growing up!”

An image of a much younger Hermione playing happily with a gaggle of neighbourhood kids flashed into Draco’s mind, and he smiled at the thought, just as she was imagining, suddenly, the rather more lonely childhood he must have had, growing up in the isolated splendour of Malfoy Manor. She squeezed him tightly.

“Hey, what’s all this then?” he whispered into her ear. “You okay?”

She nodded and held onto him a moment longer, then stepped back. “Come on, Malfoy,” she said resolutely. “We’ve got a war to win!”
Precisely twenty-one minutes later, it was all over. The first annual inter-quad snowball war had lasted a total of thirty-three minutes, so the pot—a grand total of sixty pounds—went to Draco as the one whose guess had come closest. However, in the end, he decided—with a tiny bit of prodding from Hermione—to share it with all participants in the bet and their respective girlfriends/boyfriends/dates, in a party that night. The winnings would pay for rounds of drinks and food, as far as they would stretch. It seemed a fitting way to end what had been a very good day so far.

In the meantime, a tired but exhilarated pair trudged through the snow back to Staircase 2, room 5. It was lunchtime, but both of them were so cold, wet and tired that the prospect of prolonging the time in such a state was very unappealing, hungry as they were. And neither of them was inclined to go back out again for food once they’d got warm and dry. Hermione had proposed a quick meal scrounged together from the veritable supermarket-in-a-box under her bed, along with a bit of cheese she was fairly certain she still had in the hall fridge.

Both of Gemma’s doors were open, so as she rummaged in her pocket for her keys, Hermione poked her head in.

“You coming tonight, then?” she called.

Gemma had recently begun to see Danny Kirman, who lived one floor up. He’d put money down on a rather optimistic guess of fifteen minutes. She looked up from unlacing a soggy boot and nodded cheerfully. “Yup!”

“Later!” Hermione answered, and unlocked the door to her room.

“Listen, Malfoy,” she said firmly as the two of them stepped inside and began divesting themselves of their sodden clothing and boots. “No joke now—we absolutely MUST get some work done this afternoon!”

Draco sighed melodramatically as he peeled off a very wet sock and began to massage his cold, red foot. “Ahhh… ouch… Right, work. Yes. Absolutely,” he repeated. “Promise.” The other sock came off next as Hermione crouched down to take over the massage.

“Right, then,” she replied, deftly working the flats of her hands over his chilled skin. “No distractions! And I mean none.” She smiled then. “Better?” At his blissful nod, she grinned. “My turn!”

She sat herself down and stuck out her feet, inviting him to pull off her boots and socks and return the favour. Leaning back, she reveled in the lovely sensations his warm fingers provided, as feeling gradually returned to her numbed feet.

An impromptu lunch of tinned tuna fish, biscuits, cheese, and steaming mugs of instant minestrone soup had filled them both up nicely. Following a post-lunch lie-down, they felt refreshed and ready to get down to cases with their essays. And anyway, Draco had exhausted his repertoire of delaying tactics. He’d finally given up trying to tempt Hermione away from her decision to actually get some work done. She was determined on his behalf as well as her own, and he knew from experience that there was no arguing with her once she’d made up her mind. By six, they’d made sufficient progress.
to call it a day. It was decided, after a hurried consultation amongst several of the principals, that everyone would meet at eight at the King’s Arms, a few minutes’ walk from Hertford in Holywell Street.

The couples from Staircases 2 and 5 would be joined by Chris Pullman and his girlfriend Fiona Holroyd from Staircase 3, and Steve Holdstock and his date Gillian Marks, both from Staircase 1.

The walk over proved to be something of a challenge, as the snow ploughs had pushed huge piles of snow to the kerbs, creating frozen mountain ranges along each stretch of pavement. These had to be traversed at the corners by climbing very carefully up a slippery path dug out of the mountain and then making one’s way back down the slope and into the road. Every intersection was blocked in this manner. It was slow going and treacherous in spots, but at least most of the pavement itself had been cleared.

By just before eight, nearly everyone had arrived. Standing just inside the doorway of the pub, stamping their boot-shod feet free of snow, eight of them formed a tight knot that blocked the way for people coming and going.

“Better move in,” Danny shouted above the noise, grabbing Gemma’s elbow and propelling her further inside towards the bar.
Mark and Maggie were right behind them, followed by Draco and Hermione, with Tony and Susan bringing up the rear. They were only missing Steve and Chris and their dates. It turned out that the four errant members of the party were already waiting for them at the bar, having got a head start on the evening. Chris cheerfully waved a pint of Guinness at the new arrivals and then downed a good-sized gulp of the stuff, a moustache of creamy foam clinging to his upper lip. Everyone clustered round the bar, waiting their turn to be served, talking and laughing amongst themselves.

The KA was a noisy, crowded place, truly the quintessential English pub and very popular amongst students. It specialised with great pride in real ale, and had a wide variety of them on offer, as well as wines and whiskies and ciders of various sorts. The food was unpretentious and hearty, exactly what most people coming in to drink had in mind. The walls were plastered with photos of regulars, and sharp-eyed patrons might even spot one of the Queen Mother, ubiquitous handbag in tow, hoisting a pint.

“Right, everybody, drinks are on me,” Draco announced magnanimously, to a chorus of cheers mixed with catcalls. “I’m good for two rounds each. I’ll even kick in what’s left towards food. After that you’re on your own!”

“Ho, generous, Malfoy!” Chris chortled. “Considering you suckered us out of our money in the first place!”

“Bollocks!” Draco laughed, taking a swig from a pint of bitter. “That ten quid went from your hand to mine in a blur, as I recall. You were ready to raise the ante!”

“Too right, Pullman,” Steve cut in. “So you can spring for Malfoy’s dinner with the money you didn’t lose!”
Laughter all around.

Before long, the twelve of them were crammed into a large booth in a corner. Steaming plates of scampi and chips, shepherd’s pie, and fish and chips with the obligatory mushy peas arrived before long to join the tall glasses of stout, bitter and cider already in place. Hermione and a couple of the other girls had opted to try Young’s Waggle Dance, a pale, golden ale laced with honey.

“Less than three weeks before the end of term, can you credit it?” Suze said, shaking her head as she reached for a chip. “I’m so swamped right now, I don’t know which end is up!”

“I know what you mean,” Fiona muttered. “Any of you lot have Cameron?”

Hermione waved from across the table and rolled her eyes.

“The man hates me, I swear!” Fiona groaned. “I think he must have a thing about women students. D’you find, Hermione, that he never quite looks you in the eye?”

Hermione gave a knowing laugh. “Yes! It’s always the floor or the wall just over my shoulder! I’ve been wondering about that! Bit dodgy.”

“Ladies, ladies, let us not undermine the credibility of our esteemed tutors,” Draco tutted. “We are here at this great institution to learn and we must be ever humble.”

There were groans, and a chip came flying at his head. His hand shot up and he intercepted it just before it hit his left temple.

“Close, Granger.” Draco gave Hermione a smug grin, popping the tasty missile into his mouth. Oh yeah. Still got it.

“What’s everybody doing for the vac?” Tony looked around brightly, changing the subject.

“Not a bloody thing.”

“Fucking nothing, more’s the pity!”

“Reading, what the fuck d’you think? You’ve got Bates-- you know!”

“Italy.”

Everyone fell silent and all eyes swiveled towards Danny and Chris, who had replied in unison. They were grinning.

“Italy?” Mark was bristling with mock indignation. “You’re going to sodding Italy? And you didn’t say a word? Huh!”

“Actually,” Gemma said, smiling slyly, “Fee and I are going too.” She winked at Fiona, who grinned and nodded. “A whole romantic week, just the four of us.”

“Yeah,” Danny laughed. “If we don’t end up murdering each other first!”

“Oh, you’re so lucky!” Hermione clasped her hands together, her eyes alight. “I’ve always wanted to go to Italy! Rome especially.”

Draco eyed her thoughtfully for a moment, and then turned his attention back to his shepherd’s pie as the conversation about his friends’ upcoming holiday abroad swelled around him.
An hour later, the plates had been cleared away and in their place stood a fresh round of the pub’s finest.

“Right,” Mark said offhandedly, turning ever so slightly to his right. Mags was deep in conversation with Gillian, glass in hand, and quickly, he dropped a penny in. It sank with a small plop, and instantly everyone’s eyes were on her. She sighed, raising her glass to her lips as the chant went up:

“We like to drink with Maggie, ‘cos Maggie is our mate, she drinks in moderation, and that’s what makes her great, great, great, great, great, great, great…”

At last, tipping the last of the pint down on the final “great,” she slammed her glass onto the table, red-faced and out of breath, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and then looking daggers at her boyfriend. He merely smiled complacently and took another swallow of his cider.

Draco was to Mark’s left, and now he caught his friend’s eye; the two of them grinned conspiratorially. A hand stealthily disappeared beneath the table to drop a penny into Draco’s open right palm. His fingers closed over it and slowly, his left hand moved to Hermione’s back, beginning a light massage. As expected, she turned her head to look at him with a smile. She’d been about to take a sip of her beer. Quick as a flash, Draco brought his right hand up and dropped the coin into her glass, swooping in for a kiss before she could say a word. Then he sat back, arms folded, and smiled serenely as everybody cheered.

Hermione’s eyebrows shot up and then her eyes narrowed. She’d been pennied! And the sneaky little ferret was just sitting there as cocky as you please, an infuriatingly smug grin on his face!

She inspected her glass balefully. It was still two thirds full.

“She’s from Hertford, she’s true blue…” he began to sing, gently nudging the glass closer to her lips.

Rolling her eyes and taking a deep breath, Hermione began to down the beer, swallowing steadily.

Everyone else took up the song. “She’s a pisshead through and through. She’s a mate of everyone, but she can’t down that shit in one. Down it! Down it! Down it! Down it! Down it! Down it!…”

_Nearly_ gone, just a little bit more… Hermione took the last bit in a great gulp. Then she put down the glass, let out an enormous and most unladylike belch, wiped her mouth daintily, and blew a kiss at Draco, who sat there in open-mouthed admiration as a roar of appreciative cheers welled up around them.

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Twelve wayward members of Hertford College made their shambling, loose-limbed, fuzzy-headed way across Holywell to Catte Street after closing the pub at midnight. Draco’s winnings had only covered about two thirds of the drink they’d wound up consuming, considering how many additional pennies had been surreptitiously dropped into various glasses over the course of the evening, not to mention the food, and now they lurched and slid along the frozen pavement, scaling the mounds of rock-hard snow piled up at the corners with an utter lack of coordination.

“Fucking hell!”
Snickers.

“Well, help me up then, yeah? It’s only the third time I’ve wound up on my bum in the last five minutes!”

“Bloody, buggering ice… why’s it have to be so slippery f’Chrissakes!”

“Right, put your foot there, see that ridge? You can do it, you can… oh… oops…”

“Shit, Gil, why’re you sitting down?”

“Because I LIKE sitting in the snow, you great plonker! Why do you think?”

Hysterical laughter.

“Oi! Look at Spencer! He’s got no boots on! Whad’ja do with your boots then, Tony?”

“Think I might’ve left ‘em at the pub…”

“Oh fuck, don’t tell me we have to go back…”

“We have to go back.”

Exaggerated sigh. “No, we don’t -- stupid git’s got ‘em on his hands!”

“He’s lucky I haven’t shoved one of ‘em up his arse, considering he practically killed me tonight! It’s called pennying for a reason, Spencer! You don’t use 2p! Very nearly choked!”

“Sod off, Pullman, said I was sorry, didn’t I! Anyway…” Sly glance. “Reckon I’d have been doing us all a favour!”

There followed the sound of a well-made snowball making a direct hit and the subsequent yell. Then there was silence, except for the sound of snow crunching underfoot as they all trudged along.

A couple of moments later, a wobbly “‘Scuse me, ladies… need to have a piss… any of you gentlemen care to join?”

Several male voices voiced their enthusiastic endorsement of the idea, and the five of them stumbled after Draco, laughing like loons, to the nearest secluded area away from the glare of the streetlamps. In the darkened recesses, they lined up along the wall, still giggling.

“Shite, I can’t undo the zip… s’stuck!”

“Applegate, you dumb fuck, you’ve caught your pants in the zip!”

“Malfoy, just… Malfoy, no… BUGGER!”

There was a brief, strangled cry.

The streams of urine that hit the wall a moment later steamed in the frigid night air, accompanied by a chorus of deeply relieved sighs. Standing on the opposite corner under the streetlamp, the girls laughed.

“Blokes are so lucky… all they’ve got to do is pull it out and pee.”

“I know. We have to squat. Ugh!”
“Still… I wouldn’t rather have a cock, would you? Funny-looking things, aren’t they…”

“Imagine walking round with one flopping between your legs… ew!”

Giggles.

“And when they get hard! Must be bloody weird when that happens! Like… you know… it’s alive or something…”

“The Rise of the Monster Cock!”

Snorts of laughter.

“Probably no weirder for them than tits are for us, though.”

“Yeah, but tits don’t grow just because somebody cops a feel! Wish they did!”

“Reckon they do too!”

All six girls glanced over at their boyfriends, still busy in the alleyway.

“Too right they do! Still. Don’t much fancy the idea of suddenly bursting out of my bra without warning.”

“SSSSHHH… here they come!”

Stifled giggles and a hiccup.

“Oi, what’s so funny? Would you look at them. I do believe they’re laughing at us, mates.”

“So they are… C’mon, lads, let’s get ‘em!”

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By the time Hermione and Draco found their way up the stairs to her room, they were fairly soggy for the second time that day, after their second snowball fight within twelve hours. The walk back had gone some way towards sobering them up, though both were still a bit tiddly.

Hermione stood just inside the doorway, shivering, her teeth starting to chatter. With her small frame, all the alcohol had raised her blood sugar and then sent it plummeting, leaving her cold and very tired suddenly.

Draco had been shrugging out of his damp outer clothing, peeling off his gloves and boots, and unwinding his snow-flecked muffler, when he noticed that Hermione wasn’t moving. He shook his head.

“Uh-oh. Too much booze for you, darling.”

Carefully, he began to unbutton her jacket, slipping it from her shoulders and hanging it on the door hook.

“Come on, love,” he said gently, “let’s get you out of these clothes and into a nice, hot shower,
Gratefully, she nodded, allowing him to remove all her clothing piece by sodden piece, until finally, she stood in only her bra and knickers, her flesh a pale mass of goose bumps.

Slowly, Draco reached around to unhook her bra, and it fell away to the floor, unheeded.

The desire to touch her was very nearly irresistible, but somehow, he managed to stick to the task at hand. Reaching down, he pulled the lacy little knickers down until they dropped to her ankles, and obediently, she stepped out of them.

In the dim light of the desk lamp, she seemed a pale waif, her dark eyes large in her small, oval face, her skin almost seeming to glow, wraith-like. The chill that had brought on an involuntary trembling had also caused the rosy buds of her breasts to firm and stand erect.

Then, because the temptation was too strong to resist finally, he cupped her breasts, lightly skimming their creamy surface and lingering on the pebbled tips that seemed to harden further under his touch. The delicacy of his explorations was almost too much for her to bear, and she moved into his arms, rubbing herself against him and savouring his warmth. He held her close for a moment and then pushed back a step, grasping her by the shoulders.

“Never thought I’d hear myself saying this, but… we should wait. You’re really chilled, Granger. You need that shower. Here, put on your dressing gown, okay?” He pulled the garment off another hook on the door and drew her arms through the sleeves, closing the front. She belted it and then sat down whilst he took her left foot in his hands.

“You’re so cold,” he murmured, and began to rub first one foot and then the other, kneading her insteps and smoothing his palms over the chilled skin from heels to toes.

“Wherever did you learn to do a foot massage like that?” she sighed blissfully, her eyes closed.

“I’m naturally gifted.” His reply was matter-of-fact as he continued to work her right arch.

“Not to mention big-headed.”

“Hardly. I simply don’t see the point of false modesty. Okay, baby,” he said briskly, giving her calf a light smack. “Up you get!”

The hall was deserted as they made their way to the bathroom, towels in hand.

Swiftly, Draco slipped out of his own clothing, tossing it onto a bench, and then followed Hermione into the shower, where soothing, warm water was already cascading down her back and sluicing over the top of her head.

In her little shower caddy, he found some of the products he’d bought for her in Glastonbury back in December, and now he uncapped the bottle of shampoo and took a sniff, smiling at the familiar apricot scent.

“Turn around,” he murmured, and then he gathered her hair with one hand and began working some shampoo in, his long fingers massaging her scalp just as effectively as they had done her feet earlier.

The warm water fell in a relaxing curtain around them as Draco carefully lathered every inch of Hermione’s skin, moving the sponge, creamy with soap bubbles, in gentle circles along the length of her flesh, from the nape of her neck down the long column of her spine, around the soft curves of her bum and on down to her feet.
“Hermione,” he whispered, and turned her to face him. Her eyes had been closed, but now they opened wide, droplets forming in her lashes and on her cheeks and nose with their dusting of pale freckles, her wet hair slicked back and falling past her shoulder blades.

Drawing a richly scented, soapy trail down between her breasts, he tenderly lathered each one, following the sponge with his fingers so that he could feel the firm, glistening skin for himself as it warmed and began to glow pink with the heat of the water and her growing desire. She sighed and slid her feet further apart on the tiled floor, offering him more.

The sponge gradually made its way south, and he began diligently soaping her inner thighs, moving in ever-widening circles until he reached her sex; then it was his hand that moved through the slick curls, glistening with creamy lather, to find the tender flesh within.

She moaned softly, hooking one leg around his waist in an effort to move more deeply into his caresses, and her hands slid to the small of his back, urging him closer, seeking a final joining of their flesh. Hands cradling her bum, he hoisted her up against the back wall of the shower stall so that both her legs were now wrapped around his waist, impaling her in a single, fluid movement. He slid inside easily, gripping her buttocks and pulling her tightly against him as he began to move. Their breaths mingled in the fervent seal of their mouths, their tongues moving in a twining, sultry, breathless dance as the water splashed down on their upturned faces.

They stood there together, joined under the fall of warm water, until all traces of soap were washed away and the raw desire that had consumed them had begun to recede into increasingly gentle wavelets still rippling between them. It was a delicious sensation and she threaded her arms around him, wanting to prolong it.

Even after he’d slipped out of her, she could still feel his pulse deep inside.

“Mmm…” she sighed finally, kissing a pattern on the smooth, firm flesh of his chest and darting her tongue out to catch a stray droplet of water. “Lovely…”

“You are,” he murmured in response. “It’s you…”

She raised her head and smiled at him. The wetness on her cheeks might have been tears. He wasn’t certain.

* *

_Fat the world_
_Then sink your teeth in_
_Cannibal and missionary_
_Toes are curled, my thanks uneven_
_When tales so tall are ordinary_

_Don’t ask, don’t tell_
_Follow!_
_Don’t ask, don’t tell_
_Yeah_
Sunday, late morning

Their copies of *Heart of Darkness* and their laptops were out and ready, finally. Hot coffee, the best non-magical antidote available for the mild hangovers both of them had awakened with, steamed in the tall, white porcelain mugs on the desk. A pair of buttered muffins pocketed at brunch in Hall earlier sat on an adjacent plate. Still feeling tired and somewhat fuzzy, Hermione was sprawled on her bed, propped up by an array of pillows, and Draco slouched in the butterfly chair, one leg slung over the side. Both were trying to pick up where they’d left off working the day before, and for a time, the only sounds were the inexorable ticking of the alarm clock on the chest of drawers and Draco tapping his Biro against the spiral pad he favoured for initial text notes and page references.

“Ssshh…” Hermione’s brow was furrowed, her eyes riveted on the page.

“Sorry.”

Again, silence but for the ticking of the clock. Then, Hermione sat up and began clicking on the keys of her laptop. It was a light but steady sound, like tiny volleys of rapid machine-gun fire.

Draco looked up. He was having real trouble concentrating today, his thoughts scattering to the winds every time he tried marshalling them into focus. The smallest thing was a distraction, and now the sound of the laptop keys was proving positively ruinous for his concentration.

“Uh… can you type more quietly?” He’d sounded a bit testy, though he hadn’t meant to. “Please,” he added.

Hermione looked at him. “I’ll try…” she said evenly. “But I don’t know if I can be much more quiet than this.”

“Ohay,” he replied, and turned back to the page he’d already read three times.

Eventually, the power of the novel reached out and grabbed him, though, and he, too, settled down to some genuinely productive work for a space of time. Hermione was already busy writing; she sat cross-legged on the bed, her laptop in front of her, utterly absorbed now. Draco had shifted himself to the rug. Leaning back on a couple of pillows propped up against the side of the bed, he stretched his legs out comfortably as he read and jotted down an occasional note. A companionable silence hung between them for a time as they worked.

Then, “Hermione…”?

She looked up. “Mmm?”

Draco laid the book down on his lap and leaned his head back against the pillows. “I know what Conrad wants to get across, but d’you… d’you think that Marlow *should* have been able to make a choice? Between the Company and everything it represented and Kurtz, I mean? Was there even a lesser of two evils between the two? Or do you believe that such a choice, under those circumstances, was impossible from the off?”

Hermione sat back against the large, squishy pillows at the head of her bed and sighed. Drawing her knees up, she rested her chin there, gazing down at Draco thoughtfully.

“I do, yes. There was no good choice there. None. It was either the corrupt colonial company that
was systematically abusing the natives or a single, charismatic man who happened to be a megalomaniac who favoured using the natives and then exterminating them. Both were cruel and vicious in their own way. What could Marlow have done, really? There was no way out. I mean, both alternatives were totally evil, weren’t they. What third option did he have?”

Draco sat silently for a couple of moments, thinking. “But—” he began. “What about his conscience? What about a clear repudiation of both alternatives? You’re saying—Conrad is saying—that within an insane world, everything’s relative. That there is no firm moral compass, because it’s all just absurd anyway. Nothing makes sense. So there’s no way to really judge, and everybody is off the hook.” He shook his head. “Moral relativism. I’m sorry. I don’t accept that.”

“No, not moral relativism! No, no, it isn’t that, exactly—more like moral ambiguity. Confusion. Once people are living within a system where it’s all gone mad essentially, what do you measure your life against that makes any sense? Marlow couldn’t be held responsible for insanity he didn’t create.” Hermione slid off the bed to sit next to Draco on the rug. “Look,” she said, her fingertips glancing lightly over the back of his hand for just a moment. “Marlow lost his way. He was trying to put the pieces together but they just didn’t fit. Can we really fault him because he failed?”

“Yes. He failed because he bought into all of it in the first place and then couldn’t work out how to get away.” Draco’s mouth was set in a tight line.

“No! I don’t agree! He accepted the world he found himself thrust into because it was the logical extension of everything he knew. He was just one person. What was he supposed to do, try and change things single-handedly?” She was looking steadily at him now, her brow furrowed.

“Every single person makes a difference. You of all people know that. Fuck’s sake, Hermione, it’s what you’ve always believed!”

“I know, and I still do! But look—you have to be able to distinguish between a situation you can genuinely do something about and one where your hands are tied. Marlow’s hands were tied.” Your hands were tied. “Surely you must see that?” Her voice had taken on a pleading tone.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t. I think the novel fails in this respect.” He heaved himself up off the rug and looked down at her. “I suppose next you’re going to tell me you think Kurtz shouldn’t be held responsible for his acts either. I mean, if you’re going to be really consistent, Granger, you’d have to support that view.”

Now Hermione felt her ire rising. She did not appreciate being backed into a corner this way.

“Of course I don’t believe that, and you know it, Malfoy!” Her eyes flashed. “Quite clearly, he brought his racist attitudes with him when he went to Africa. They didn’t just spring, fully blown, into his head once he got there!”

“Ah, but isn’t it conceivable,” Draco said, a strangely hard set to his smile, his eyes glittering, “that his views evolved in direct response to the environment he entered into when he arrived? By that I mean the Company’s exploitation of the natives and the natural resources. Couldn’t his attitudes just as reasonably be the product of such a poisoned environment?”

“Stop it, Draco!” Hermione found she was unconsciously clenching her fists now, and she took a breath to steady herself. “He was a source of the corruption, a lot of it anyway. He and the Company, and everything they represented—colonialism itself! He helped to create the poison that was destroying the natives and ultimately himself. He wasn’t a victim!”

“Oh, but by your lights, he really was,” Draco said softly. “Even if his virulent racism was inherent
and he brought the corruption with him to Africa, where did such beliefs begin? Nobody is born a racist, Hermione. You know that.”

She glanced at him sharply, stopped in her tracks by the irrefutable logic of his words. “That’s true,” she replied at last, gradually warming to her thoughts as they took shape. “Still-- Kurtz made conscious, deliberate choices when he had natives murdered. When he wrote, ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’ There has to come a point when we’re held accountable for our actions!”

There was a palpable pause.

And then Draco smiled, a hard, mirthless grimace. “Precisely.”

Abruptly, he turned and strode to the door, where his jacket and muffler hung on a hook. “Need some air. See you later.”

Hermione watched the door shut behind him, confusion in her large eyes. As she sank back down on the edge of the bed, she felt bereft suddenly. Pulling the spare quilt over her shoulders, she hugged it around herself and gazed out the window, watching as scattered snowflakes began to fly.

There was a persistent drip from the tap in the small sink. She must remember to report that and have it seen to. How was she supposed to get any work done with that incessant drip, drip, drip?

Hermione glanced at the clock. Half four. Draco had been gone for nearly three hours. It would be dark outside before long. She turned back to her laptop, where she’d been trying to work on that bloody Conrad essay. It was only about half done and she was growing frustrated at her lack of progress.

He failed… bought into all of it… couldn’t work out how to get away… Every person makes a difference… Nobody is born a racist… What about his conscience… his conscience… What about… Need some air… see you…

Enough. She closed the laptop with a snap and pushed off the bed, slipping into her boots and reaching for her jacket.

The lanes that enclosed the college buildings were fairly deserted, save for the odd individual scurrying in the direction of one of the residence halls or on his or her way to the library. A narrow path had been cleared along the pavements, but now it was covered in a treacherous film of black ice from the snow that had liquefied mid-day when the temperatures had risen slightly, and then frozen over again in the late afternoon when they’d plummeted once more. Hermione found it slightly easier to walk on the snow itself. It crunched beneath her feet as she made her way to Staircase 5.
Peter Lawson was just passing as she came in the ground-floor entrance.

“Have you seen Draco?” she asked him. He shook his head, shrugged, and then disappeared out the door into the late-afternoon gloom.

She made her way up to the third floor and knocked on Draco’s door first. She wasn’t surprised, somehow, when the answer was dead silence. She tried Tony’s door next.

No answer. He could be anywhere. Her stomach rumbled slightly and she pressed her palm to it, hoping to relieve the small gnawing sensation she suddenly felt. She’d forgotten to eat lunch.

Right, then. Eric. She knocked at number ten. A muffled, rather irritated voice answered. It sounded suspiciously like “Fuck off!” He’d been sleeping, apparently. Or not. Or… possibly not alone at least. She backed away and turned to the only door left on the landing, number eleven.

“Mark?” she said tentatively. “You there?” She waited a few seconds and tried again. “Mark? It’s me, Hermione.”

Silence. Feeling rather dejected, she turned and had just taken a couple of steps towards the staircase when the door opened behind her.

“What’s up?” Mark scratched his stubbly chin, looking at her quizzically.

“It’s Draco. I’m… I can’t find him. Have you seen him at all this afternoon?” She tried to keep her voice conversational and light, and not betray the small kernel of worry that had lodged in her chest.

Mark thought for a moment. “Come to think of it, yeah. He was here… must have been about an hour ago, I think. In and out, though. I wouldn’t have known he was here at all except that he banged on my door the way he always does when he passes. Woke me up.”

“And you’ve no idea where he might have gone, then?”

“Sorry, no, I haven’t. I was only half awake, and he didn’t stop to talk. I’d offer to help you look, except I’m expecting Mags any minute.” Mark looked genuinely apologetic. “You’ll find him, don’t
worry.”

“Thanks…” Hermione managed a small, half-hearted smile and backed away.

The library. She’d try there.

He wasn’t at the table they often favoured, for starters. Reference room—no. The computer room. Not there either. The stacks—definitely worth a try. Wandering up and down the narrow aisles, their endless shelves of books waiting, tantalising, beckoning to her as she passed, she stubbornly resisted the temptation they offered and continued to search. She’d half expected to find him sitting on the floor in one of the aisles, his long legs stretched out as far as space would allow, nose buried in a book. But there was no sign of him anywhere.

Hertford College library stacks

Where, where…?

It was still a bit early for dinner, but she went to Old Quad anyway, hurrying up the winding staircase that led to the dining hall. A quick scan told her he wasn’t there.

Nearly half five and getting dark. It was considerably colder now, as she stood outside once again. Stupidly, in her haste, she’d run out without a hat, gloves or muffler. Shivering, she shoved her hands into her pockets and considered where to try next. She was rapidly running out of ideas.

There was one more place… just possibly… worth trying anyway. She set off at a near-run, trying not to slip on the icy pavement.

Down Catte Street and a quick left into the High. She checked her watch, chafing her hands together in an attempt to regain feeling in her cold, stiff fingers. 5.40 pm. She quickened her pace.

Ah, there. The Rose. Still open. Under its familiar white awning, bright light spilled onto the snow-crusted pavement, a warm and welcome beacon to a very tired, chilled Hermione. And there, through the large front window, she spotted a familiar blond head bent over a steaming cup. An overwhelming sense of glad relief flooded her and she couldn’t help grinning as she drew near the door-- and then relief turned to indignation.

“Closing in twenty minutes, Miss,” she was told as she entered. Hermione waved her hand in recognition and nodded. Draco looked up as she approached. He opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione nipped in ahead of him, her hands on her hips.
“Do you know, Draco Malfoy, that for the past hour, I have been all over sodding Oxford looking for you? In the freezing cold! Look at me, I can’t even feel my fingers anymore!” She stuck out her reddened, chilled hands. “What did you think you were playing at, disappearing for hours and scaring me half to death!” Beneath her anger, her voice had begun to quaver. “I didn’t know where you were! I waited for you to come back, and you didn’t… you just didn’t.”

Suddenly exhausted, she sank into the chair opposite Draco, which he had hastily leaned over to pull out for her. Inexplicably, she could feel tears coming, and chagrined, she covered her face with her hands and tried to swallow them down.

Warm fingers gently pried her hands from her face and then covered them, massaging her cold, chapped skin. She looked up into a pair of grey eyes grown dark with concern and contrition.

“It was stupid. I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I just felt so angry…” he began and then, seeing her eyes widen and grow suspiciously watery again, hastened to add, “Not at you, love! Sorry! I didn’t mean that! Here…” He plucked a clean napkin from the table and handed it to her. She gave him a small, quavery smile as she dabbed at her eyes, nodding her thanks.

Hermione nodded again. “Famished, actually. I haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

He pushed his plate over to her. Half a very nice-looking sandwich remained. “Finish it. I’ve had plenty. Fancy something hot to drink?”

“Mmm. Yes, please. Some cocoa would be nice.”

Draco got up and went to the counter, speaking quietly to the owner. She nodded, smiled, and disappeared into the kitchen.

“We can stay a bit. They won’t kick us out,” he said, his fingers playing idly with hers.

Just then, her hot chocolate arrived, richly fragrant, with clouds of cream rising in peaks on top. The waitress set down the tall mug and a long-stemmed spoon.

“Something to eat, love?” she asked. “I’m afraid I can’t offer you anything cooked now—kitchen’s closed—but what about a scone or a nice bit of cake, perhaps?”

Hermione nodded, her mouth full of a bite of Draco’s sandwich, a mouthwatering combination of ham and melted Gruyere on buttery, grilled bread. Swallowing, she began, “Lemon raspberry square, pl--”


Hermione smiled to herself as she dipped the spoon into the whipped cream and offered it to Draco; he opened his mouth and allowed her to feed him, savouring the cream and then cleaning his lips with a leisurely flick of the tongue.

“Good?” she asked softly. He nodded, his eyes darkening for a moment as he gazed intently at her. A familiar, answering flutter caused her cheeks to colour, and she shifted in her seat. Gods, what he could do to her with just a look!

Forcing her attention back to her plate, she polished off the sandwich in short order. All the while, he sipped his tea, watching her quietly. Taking a forkful of the cake at last, she sat back, regarding him with a thoughtful look. Finally, she spoke.
“You’re not Marlow,” she said with quiet finality. “You weren’t ambivalent.”

“Yeah—not finally,” he muttered. “Took me long enough, though, didn’t it.”

“That’s not important!”

“It is to me.”

Hermione sighed. “I understand. Really I do. But you were under a lot of pressure, weren’t you. It can’t have been easy, making that decision and then actually following through. Draco, you’ve got to stop being so hard on yourself!” She toyed with the cake on her plate for a moment, and then seemed to come to a decision about something. “I’ve… I’ve told them, you know. Harry and Ron. How you helped the Order.”

Draco’s head shot up and he stared openly at her. “You did? Why?”

“Because… because I thought they should know about you. Because,” she said, her voice very soft now, “I’m proud of you, Malfoy. It was quite dangerous, what you did, secretly breaking with your family that way, and working to bring Voldemort down. You were really brave.”

A flush of sudden emotion welled up in his chest, threatening to unman him before he managed to fight it back down. He said simply, “Wish I’d been able to be open about it, though. I hate that people still think of me as a Death Eater.”

“But then… why didn’t you ever tell anybody about it afterwards? I’ve never understood that.”

Draco snorted derisively. “As if anybody would’ve believed me! You know better. They’d have reckoned I’d just made it up to get into the winning side’s good graces. And the only person who could have corroborated my story was dead. Potter and Weasley probably still believe that.”

Hermione’s eyes were flashing again. “But the truth of what Snape himself had been doing came out eventually anyway! If people were capable of accepting that, they could’ve accepted your story as well. I mean, in light of Snape having really worked for Dumbledore the entire time, it’s totally credible. Look,” she said, catching his hand and holding it firmly, forcing his gaze back to hers. “Everyone knows how miserable you were at school, that you couldn’t bring yourself to kill Dumbledore, and how withdrawn you were after that. Even I heard about that secondhand. You don’t give people enough credit, Malfoy. I think they’d have believed you. And they will now. If you give them a chance, that is.”

He looked away, busying himself with picking a piece of lint off his shirt. Trust. Could he really trust that anyone who’d known him from before, outside of his own friends, would ever really see past the very image he himself had so carefully cultivated for years? Hermione had done, though, hadn’t she. If she could, maybe…

“Anyway,” she was saying, “everyone’s going to find out now, I’m afraid, whether you want them to or not. Now that Harry and Ron know, I mean.”

“Too right,” Draco agreed, shaking his head and grinning ruefully. “They never could keep their mouths shut, neither one of ‘em. Well, I’m glad, really, I suppose…”

“You’re… you’re not angry with me, then?”

He shook his head, and gave her hand a squeeze. “No. Better coming from you than from me. Did they… how did they react?”
Hermione put down her mug and wiped her mouth. “Shock, mainly. At first, anyway. Absolutely gobsmacked, the pair of them. Ron was still going on about what a load of shite you’d probably been feeding me and how I was so gullible and always looking to take care of strays”—at this, Draco frowned and made a disgusted sound deep in his throat—“but Harry got very quiet. He just looked at me for a long time without saying anything at all. And then finally, he just… he just nodded, you know? As if pieces of a puzzle had clicked together in his head. And then he said…”

“What?” Despite himself, Draco really wanted to know.

“ ‘Good.’ Just ‘good,’ nothing else. And then he smiled at me. See, you have to remember-- we were right there when Snape died. Ron wasn’t. And Harry… Harry was very affected by that, and by what he saw later in the Pensieve, you know? There was a lot more than what he found out about you. Some of it was very personal to him. Snape had been in love with his mother. For years. Turns out they’d been children together, before Hogwarts. I know—shocking, right?” She smiled slightly at Draco’s surprise before continuing. “He’d have done anything for her. Including looking out for Harry all those years.”

She stopped, letting Draco process this revelation.

“So… besides protecting me… he agreed to help Dumbledore protect Harry,” he said slowly. “For…”

“Lily Potter, yes. For the sake of her memory. He’d never stopped loving her. It was all quite a shock. It was obvious from the Pensieve memories that there was much more to Snape than Harry had ever imagined. And don’t forget, he’d been misjudged himself, for ages. Despite what Dumbledore said, almost nobody believed Harry about Voldemort after the Triwizard Tournament. He was vilified in the press, and the Ministry did everything they could to discredit him. He put up with such a lot of distrust and hostility for so long, all of fifth year! Everybody thought he was so full of himself, just an attention-seeker.”

She refrained from pointing out that this had been precisely what Draco had not only thought, but proclaimed loudly to anyone who’d listened. He didn’t need reminding, however, and flushed slightly.

Hermione pretended not to notice. “I think that Harry understands better than anybody that a person isn’t necessarily what he appears to be. You know…” she said pointedly, her gaze shifting to meet his directly and hold it. “If you got to know Harry, you might just find that your old notions about him have been wrong too.”

For all he knew, she might just be right. In any case, from a purely practical standpoint—considering the direction in which things between him and Granger seemed to be going— it simply made sense that he should make an effort. He could meet Potter halfway, he supposed, and then see.

He nodded slowly.

They’d finished their food and it was well past six now. The café manager was clearly anxious to close up for the night.

“Come on, Granger,” he said briskly, rising from his chair and holding out a hand to Hermione. “Let’s go home.”

Home.

He wondered when he’d started thinking of here in quite that way.
Late that night—

“I’m sorry, Hermione.” The words were whispered into her hair as she lay spooned against him, their skin still flushed with the exertions of their lovemaking. He wasn’t sure she was awake and even less certain he had truly intended to be heard. But he had needed to say it again.

There was a palpable silence for a couple of very long minutes. And then she rolled over, pressing her hands and face into the warmth of his chest. “I know,” she whispered in return. “It’s okay.”

He swallowed hard and hugged her tightly to him. “It’s only… sometimes I just have to get away, get out… it’s like my head’s about to explode or something… I feel like I’m suffocating. It wasn’t you. You know that.”

She nodded against his skin, the golden halos of baby-fine hair around his nipples tickling her cheek.

Moving aside her luxuriant hair— now tangled and wild from the ministrations of his hands as he’d slid his fingers through it, clutching handfuls of her curls, kissing them—he bent his head, pressing
his lips to the spot where her neck and shoulder joined and inhaling deeply. His exhaled breath tickled, and she laughed softly, tightening her arms around him.

“Draco.”

Her voice was a murmur, his name floating back to him like a leaf drifting gently on the current. He closed his eyes and slept, elusive dreams fluttering against the corners of his consciousness like iridescent moth wings.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks and props to my wonderful betas, kazfeist and mister_otter, for their time, support, and meticulous attention not only to the words but what’s behind them.

A year at Oxford is divided into three terms of eight weeks each: Michaelmas, Hilary, and Trinity.

Hertford College is made up of three quads: Holywell, mainly for first-years, Old Quad, also known as OB (for “Old Building”) Quad, and New Quad (NB Quad).

“Pennying” is a longstanding tradition at both Oxford and Cambridge (though not necessarily at all the colleges), and other universities in the UK as well. For more information, read about it here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennying

In the UK, “pants” are underwear, not trousers. We can safely assume, from Mark’s pained reaction to Draco’s assistance, that he had caught more than just his underwear in the zip.

The song “Follow,” which inspired the chapter title and from which lyrics are quoted, is by the amazing band Incubus (melody and lyrics by Brandon Boyd). For me, it captures completely what Conrad was doing in Heart of Darkness, and also articulates the terrible dilemma that Draco and others in Slytherin, and probably many in the wider pure-blood world, would have felt at being caught in the middle of the madness that Voldemort inflicted on the wizarding world.
Tuesday, 14 March

The day had been ordinary enough up to that point.

On his way back to his room from the library, weary from several hours of concentrated reading, Draco had made a detour at the porter’s lodge to pick up the post, such as it was. Generally speaking, he never got too much of anything substantial—sometimes there would be a “pigeon post” from a friend—but mostly just circulars from local concerns wanting to drum up student business, and of course, official correspondence from the university that would ordinarily have been sent home. Except that in his case, of course, to do that would be pointless. His parents had nothing whatsoever to do with any aspect of his university life, and he found he really preferred it that way.

The moment he stuck his hand into the pigeon hole, however, he knew today was different.

His fingers closed around a fair-sized envelope, its paper a heavy, creamy stock. Pulling it out, back side up, he recognised it immediately as one of a set of stamped envelopes he’d given his mother before leaving home after the last vacation. She’d actually begun writing to him after that—somewhat erratically, however, probably due to her residual reluctance even to walk into the Muggle post office in the village, much less do any sort of business there.

As he walked back to Staircase 5 somewhat distractedly, he ran his fingers over the front of the envelope. The very distinctive handwriting was definitely his mother’s, a rather spidery, ornate script
obviously penned with a quill.

Letting himself into his room, he tossed his rucksack onto the desk chair and flopped down against the pillows on the unmade bed, the letter in hand.

11 March

Dearest Draco, he read.

We received your most recent letter several days ago. I confess, I am very disappointed to learn that you won’t be coming home for your holiday, or “vacation” as you put it, between terms. Your father and I were quite looking forward to seeing you, and I had some lovely things planned.

We’ve discussed it, however, and decided that we should like to come and visit you instead. I shall leave it to you to make dinner arrangements, and of course, do please invite Miss Granger. You need not worry about a hotel for us. We have already booked into the Damselfly for the night.

I am assuming, from comments you’ve made, that you have not as yet acquainted yourself with the wizarding sector of Oxford. You may reach it by way of the passage between Payne and Son, Silversmiths, and the Britannia Building Society, off the High Street. Follow that passage to the Chequers. When you enter the pub, walk through to the back. There is a locked door marked “storage” between the Ladies and Gents. Simply tap it once with your wand and then you’ll be able to go through. You’ll find that it opens into Bellevether Crescent.

Hixon and Grundleston’s Apothecaries is at number 9. I have some shopping to do, so we shall meet you there at three in the afternoon, Saturday next. Father and I look forward to seeing both you and Miss Granger then.

Hoping this letter finds you well,

Mother

His parents. Here. In only a matter of days. Whatever fatigue he’d been feeling earlier had vanished completely. He glanced at his watch. Ten past three. Hermione would be nearly done with her shift by now.

Pulling his jacket back on, he hurried out the door, taking the three flights of stairs at a sprint. The afternoon had turned overcast and chilly, the sky leaden, heavy with the threat of a late snow, and he pulled the hood of his fleece up over his head as he ran.

Blackwell’s, at number 50 Broad Street, was just minutes away at such a pace. Draco arrived slightly winded, stopping just inside the entrance to catch his breath, his pale skin flushed with the cold and the exertion. He leaned back against the doorframe and shut his eyes.

“Malfoy! Did you come to collect me, or… what is it? What’s the matter?”

Hermione’s voice shook him out of his reverie. She’d just come up the stairs from the Norrington Room, where she’d been shelving new arrivals, and spotted Draco waiting by the door. She stood, coat slung over one arm, her initial expression of happy surprise turning to concern.

“Come on,” he said grimly, helping her on with her coat and then taking her arm. “Let’s get a coffee.
I need to talk to you!”

He pulled her along at a fairly rapid clip, Hermione practically running to keep up with him as they made their way up Broad Street, weaving around traffic to cross to the other side. The Buttery at number 11 was not terribly busy at this hour, and they threw their things down on an empty table near the front window before walking to the counter to place their order.

Hermione blew a stray curl out of her eyes. “What was all the rush about? You very nearly pulled my arm out of its socket!”

“You’re not going to believe it. I’ve just had a letter from my mother, and she’s coming here. With my father. On Saturday!” He exhaled explosively, running a hand distractedly through his hair, static electricity causing a handful of silver-blond strands to stand straight up from his head.

“Here? You’re joking! Why ever are they doing that all of a sudden?” She shrugged off her jacket, slipping it over the back of the chair.

Just then the waitress appeared, smiling pleasantly. Her smile deepened once she’d had a good look at Draco.

“Sorry, we’re not ready yet.” He made a show of studying the menu and examining the enticing choices behind the glass.

“Take your time, love. No hurry.” She winked and turned to wait on another customer.

Hermione scanned the menu quickly and then laid it down. “Cappuccino for me. Want to share something? I’m really in the mood for lemon cake.”

“Yeah, okay…” he murmured. “Sounds fine. One cappuccino, one espresso, and a lemon cake to share,” he told the waitress, who had returned and stood poised to take their order. “Thanks.”

“Back in a tick,” she smiled, dropping her gaze coquettishly for a moment. “Make yourselves comfortable.”

It never failed. Or practically never, anyway. No matter where they went, if there were even one female in the vicinity, said female was bound to make an arse of herself over Malfoy. It didn’t even seem to matter if Hermione were there. Well, that was simply not on, not anymore. Because he was her Malfoy now.

“Stupid cow was flirting with you!” Hermione muttered as they sat down, sending a filthy look in the direction of the waitress, who still had a rather silly grin on her face as she prepared their drinks behind the counter. “Right in front of me!”

“Was she? I hadn’t noticed,” Draco said absently, staring out the window.

Hermione rolled her eyes, although now she realised how upset he must be. Ordinarily, his radar was very keen when it came to detecting flirtatious female vibes directed his way. If he actually hadn’t noticed the appreciative glances and the sickening purr in that woman’s voice, something really was up. She reached over and laid a comforting hand on his forearm, bared when he’d pushed up the sleeves of his jumper.

“So—you didn’t tell me—why are they coming to Oxford now, all of a sudden? I thought you said they were totally opposed to your studying here and had no desire to come.”

“That’s what I thought! It’s because I decided not to go home this vac, Mother said.”
Hermione nodded. “My parents weren’t exactly happy about it either. They want to see me at some point. In fact…” she began, and then trailed off. The phone conversation she’d had with them that morning could wait.

“Well, apparently, mine want to see me as well. Or at least my mother does. Having rather a hard time believing that about my father though,” he said, with a short laugh. The undercurrent of bitterness in it was impossible to miss. He drew the letter out of his pocket, sliding it across the table to Hermione. “See for yourself.”

Hermione opened the letter and scanned it quickly, her eyebrows shooting up momentarily. When she handed it back to Draco, her expression was entirely neutral however.

“You’ll have to get your hours at Blackwell’s changed, you know,” she remarked matter-of-factly. “As of now, you’re on for next Saturday from eleven to five.”

“Is that all you have to say, Granger? That I’ll have a scheduling conflict?” Draco was plainly incredulous. He’d expected that at the very least, he’d be having to calm her down from an attack of nerves at the very prospect of having to join the Malfoys for most of an afternoon, for dinner, and quite possibly more than dinner, depending on how long they decided to stay.

The waitress came back just as Hermione opened her mouth to reply. Shutting it firmly, she waited as the two steaming mugs were placed before them, followed by a plate of moist, fragrant lemon cake and a pair of forks. The waitress leaned over Draco slightly, smiling. No doubt so he can look down her blouse, Hermione thought sourly, crossing her arms over her chest. “Give me a shout if there’s anything else I can do for you, won’t you, love,” she purred. “My name’s Hazel.”

“Thanks, Hazel,” Hermione cut in with an ingratiatingly toothy smile. “We certainly will. And no…” Her voice dropped and she paused, waiting until the waitress was well out of earshot. “That isn’t all I have to say. Of course it isn’t! It’s just that… well… I… I just didn’t want to let myself get all freaked out. I mean… I know spending time with your parents is inevitable as long as…”

“As long as?” Draco asked quietly, one eyebrow raised, a faint smile lifting the corners of his mouth. “Well, as long as we’re…” A faint flush coloured her cheeks becomingly. “Oh, you know!”

“Yes, I know, love,” he grinned. “Well, then, expect to spend lots of quality time with my parents, because I intend to keep you around for quite some time.”

“And how do you know it isn’t me deciding I want to keep you around, then? Hmm?” Hermione challenged, a teasing glint in her eye. “And do you? Want to keep me around, I mean?” His expression was suddenly much more serious and it sobered her immediately.

Her dark eyes were lambent as she gazed at him, her hands reaching for his. “You know I do, Draco.”

“Good. Because you see…” His tone was nonchalant. “I’ve got rather used to you by now, Granger. It would be an awful bother, having to break in somebody new.”

“I see,” Hermione huffed in mock affront. “Of course, I shouldn’t like to inconvenience you. I realise you’re probably--”
And then Draco leaned in, smothering her words with a swift kiss, and whatever she had been about to say was forgotten. She relaxed almost immediately, returning it with a fervour to match his own.

Finally, they broke apart for air.

“Hmmm… very clever, Malfoy!”

“I rather thought so…”

There was a moment or two of silence as they sipped their drinks and had bites of the cake, both of them unsuccessfully fighting back grins. Then Hermione looked thoughtfully at him, resting her chin on the heel of her hand.

“We’ve never been. To the wizarding part of Oxford, I mean,” she remarked presently.

“I know. I haven’t wanted to go. I just… I wanted to keep Oxford free of all that. No ties to the past.” He studied the last of his coffee, swirling it around in the mug, and then looked at her steadily. “I’m not proud of who I was in the wizarding world. You know that. What if… well, what if I get there, and then find I want to keep going back? Then everything I’ve worked so hard for here could be totally fucked. I don’t know, I s’pose I feel like I need to keep that part of me separate from who I am here, you know?”

“And you have done. Brilliantly. I really admire you, y’know,” Hermione said quietly. “It can’t have been easy.”

“Well…yeah. It was hard-- at first, anyway,” Draco admitted. “You know, just learning all the everyday stuff to do with living without magic. Learning not to turn to it right off, the way I’ve done all my life. There’s so much. But on a deeper level, it was surprisingly easy. Rather a relief, even.”

He looked away for a moment, but Hermione took his hands in hers, willing him back to her. “Malfoy, listen. What you’ve achieved… all of it… nothing can take that away from you. I understand how you’re feeling, but honestly— going to Bellewether Crescent won’t change anything, not now.” She looked at him hard, forcing him to meet her eyes. “And neither will your father being here. I promise. You’re stronger than that. We’re stronger than that.

“And besides…” She took a breath and plunged ahead, her words for his ears alone now. “No matter how far from magic you go, you are a wizard, just as I am a witch. We are what we are, and there’s no getting away from it, even when we are choosing not to do magic. It wasn’t being a wizard that was the problem, Draco. It was being a certain kind of wizard. And you are not that person anymore. You haven’t been for some time.

“So,” she concluded, her gaze resolute and sure as she regarded him, “you mustn’t worry about the effect that Bellewether Crescent will have on your life here. After all, we went to Diagon Alley together, and Glastonbury as well, and you know how many magical folk were there. Loads. You were fine then. It shouldn’t be any different just because it’s here in Oxford.”

She gauged his expression quickly, hoping her argument was convincing. She knew that in truth, it was flawed, and that he could quite reasonably make the case that this situation was, in fact, different. But instead of scepticism, she saw relief on his face, the sheer force of her conviction evidently having persuaded him.

“Frankly,” Hermione added, relieved herself, “I’d be surprised if there weren’t a magical community here, of all places. We were bound to come across it eventually. And… well… there’s something else. I totally understand that this place is a sort of refuge for you. But you know…” She laid her
hand on top of his. “We won’t be here forever. We’ll finish our degrees and then, you’ll still have to
deal with being a wizard and decide how you want to conduct yourself for the rest of your life.”

Draco nodded. Her words made a good deal of sense, really. He was a wizard and always would be.
Much as he enjoyed the freedom of not having to be whilst here, he couldn’t escape that fundamental
reality. And to be completely truthful, he wasn’t even all that certain he really wanted to, in the end.
But he did have a choice about how to think and behave. And there was somebody who believed he
could make the right one.

Hermione dropped a quick kiss on his palm and then gave his hand a squeeze. “I’m knackered! Let’s
go, yeah?” Glancing at the bill the waitress had left on the table, she began rooting around in her
shoulder bag, finally pulling out her wallet. “£4.50. Not bad. My treat this time!” she said firmly, her
tone making it clear that she would brook no arguments.

Draco threw his hands up in a gesture of surrender, laughing. “Fine with me! I rather like being a
kept man.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Come on,” she sighed, pulling him to his feet. “Let’s get out of here!”

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Early Saturday morning, 18 March

“Lucius?” Narcissa Malfoy carefully replaced the bone china cup in its saucer, the remains of her
coffee tepid now. Her husband’s gaze was directed towards the French doors that led to the terrace.
He appeared not to have heard.

“Lucius.”

Turning his head finally, Lucius Malfoy regarded his wife with a mildly curious expression. “I’m
sorry—were you saying something? What is it, my dear?”

Narcissa sighed. “I merely wanted—well, it’s just… I’m very anxious that our visit with Draco go
well. You will make an effort to get along with him, won’t you… We haven’t seen him since just
after New Year’s. It’s been more than two months. And… well…”

“Yes, I know,” Lucius sighed. “He and I didn’t exactly part on the best of terms.”

The long look Narcissa gave him was also a keenly appraising one. “It’s been bothering you all this
time, hasn’t it… what he told us in December.”

Lucius shook his head, a faint smile on his lips. “You know me too well, Cissa.” He rose from the
table, his cup and saucer in his hands, and moved to the French doors, gazing out through them to
the manicured Lady Garden situated below the terrace, the remains of a light coating of frost riming
the bare branches of its trees and shrubs. “I can’t deny it. I still find it astounding that he would have
gone so far as to…”

“Follow the dictates of his conscience, finally?”

“That wasn’t what I was about to say,” Lucius replied dryly. He turned back to face his wife now.
“No. Bad enough that he went so far as to actively assist the other side. But all the while, he was
merely going through the motions of being a dutiful son, allowing us to carry on believing we had his unwavering loyalty. That is what really rankles, Narcissa. He deliberately deceived us for months on end. Quite apart from the fact that he passed information that could have put his own parents in jeopardy. Does that not trouble you even a little bit?”

“Well…” Narcissa began slowly, pushing her cup and saucer away and folding her hands together. “I would be lying if I said that this aspect of things hasn’t upset me at all. It has. But you know, Lucius—the truth is, all of that notwithstanding, I find myself proud of him more than anything else. I’ve told you before—I watched that boy suffer for a long time under the yoke of what he was being made to do. You weren’t here for a lot of that.”

“True. Although given a choice between being at home to deal with Draco’s crisis of conscience and having a jolly holiday in Azkaban, I think the choice would have been a fairly straightforward one.” His tone was sardonic.

“Stop it, Lucius! That was uncalled for!” Narcissa felt herself beginning to tremble with the anger that was rising in her. “Perhaps the question we really ought to be asking ourselves is how we could ever have stood by and allowed the Dark Lord to use our child in the way he did, regardless of our alliance with him—I blame myself for that during the time you were in prison. It still haunts me. I’ll always wonder if I could have done more. If anything, you ought to be furious that I was even put into such a position with Draco whilst you were gone—having to stand by and watch him suffer that way. If anything,” she repeated, her eyes narrowed and her voice very low, “you should count yourself lucky you weren’t here to see it! Although I doubt it would have affected you overmuch at the time. Voldemort had you wrapped round his little finger.”

Narcissa’s laughter was brittle. “And then afterwards—that last year at Hogwarts…what he was forced to witness and be a part of… at our behest…” She shuddered. “Thank the gods for Severus. At least he was able to spare our son the lifelong torment of knowing he was Albus Dumbledore’s murderer, and then help him find a way to cope with all the horrors by doing what he felt was right in the end. And so much of what our son suffered was in the service of the Dark Lord’s twisted scheme to punish you. You know that.”

The silence between them grew to what seemed immeasurable minutes before Lucius replied.

“I do, yes,” he said heavily, returning to his chair and slumping down in it, his body betraying a sudden and powerful exhaustion of spirit. “He played his little games consummately well. I’m…” Here, Lucius seemed to struggle for the will to get the words out, staring fixedly at a point on the wall somewhere beyond his wife. “I’m… grateful to you, Cissa, ” he said finally. “For doing what you did to protect Draco. I should have told you that long ago. I regret that it took me until now to say it.”

Narcissa stood and moved swiftly to her husband’s side, sitting down and covering his hands with her own. “Thank you for that,” she said quietly. They sat together in silence for a brief time, and then she gave his hands a squeeze. “We’ll have a good visit. You’ll see. Just…” She trailed off, wanting to say so much, not knowing where to begin. Let him breathe. Let him take the lead, be himself, show you this part of his life that he’s so proud of now. Be open and listen to him finally. Please. “Just…”

He patted her hand. “I know.” Leaning in, his lips brushed hers lightly and then his voice turned deceptively brisk as he stood, pulling her to her feet. “Come, wife! We’ve a trip to make in a few hours’ time. Things to do!”
That afternoon--

“Malfoy!”

“Hmm?”

“Do I look all right?”


“How do you know? You’re not even looking at me!” Slight hysteria in her voice. “STOP!”

They had been sprinting along Catte Street towards the High and had just passed the Radcliffe Camera when Hermione stuck her hand out, finally, plucking at Draco’s arm.

“Draco! Please. Stop a minute,” she panted. “I know you’re a bit on edge, but can’t we slow down a little? I’m all out of breath and with all this running, I’m going to look a fright when we finally get there!”

Draco really looked at Hermione then. The ends of her hair were lifting in the light breeze, the chill dampness in the air causing the curls to frame her face more emphatically and frizz just a bit. Her cheeks were flushed (rather prettily, he thought) and her eyes were bright but wide, and slightly desperate-looking.

His smile, meant to reassure her, was just a bit edgy as well. “Sorry, love. You look great. Honestly. Just…” He reached out and patted at her hair with both hands, smoothing it down and then lingering to wrap a small curl around his finger playfully. “There. All better. We really should get going, though—I don’t want to be--”

Hermione glanced down at her watch. “Malfoy, relax! No way are we going to be late! It’s only half past two! They won’t even be here for another half hour. We have time. Come on,” she grinned infectiously, pushing a persistent curl out of her eyes and taking his hand. “Let’s walk.”

A small, answering grin escaped him, and he nodded, squeezing her hand briefly, and then they moved on, this time at a more leisurely pace. Before long, they’d reached the intersection of Catte and the High, crossing over and turning right on the other side. The street was humming with busy shoppers and students, many of them threading their way through the traffic on bicycles.

“Draco,” she said presently, her tone deliberately casual and offhand. “Can you ride a bike?” She might just as well have asked him if, growing up, he’d ever swung a cricket bat. The answer was obvious.

He regarded the bicycles gliding past in the street with obvious scorn. “Now why in the world would I have had need of a bike when I had a--”

“Sshh!” Hermione’s finger flew to her mouth and she looked around furtively.

“Broom!” he whispered. “Sorry!” And then he relaxed into a normal tone of voice once again. “Fuck’s sake, Granger, how could anything be better than that!” He let out a derisive snort of laughter and shook his head, though the look he gave her was fond.
“Oh, but riding a bike is fun! I always loved it. I used to imagine I was flying sometimes, when I was going really fast…” Suddenly, Hermione realised what she’d just said, and blushed at his wide, rather smug grin.

“Okay, okay, point taken! Still, though… it’s very nice all on its own, you know. I could teach you, if you like.”

“Okay,” he answered airily. Their hands were still clasped, and playfully, he began swinging their joined arms forward and back in a carefree arc as they walked. They were just crossing the narrow passage leading to the Chiang Mai Kitchen when their eyes met. She gave him a tiny smile and a wink and he winked back, both of them remembering the day they’d eaten there with Hermione’s parents. It had been the first time he’d met them, and he recalled how nervous he’d felt beforehand and how quickly they’d put him at his ease. That had been a very good day indeed, even though it had ended with the two of them facing the unhappy prospect of a separation.

Today would be a sort of bookend to that day in early December. He only hoped it would go even half as well.

And then suddenly, there it was: Payne and Son, Silversmiths, a tall, narrow building with bay windows in the first and second storeys and a rather remarkable-looking statue of a dog holding a gigantic pocket watch in his mouth, perched on the narrow ledge overhanging the ground-floor shop front. Hermione tugged at Draco’s jacket sleeve, pointing delightedly at it. He nodded, giving her a quick smile, but was clearly beginning to feel apprehensive again, and anxious to move on. The passage they wanted was just there directly beneath the dog and watch, a very narrow, covered lane between Payne and Son and the next establishment, the Brittania Building Society.

Stopping at the entrance, Hermione pulled Draco close, and they looked at each other for a long moment. Then Hermione rose onto her tiptoes, kissing him firmly on the mouth.

“For luck!” she whispered. “Though I bet we won’t need it!”

Draco bit back the cynical reply born of experience that was on the tip of his tongue, and merely nodded, resting his chin on the top of her head.

“Right, let’s get this show on the road, then,” he muttered finally, wiping suddenly clammy palms on the seat of his jeans as they turned into the passage.

It was a short walk along the very narrow, covered, cobbled alley to the pub, housed in a fifteenth-century building that had once been a moneylender’s establishment. The chequer board hanging outside like a calling card was a traditional moneylending symbol dating back to at least the thirteenth century.

Passing a dark, shingled section and then a winding, spiral staircase on the right, they found themselves looking at an outdoor beer garden further ahead, with the entrance to the pub proper before that on their immediate right.

It was ten minutes to three.

Taking a deep breath, Draco held the door open for Hermione and followed, and the two of them walked into the darkened interior of the pub.

“Straight to the back,” he muttered, his hand at Hermione’s waist as they walked amongst the patrons of the pub who were moving between the bar and their tables.

There were a fair number of people in for a late lunch, and once they made it to the small area in the
back where the Ladies and Gents were located, it took close to ten minutes before the area was clear of people waiting to use the facilities. Then, looking quickly to right and left, Draco stealthily pulled out his wand from an inside pocket of his jacket and tapped the door of the storage closet once.

Instantly, there was the sound of locks disengaging. Draco tried the door knob and it turned easily. With one final look around, the two of them slipped past the door, closing it quickly behind them. The lock clicked back into place instantly.

And then they turned around.

“Oh!“ she breathed.
“Oh!” she breathed.

Spread out before them was a scene at once so familiar, with its aura of magic, as to be almost eerie, and yet quite different to anywhere they’d ever been in the wizarding world. Because this was Oxford, and not Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, and certainly not Glastonbury, each of which had its own special stamp. The same could most certainly be said of Bellewether Crescent.

The buildings were clearly quite old, the oldest dating back about seven hundred years and the rest ranging anywhere between two hundred and five or six hundred years in age. Some were half-timbered and overhung, but many others were made of stone, or plastered over and painted in bright colours, mirroring the scene they had just left behind in the High Street. However, unlike Diagon Alley, where everything seemed to be jammed together higgledy-piggledy, here there was a sense of
order and structure and calm, as if somehow, the builders in each succeeding generation had had a sixth sense about how to space their new additions or any alterations they might be making to existing structures, so that nothing would feel crowded or cramped. Trees grew between buildings and on grassy areas alongside the generous pavements. There was even an open, public green bordered all around by shops surrounding it in an oval. Here people could stroll or sit beneath the trees, or enjoy the garden in the warmer weather.

“Bloody hell.” It wasn’t in the least what Draco had expected either. He stared for a moment, and then he seemed to wake up from his surprise. Shaking his head, he blinked and took Hermione’s hand once again. “Come on, Granger,” he muttered. “It’s nearly three. We’re looking for number nine, Mother said. The apothecary.”

The street was thronged with witches and wizards shopping, and here and there a lone figure plying his or her independent trade in tarot readings or palmistry. It was as busy in its own way as the High Street had been, only just on the other side of a narrow alley and yet an entire world away. There was the local post office on their right, the bank directly opposite (a local branch of Gringott’s, they were surprised to discover), and then a whole panoply of shops opened up before them in a rainbow display: blue, salmon, white, sea-green, cherry-red, bright yellow, purple, and more. Fascinated, Hermione and Draco found themselves looking right and left as they walked, so as not to miss a thing.

“Ooh,” she cried, pointing just after they’d passed Snowe’s Gems and Baubles. “Look!” It was a wide structure of palest pink with a large bay window in front, invitingly filled with a variety books. The sign above the window read “Wickenden’s, Ltd. Purveyor of Books, All Sorts.”

She began drifting towards the entrance only to find herself being hauled back, Draco shaking his head and grinning wryly. “Hah! How did I know?” he laughed. “Not now, sweetheart, sorry. No time. Maybe afterwards, though. I’d rather like to have a look myself.”

They found that Bellewether Crescent truly was aptly named, because it wound around to the left in a gradual, flattened half-moon shape, with two smaller lanes that branched out, one to the left immediately after the bank—this one, The Spit, connected to the nether end of the Crescent— and the other to the right, just past the bookshop. That one was The Narrows, and connected the Crescent to the other main road that ran relatively parallel to it. This was Jiggery-Pokery Lane, which Draco and Hermione would discover later.

For now, though, they were busy watching the numbers. Snowe’s had been number three, Wickenden’s number four, and Sybila’s, a rather expensive-looking women’s clothing boutique, was number five. Rounding the curve of the Crescent, Hermione pointed to a trio of buildings on their right.

“That one’s six,” she said, and Draco took note of a shop specialising in stylish and somewhat unusual footwear. A Stargazer’s café was immediately next-door at number seven.

“There’s the hotel,” Draco observed, drawing Hermione’s attention to the rather imposing and quite grand-looking building just to the left of the café. The Damselfly Inn was at number eight. “Right, number nine’s got to be round here somewhere.”

There was a tug at his sleeve and he turned.

“There,” Hermione said quietly. And so it was.

Hixon and Grundleston’s Apothecaries stood directly across the road from the hotel, oddly set apart from the two nearest shops and framed on either side by towering and probably ancient beech trees.
“Right,” Draco said softly, almost to himself. “Come on, then.” Hermione felt him clutch her hand tightly and she offered a comforting squeeze in return.

The tall figure with the distinctive, silver-blond mane was impossible to mistake for anyone else. Lucius was standing between two narrow aisles crammed with merchandise, his back to them as they approached, examining an array of mortars and pestles in marble and finely carved woods of different sorts. Narcissa spotted them first, and she instantly raised a hand to wave, a delighted smile lighting her lovely features. Draco really did resemble her as much as he did Lucius, Hermione decided, looking from mother and son as they drew closer.

“Draco, darling! Lucius, look, they’re here!”

Draco and Hermione had, by this time, reached Narcissa, and as she gathered her son into a welcoming hug, Hermione dropped back a couple of steps, smiling shyly as she watched.

A moment later, Narcissa released Draco, who was smiling easily now despite his earlier trepidations. He stepped back and slipped an arm around Hermione’s waist, drawing her forward.

“Mother, here’s--”

“Miss Granger, yes.” Narcissa gave her a gracious smile, so much more spontaneous than the one with which she’d greeted Hermione at their initial meeting over tea two months earlier. “May I call you Hermione, dear?”

Hermione flushed and nodded, and the shy smile of a moment earlier relaxed, broadening into one of genuine pleasure. “Please! It’s lovely to see you again, Mrs. Malfoy. Thank you for including me.”

Then she paused. Lucius had moved to stand alongside his wife and now regarded Hermione and Draco with an expression of impeccable composure. The corners of his mouth quirked upwards in a slight, somewhat distant smile.

“Draco. And Miss Granger. How very pleasant.” He extended his hand to his son, whose own hand was now offered in a rather automatic gesture of dutiful civility.

“Father,” he said politely, and then carefully withdrew his hand.

Now Lucius turned to Hermione.

She paused, but only for a fraction of a second, and then made her decision.

“Hello, Mr. Malfoy,” she said, with her brightest possible smile, and moved forward to grasp his hand with unequivocal firmness. “It’s very nice to see you.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow. No shrinking violet, this girl. Not any longer, at least. He wondered at her boldness, and then remembered the poise with which she’d eventually conducted herself the last time she’d been in his company, and the growing confidence of her self-expression. Apparently, first impressions in her case had not been misleading, but were instead an overture for things to come. He suspected that this trip to Oxford might just turn out to be far more interesting than he’d initially thought.

“Ah… yes. Draco’s mother and I are… pleased you could join us today. Come, Draco, let us walk ahead and allow the ladies to chat.” He laid a hand lightly on Draco’s shoulder and inclined his head towards the door.

Draco’s gaze fell for just a fraction of a second upon the hand that rested on his shoulder and then he
noded, allowing himself to be steered gently towards the exit. What the fuck had just happened? He had the uncanny sense that whatever it was, it had been something momentous, but that somehow, it had managed to elude him. He glanced up at his father, whose features were as regally composed as ever, and then over his shoulder at his mother, who was talking animatedly with Hermione. Then she reached over and touched Hermione’s arm warmly for just a moment. His eyes widened, and as he looked, Hermione glanced up and caught his eye. She winked, and a very tiny, very tentative nugget of warmth and well-being was suddenly ignited in his chest. Maybe— just maybe-- today was going to be all right.

Half an hour later, they’d had a rejuvenating cream tea at a tiny tea shop with the curious feature of having two different addresses depending upon which end of the shop one chose to enter from. They’d found Elementals at lucky number thirteen, as they’d completed their walk around the rest of Bellewether Crescent. It was at the tail end, situated alongside The Bindery, a small bookshop specialising in old, rare, and out-of-print books. Hermione had gazed longingly at its tantalising window display as they walked up the porch steps of the tea shop.

“I know, I know,” she sighed with a rueful grin, before Draco could even open his mouth. “Not now!”

He chuckled, giving her a tickling pinch about the waist. She twisted away from him with a small squeak.

Walking behind them, the senior Malfoys glanced at each other, Narcissa giving Lucius a meaningful look, and there was amusement in her eyes in addition to the obvious message she was sending. This was a girl who could make their son laugh, somebody he felt relaxed enough to be genuinely playful with, and openly affectionate besides. It was a first, and Narcissa was astute enough to notice-- and to make certain that Lucius did as well.

After tea, they’d discovered the back entrance, with the odd additional address of number five, The Loop. The reason became obvious almost immediately. Bellewether Crescent diverged just after Portia Gregory: Robes for All Occasions, to make a small half circle, a mini-crescent; this loop joined up again with the main road after passing Elementals and The Bindery, both of which had double addresses.

Now, at nearly half past four, they stood by the directory of shops that was posted just inside the entrance to the Crescent. There was a somewhat awkward moment as everybody seemed unsure of what to do next. Draco cleared his throat after a surreptitious nudge from Hermione.

“Um… would you like to… see the university, then? See where I live?”

He wasn’t at all sure this was a good idea, but after all, it would have seemed an obvious omission not to ask. And his mother had such a bright smile on her face. He had the feeling she would jump at the idea. In her very dignified way.

Of course, she did.

“Draco, that sounds like a perfectly lovely idea. Your father and I have been most curious about where you have been studying and what sort of living arrangements you have.”

“Right…” Draco began, still somewhat noncommittal.

“Follow us,” Hermione piped up, nudging him again and darting him a questioning glance. “This
Looping her arm through his, she half-pulled him along to the door through which they’d come, and then without waiting, she pulled out her wand, about to tap on the door once. Then suddenly she stopped short and whirled around.

“Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy—perhaps… um… well… you really don’t want to be seen walking round the streets of Muggle Oxford in your robes. You’re… um… Are you…?” Here, she blushed, unwilling to come out and ask whether they were in fact wearing ordinary clothing beneath the robes.

Narcissa looked startled. It was an eventuality she hadn’t even given a thought to in all the hurry of planning the trip.

“Oh dear,” she murmured, chagrined. “I’m afraid I…”

“Please--allow me,” Hermione said immediately, smiling, and then added, “You can take care of your dad, Draco.” Waving her wand in a graceful arc in Narcissa’s direction, she murmured, “Induviae transformo!”

Instantly, the stylish, teal-blue robes Narcissa had been wearing were gone and in their place, there was a lovely and very smart two-piece suit in the same colour, an ivory silk blouse, and a pair of matching heels. She looked down at herself, startled and then immensely pleased.

Sense of humour, intelligent, and resourceful. Hmm.

She cast a quick but penetrating glance at her husband, raising a "You see? What did I tell you?" eyebrow. Narcissa was on a campaign now. Lucius recognised all the signs. But… the Granger girl was quick on her feet and magically quite clever, evidently. He gave his wife a faint smile of acknowledgement in return, nodding slightly.

“Very pretty, Mother.” Draco smiled his approval. “Nice work, Granger!”

He turned his eye on his father, tall and imposing in midnight-blue robes. Narrowing his eyes, he thought for a moment, and then inscribed a somewhat wider arc with his own wand, echoing Hermione’s spell.

When next Lucius looked down at himself, he was wearing a stylishly cut and tailored, charcoal-grey suit, a pinstriped shirt, and a claret-coloured tie. It was…rather elegant, if he did say so himself. Quite appropriate for dinner in a fine restaurant. Reaching up, he felt his hair, which was now pulled back into a neat ponytail. He might easily have passed for a senior partner in a solicitor's firm, or the Muggle version of exactly what he was in the wizarding world: a well-heeled corporate executive and a member of the landed gentry. Never mind that his name wouldn’t be found in any ordinary social register.

“Shall we?” Narcissa asked gaily. She was having a simply wonderful time, and so far, things were going swimmingly.

Now Draco did the honours, tapping on the door once. As before, a complex series of internal locks rearranged themselves, and he opened it slowly, peering through a crack to be sure nobody was around on the other side. Satisfied that the coast was indeed clear, he gestured for everyone to follow him and the four of them made their way through the pub into the narrow alleyway outside.

A fair number of shoppers still populated the High as they exited the passage. Draco was keenly aware, suddenly, that this was very likely one of the only experiences his parents had ever had—if not the very first ever—of the Muggle world. They would be stepping into a world that he’d grown
to know fairly well in the last four and a half months. He remembered well how it had been for him in the very beginning: alien and strange, even bizarre at times, with almost nothing that one could take for granted. Very like visiting a foreign country in which the language was allegedly the same and yet full of mysterious code words for which one had no frame of reference, and customs and ways of doing things that were completely Other. He slanted a quick look at his parents to gauge their initial reactions to these new surroundings. Narcissa’s eyes were wide and intensely curious as she gazed around her at the busy High Street, with all its shops and bustle. Lucius’ face betrayed less, but that was only to be expected. However, Draco knew his father well enough to recognise the spark of interest behind the nonchalance and obdurate stoicism that veiled his grey eyes as they surveyed the scene.

“This way,” Draco said, gesturing to the right, and they began to make their way down the street, passing a pair of cafes, clothing shops, a bank, and then the impressive Oxford University Press bookshop. Apparently, something displayed in the window had caught his father’s eye. Lucius seemed to linger for a fraction of a second longer by the plate glass window, and Draco looked to see what in particular would have garnered such interest. In the display window, there were a number of books on various periods of British history, archaeology, and antiquities. However, this was neither Flourish and Blotts nor Obscurus Books, nor even The Bindery here in wizarding Oxford. It was the very Muggle OUP shop.

“See something that interests you, Father?” he growled, unable to resist asking. “Fancy a look round the shop?” There was a slight but undeniably sardonic edge to his voice. Hermione looked over at him with a frisson of sudden surprise and apprehension at the same time that Narcissa turned sharply in his direction, her eyes flicking between his face and that of her husband.

To the casual observer, the question would have sounded quite innocent, at worst mildly teasing in nature. But it was more than that, and both women knew it. There was a certain perverse pleasure for Draco in the fact that his always-in-control father was decidedly out of his comfortable, familiar element. Not only that, he was in the very environment he’d always so vehemently proclaimed to be inherently inferior. And yet, could it be that such a place could possibly produce something of value and interest to the very discerning Lucius Malfoy? This peevish impulse to prod his father, to bait him just a little bit— so apparent to his very perceptive mother and equally sharp girlfriend— began to set off sudden, tiny alarm bells for both of them. Hermione moved quietly to Draco’s side, feigning an interest in the shop display. Her fingers curled around his, giving his hand a quick squeeze, her whispered “Malfoy, no” tickling his ear.

Standing beside Lucius, Narcissa caught her son’s eye in the next moment, and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

Draco rolled his eyes in response to both of them and shut his mouth, preparing to walk on, when suddenly Lucius spoke, surprising everyone. Remarkably, his tone was utterly unruffled.

“Yes. I would, rather. Shall we?”

Everyone stared at him, momentarily nonplussed. It was Hermione who recovered her wits first. She smiled.

“Yes, let’s! I love this bookshop. It’s wonderful!” She turned to Draco, who was still standing there, dumbstruck, as his mother and father entered the shop. “Well, come on, silly! Your parents are waiting!”

Half an hour later, the four of them emerged, Narcissa and Lucius carrying shopping bags. She’d found a book on gardening that had proven irresistible, despite the expense. Along with classical music, gardening was a passion she had actively cultivated over the years, and the Lady Garden at
the manor was her particular pride and joy.

Lucius had found a book as well. It was about mapmaking in the Renaissance, a period of turbulent activity both in the Muggle and wizarding worlds. What did it say about Lucius that he would have the slightest interest in a perspective on the Muggle world of several centuries ago, much less indulge that interest by purchasing a book about it? Draco was mystified.

A few doors down, Lucius stopped them yet again in front of Sanders of Oxford: Rare Prints and Maps. In the display window were several reproductions of antique maps, their spidery lines and arcane markings striking against the faded, parchment-like backgrounds. No surprise here—Draco had always known his father to have a fascination for antiquities, Dark objects as well as the more innocuous varieties. Maps—the older the better—were a particular passion. Lucius had quite a collection, some of whose rather more nefarious purposes were better kept secret and hidden. But these were not the wares of Borgin and Burkes drawing Lucius’ attention now. Nevertheless, he disappeared inside, everyone else dutifully in tow.

The maps he chose were reproductions he’d spotted in the display window, one a rendering of Wiltshire done in the early seventeenth century, and the other, a mid-nineteenth century map of the constellations visible in the spring sky. These he carried out of the shop carefully housed in sturdy cardboard tubes. Along with the book, they would be the first Muggle-made objects brought by choice into Malfoy Manor. Draco couldn’t help wondering just what he intended to do with them once he’d got them back home. The very idea of his father actually framing and displaying them for all the wizarding world to see was just impossible for Draco to grasp at this point.

Quite naturally, the Malfoys carried no Muggle currency, so Draco took care of the troublesome but necessary business of paying for his parents’ purchases, the bonus being the nice discount he received at the OUP shop, as a student at the university. Hermione’s eyes had widened when cashiers totalled the items in both shops, but not surprisingly, money was no object. They would reimburse Draco in wizarding currency that he would have Gringott’s convert into pounds, to be deposited later in his local account. Now, of course, he knew where he could take care of that locally, and he had to concede it was a definite benefit of becoming familiar with wizarding Oxford.

Lucius Malfoy's OUP purchase: *The Mapmakers' Quest Depicting New Worlds in Renaissance Europe*, by David Buisseret £20.00 (Four Galleons, $40)
Lucius' 17th C. map of Wiltshire
“Well, Draco,” Lucius remarked conversationally after they’d left Sanders. “Where next?”

This newfound affability was still registering small shock waves of disbelief in both Draco and Hermione, who knew Lucius far less well but had never had a positive impression of him, hitherto, either as a human being or as a father. In fact, until her visit to the manor for tea in early January, her impression of him was quite virulently the opposite. Of course, Draco’s reactions now were in direct response to a lifetime of exposure to his father’s distant personal manner as well as his entrenched elitism and racist beliefs. Now he began to wonder just who was walking around Oxford, inhabiting his father’s body.

The only one who wasn’t the least bit surprised was Narcissa. She smiled at her husband, wanting him to know how proud she was of the efforts he was clearly making. It was obvious, though only to her, that his pleasant manner was not coming all that easily to him; she could see the slight strain behind his eyes and the tiny lines in his forehead as he struggled to master his more natural impulses and remain open and tolerant.

Apparently, only she had noticed the fleeting furrow of his brows when Draco had made his slightly provocative remarks. If only Draco could know the extent of the efforts his father was making on his behalf. But this was something that had to work itself out between the two of them. She only hoped Draco would be astute enough to notice on his own, before she felt compelled to tell him herself.

“Oh… this way, Father,” Draco replied, indicating that they should continue in the same general direction, which was leading them towards the intersection of the High and Catte Street. They were nearly there. “I thought we’d walk over to the college now, and we could show you and Mother around a bit… that is, if…”

“Of course, darling,” Narcissa interjected. “Wonderful idea.” She smiled brightly, turning to Hermione and pointing. “Oh, look—what lovely clothing! Come!” Threaded her arm through Hermione’s, she walked the two of them over to inspect the wares in the windows of a pair of fashionable boutiques, Toast and Brora, that stood side by side at the corner of the High and Oriel Street.
This left Draco alone with his father momentarily. He shuffled his feet awkwardly, slanting a look at Lucius’ face, which remained impossible to read behind the pleasant expression he wore like a mask. Now Draco found that he had a million questions sprouting like weeds inside his head. These were questions he would rather not have had at all, because they had caused a small but undeniable crack in the carefully constructed wall he’d built around his heart where his father was concerned. Now, they were wedging their way into that crack, widening it, opening him up to feelings he had thought were long deadened, given up as lost causes. He didn’t want to wonder what his father thought of Oxford. He didn’t want to wonder what his father thought of him. It was easier telling himself that he already knew he was a monumental disappointment, and just leave it at that, moving on from there with his life. It was so much simpler to leave his father as a cipher, nobody of any real consequence to him any longer. It was so much simpler just to continue walking away.

But Lucius wasn’t allowing him to do that anymore, it seemed. What had happened to change things? That was another question he was dying to ask and yet could not bring himself to voice. Instead, he cleared his throat and took a step closer to his father, who stood gazing around at the busy thoroughfare.

“You… spend a lot of time here in the city when not at your studies, I presume?” Lucius’ question ended the awkward silence.

“Yes, we… I do. Everyone does,” he replied, meeting his father’s gaze steadily now. “I like it,” he added, just a tad defensively.

“I can see that,” Lucius remarked. “You appear to have made quite a successful adjustment to life as a… to life here,” he amended, after a moment’s hesitation. “It seems to agree with you.” The observation still held a tinge of undisguised surprise.

Draco glanced quickly at his father, momentarily suspicious of the intent behind the remark. But Lucius’ expression betrayed no sarcasm, and his son relaxed his guard slightly.

“Thank you. I think it does too.” His tone was guarded. Lucius was looking at him with what appeared to be an open and interested expression, one eyebrow raised only slightly, and suddenly Draco found himself rushing on to elaborate, partly in defence of what he’d just said and much to his own surprise.

“I like it here very much, Father. People are…well, they’re just people, like everywhere else. But they’re nice, when you get to know them. Not…well…” He swallowed, suddenly reluctant to open such an obvious tin of worms. “And… I’ve made friends. They seem to like me. They don’t… they have no idea…” he trailed off, finding himself flooded with sudden feelings of bewilderment. What in Merlin’s name had he just done, blathering on like that to his father of all people? He could never understand! This was mad, all of it! He clamped his mouth shut and turned away, flushing slightly.

Father regarded son with a speculative expression. Draco’s words and his subsequent silence had revealed far more than he had intended. That much was plain.

“Ladies,” Lucius called abruptly. “Shall we move on?”

The brief walk along Catte Street to Hertford took them past the Camera and the Bodleian Library, both of which elicited animated expressions of interest and appreciation from Narcissa. Lucius remained silent, but his eyes missed nothing as they walked.

Before long, they were at the main entrance to Hertford. Passing through, Draco pointed out the porter’s lodge.
“It’s where the postboxes are, Mother,” he said, gesturing. “We call them ‘pigeon holes.’ It’s where I pick up your letters. Notes to or from friends in other colleges as well. We ‘pidge’ them, see? Pigeon post,” he added.

Narcissa laughed. “Oh! Like—”

“Exactly that,” Draco grinned. “Metaphorically speaking.”

Narcissa smiled, looking around curiously. Intriguing place, this Oxford. Full of oddities and quirks. She suddenly remembered something Hermione had said when she’d come to tea two months earlier. Oxford has a magic all its own, she’d told them. The meaning of that was now becoming clear.

In the immediate left corner of the quad, the very distinctive dining hall, with its eccentric, wraparound façade fronting the spiral staircase within, attracted both Malfoys’ attention. Hermione flashed Draco a quick smile. Things were going well so far, better than she might have hoped. He gave her a lopsided but enigmatic grin in return.

The stairway in the corner of the quad that led to the Bridge of Sighs brought them out into NB Quad, where Hermione pointed out the JCR computer room.

“I really think,” she said matter-of-factly, her voice low now, “that the wizarding community needs to get on board with computers. They have really revolutionised communications in the Muggle world, and I think they could do the same for our world as well. I bet they’d really increase efficiency and productivity at your company, Mr. Malfoy.”

Narcissa and Lucius nodded politely, although all three Malfoys were inwardly taken aback at Hermione’s boldness. Not many people presumed to offer Lucius Malfoy suggestions on how to run his business concerns. It said rather a lot about this girl that she could summon the nerve to be quite so forthright. One might dismiss it as mere brazenness, but somehow, Narcissa suspected that might be a serious underestimation of young Miss Granger.

Draco led the way through the connecting passageway to their quad, Holywell, and they walked to its centre, with its cobbled and bricked courtyard, bike stands and wooden benches, and strategically placed shrubbery. He drew their attention to the Junior Common Room, its entrance in one corner.

“The JCR’s not just a place for students to hang out,” he explained, almost shyly, warming to the task of showing his parents around. “It’s the student organisation that deals with our concerns as well. They really do a lot for us.”

Between Draco and Hermione, they were certainly getting the cook’s tour, but it was precisely what Narcissa’s mother’s heart had been longing for. She could only hope Lucius had secretly been just as interested in a detailed glimpse of his son’s new life. She rather suspected that he had.

“Oi! Malfoy!”

A cheerful voice echoed across the quad just as they were about to enter Staircase 5. Turning, Draco and Hermione spotted Mark striding through from NB, a wide smile on his face. He reached them in a moment, stopping and grinning expectantly at the pair he knew at once to be his friend’s parents.

“How do you do?” he said, sticking his hand out in Lucius’ direction. “I’m a good friend of Draco’s. Mark Applegate. You must be his dad.”

There was a moment, just a fraction of a second, really, when it seemed that everyone around Mark had frozen. And then Lucius accepted Mark’s friendly handshake with a faint but polite smile.
“How do you do?” he countered, and then his hand dropped back to his side. “Lucius Malfoy.”

Mark nodded. “Pleasure, Sir. And you must be Draco’s mum,” he continued, oblivious to the weirdness of the dynamic that the other four were so keenly aware of. Running into his friends hadn’t been something Draco had anticipated. He’d forgotten that any of them would still be around during the vacation. Taking a deep, steadying breath, he gave Mark a grin.

“How do you do?” he countered, and then his hand dropped back to his side. “Lucius Malfoy.”

Mark nodded. “Pleasure, Sir. And you must be Draco’s mum,” he continued, oblivious to the weirdness of the dynamic that the other four were so keenly aware of. Running into his friends hadn’t been something Draco had anticipated. He’d forgotten that any of them would still be around during the vacation. Taking a deep, steadying breath, he gave Mark a grin.

“Mark Applegate… my mother, Narcissa Malfoy,” he said, gesturing.

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Applegate,” Narcissa smiled, offering her hand gracefully. “Are you not going home to see your family this vacation?”

Smiling, Mark took her hand. “No, not this time. I’m doing some research, so I needed to stay. I’ll probably go home next week sometime, though, just for a couple of days.” He turned to Hermione and Draco, draping a friendly arm around each of their shoulders. “So… what have you lot been getting up to? Seeing the venerable sights?”

“Yeah… we’ve just come from doing some shopping,” Draco replied. “Going out to dinner in a bit. Just wanted to show them my digs first.”

“Ah, yes. Not quite all the comforts of home, but we like it,” Mark quipped. “Come on, we can walk in together, yeah? I’m just going up, too.”

Reaching the third floor, Draco explaining on the way about the tutors’ quarters being on the ground floor, he dug into his pocket for his room key. Meanwhile, Mark crossed over to room number nine, giving its door a solid whack with his fist.

“Oi! Spencer! You in there?”

A groggy voice replied. Even muffled, it sounded distinctly like a rather vehement “Sod off!” Then, the door was yanked open abruptly, and a tousled head stuck out, peering round the doorway, eyes slitted against the light.

“Applegate, you pointless, arse-brained, fuckwitted twat! How’s a bloke supposed to get any sleep with you hauling off and…” Tony’s good-natured diatribe died away as he became aware, suddenly, of the pair of elegant, well-heeled parent-types standing with Draco and Hermione outside room twelve. “Oh! ‘Scuse me, sorry!” he muttered. “Just woke up. I’m not usually quite so uncivilised…”

“Tony Spencer.” Draco grinned wryly, nodding in his friend’s direction. “My parents, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.” Well, he thought, stifling a laugh, they’re certainly getting the full experience, warts and all.

The niceties out of the way finally, he opened the door and they walked into his room. Draco turned somewhat awkwardly around with a quick gesture that covered the entire room in less than thirty seconds, and cleared his throat. “Well, this is it.”

Plain, spare, functional and so small… Not at all what their son had been accustomed to at Hogwarts, and certainly not at home. The room was very nearly spartan in its simplicity. Not to mention… Well. Narcissa glanced around, an eyebrow delicately raised, but refrained from commenting beyond a tactful “Very nice, dear.” Her eyes met Lucius’ briefly and then they both glanced away. Their exchange of looks hadn’t gone unnoticed. In the past, their disapproval would have irked Draco terribly. And now? He turned away, trying to conceal his grin.

It was decided, in the end, that the simplest plan would be to have dinner in Belliewether Crescent after all. It was getting late, and Draco was chagrined to realise that he’d completely forgotten to
book a table anywhere. At this hour, the wait in the finer restaurants would be ridiculous. And as it happened, there was a lovely restaurant at the Damselfly, Narcissa assured everyone. It was called Philomela, and she’d personally had a look at it when they’d checked in upon arriving that afternoon. The four of them Apparated from inside Draco’s room, arriving instantly in the lavishly appointed lobby of the hotel.

By this time, everyone was tired and hungry. The food at Philomela turned out to be delicious, if a bit prosaic in terms of selection. The remainder of the evening passed quite pleasantly as they dined and enjoyed a bottle of very good wine, the conversation dominated by Narcissa and Hermione. They kept a steady, bright stream of talk going in the face of the more reflective quiet that seemed to have fallen over both Lucius and Draco.

Finally, it was time to say goodnight. The Malfoys would leave early in the morning, so there would be no opportunity to see them again before that time, and truth to tell, Draco was feeling more than a little relieved about that.

Narcissa reached out to Draco, enveloping him in her embrace. The delicate scent of lavender filled his nostrils suddenly as he returned her hug. It had been very good to see her.

“It was wonderful to see you,” she said, over his shoulder, holding him close. “I had a perfectly marvellous time.” Then she leaned in close to his ear, her breath tickling him. “Be good to her, darling. She’s very special.”

Feeling suddenly too full to speak, he simply nodded, his soft hair brushing her face. Releasing him, finally, she stepped back and reached for Hermione’s hands. “It was delightful spending time with you today, my dear. I feel I’ve come to know you better.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy,” Hermione said, smiling, her cheeks pink with pleasure. “I enjoyed today very much indeed.”

She turned to Lucius then and held out her hand.

“Goodbye, Mr. Malfoy. I… I hope you enjoyed your visit. Thank you for including me.”

Lucius grasped her hand for a moment, and then released it. His words remained formal, but they were not unkind. “You are very welcome, Miss Granger. It was our pleasure.”

Then he turned to Draco, who waited. He was quiet, tense. Even more keenly than usual, he felt the familiar maelstrom of emotions as he anticipated taking leave of his father.

“Draco.” Lucius clasped his son’s hand firmly, searching his eyes. “I’m…”

“Thank you for coming, Father,” Draco broke in quickly. “I appreciate it.”

He really wanted to get away now. “I’ll see you both at the end of term, in June,” he rushed on. “We… we have to go now. Goodbye, Mother… Father!”

The clouds had cleared, opening a wide swath of black, diamond-studded sky to view, the air on this late-winter night crisply invigorating as they jumped the last step of the hotel’s veranda to the street.
Much later, they lay, drowsy and warm, in Hermione’s bed. Curled up on her side, her head rested on Draco’s chest, an arm and a leg draped over him. She really liked to cuddle after love-making, he’d discovered, and he loved holding her this way. He found himself feeling especially protective of her after they’d been intimate, more so than at any other time, perhaps because she’d just trusted him once again with a very private part of herself. She seemed to him particularly fragile in such moments. The scented cloud of her hair tickled his chin and he turned his head, blowing a wayward curl away from his mouth, drawing her closer.

Hermione pressed a soft kiss to Draco’s bare chest, briefly stroking his smooth skin with her fingertips before closing her eyes again. There was such a sense of peace in this island of quiet time they shared after making love. A quiet strength filled her, coupled with a powerful surge of affection for him, making her feel invincible and a part of something deeply primal and ageless.

“Love you,” he whispered, his fingers combing gently through her hair.

“I love you too,” came her soft reply. “So much.” There was a pause. “It went well, don’t you think? Today, I mean.”

Draco reflected for a minute. “Yeah… it really did. You were amazing, Granger. Mother really likes you, y’know.”

“I like her too, very much. I can see why you feel close to her. And your father… he was…”

Draco snorted. “I know! I couldn’t believe it. Merlin’s beard, I’ve never seen him like that. Not ever. Hey, d’you suppose Mother might’ve drugged him?” He laughed briefly at the thought, and then sobered. “D’you know, he actually asked me about my life here! Asked me. And I… I found myself telling him. And then suddenly, the whole thing just seemed so… I don’t know, so weird… I had to stop. I mean, it was surreal. Tell you something else, Hermione,” Draco added. “I think… I think he’s beginning to like you, despite himself. He’d never say it, not to me anyway. But I saw something in his eyes a couple of times when you were talking. I do believe you’ve charmed him.”

Hermione giggled, visions of a snake charmer suddenly filling her head. “Do you really think so?”

“I do, yeah. Fuck, Granger!” he exclaimed suddenly. “Did you see the look on his face when Applegate turned up in the quad and introduced himself? For just a second, I wasn’t sure what Father would do! He looked like he wanted to disappear! Or Vanish Mark! I mean, think about it: this was his first real conversation with an ordinary Muggle, ever. The only other ones he saw today-- close-up, that is-- were the two cashiers. And anyway, I paid, so he didn’t even really talk to them. And then--” Draco began to snicker quietly. “Then—did you see the expressions on both their faces when Spencer came bursting out of his room, swearing like a trooper?!”

Hermione nodded against his chest, giggling now herself.

“Totally gobsmacked, the pair of them!” Draco let out a guffaw, and Hermione clapped a hand over his mouth. Tremors of his silent laughter shook them both as she lay against him. “Nearly pissed myself! It was priceless! Not to mention what they must have thought when they saw my room!”

His arms wound snugly around her as they laughed together, tears starting out of their eyes, and then he sighed deeply.

Hermione raised herself up on one elbow. “You might have made your bed, at least,” she reminded him, and gave him a small, playful poke in the ribs.

“True, true, but this way, they really got the unvarnished picture, full-on. Poor Mother! To look at
her, you’d have thought her precious baby was having to live in a hole in the ground.” He shook his head, laughing again.

“You’re awful, you are,” Hermione sighed, but even now, she couldn’t completely repress a tiny grin. “You must have known what she’d think. Your mum’s nice! You shouldn’t tease.”

“Oh, she’ll get over it. Besides,” he added, his eyes growing soft, “she knows I’m happy. That’s really all she cares about, not how big or posh my room is.”

“What about your dad, Draco? What do you think he cares about?”

Draco sighed again, pushing a hand reflexively through his hair. “I really don’t know anymore. Your guess is as good as mine.”

Hermione fell silent then, snuggling back into the welcoming shelter of Draco’s arms. She lay wrapped in thought for a time, and then raised her head to look at him. He was deeply asleep now, his chest rising and falling gently. Settling a light kiss on his pliant mouth, she lay back, closing her eyes. But sleep remained elusive.

TBC

A photo tour of the Malfoys’ day in Muggle Oxford follows.

**WIZARDING OXFORD DIRECTORY**

**SERVICES:**

**Bank:** Gringott’s branch 1 Bellewether Crescent  
**Post office:** 2 Bellewether Crescent

**SHOPS:**

**Jeweller’s:** Snowe’s Gems and Baubles 3 Bellewether Crescent  
**Books:** Wickenden’s, Ltd. Purveyor of Books, All Sorts 4 Bellewether Crescent  
The Bindery 14 Bellewether Crescent/ 3 The Loop

**Clothing:** Hobson’s 10 Bellewether Crescent  
Sibyla’s 5 Bellewether Crescent  
Portia Gregory, Robes For All Occasions 11 Bellewether Crescent

**Shoes:** Heel and Sole 6 Bellewether Crescent

**Quidditch/Broom supplies:** Flights of Fancy 3 Jiggery-Pokery Lane
**Stationers:** (quills, inks, parchment) Havisham & Ellis 4 Jiggery-Pokery Lane

**Divination Needs:** (candles, runes, crystals, tarot card decks, scrying mirrors, incense sticks, etc.)
The Third Eye 2 Jiggery-Pokery Lane

**Wands and Staffs:** Campbell & Sons, Fine Wands & Staffs Made in the Old Way 1 Jiggery-Pokery Lane

**Apothecary:** (potions ingredients, herbs, vials, mortars and pestles, cauldrons)
Hixon and Grundleston’s, 9 Bellewether Crescent

**Magical Animals:** Familiar Friends 12 Bellewether Crescent

**DINING:**

**Fine Dining:** Philomela, the Damselfly 8 Bellewether Crescent/6 Jiggery-Pokery Lane

**Cafe:** Stargazer’s, 7 Bellewether Crescent/5 Jiggery-Pokery Lane

**Tea shop:** Elementals, 13 Bellewether Crescent/5 The Loop

**HOTEL:**

The Damselfly Inn 8 Bellewether Crescent

And now, the Malfoys’ visit to Oxford:
Britannia Building Society, 132 High Street (covered passage is on the left, directly under the dog and pocket watch.)
The covered passage leading to Chequers, 131a High Street

Dog and pocket watch above the covered passage
Payne and Son, Silversmiths, 131 High Street
OUP bookshop, 116-117 High Street, Oxford
Sanders of Oxford, 104 High Street

The intersection of the High and Oriel Streets
The Radcliffe Camera, or “Rad Cam,” which houses part of the Bodleian collection
Main entrance to the Bodleian Library

Inside the quad at the Bodleian
Disclaimer: All that’s mine are the original plot and characters, and wizarding Oxford. I make no money from this story.

A/N: My wonderful betas, kazfeist and mister_otter, deserve tremendous praise and thanks for their excellent support and much-valued friendship. Thanks so much, Karen and Carol!

Antique maps information and sales at Geographicus: http://www.geographicus.com/

Antique map reproductions can be found at The Old Map Company of Great Britain: www.oldmap.co.uk/IsleofWight.html

Information about the Oxford University Press and its catalogue may be found at: http://www.oup.co.uk/

Induviae transformo: “Clothing, transform!”
The chapter title is the name of a track sung by Danny Kirwan of Fleetwood Mac on their “Blues Jam in Chicago” album. It was written by J. Lane.
Friday, 12 May
4.28 pm

The taxi deposited them at the railway station with precisely two minutes to spare. Heaving their rucksacks over their shoulders, Hermione and Draco ran for the platform, hardly sparing a moment to breathe.

Tossing their bags down, they collapsed into facing seats, stretching their legs out and resting their feet on the seat opposite. For a moment, neither one spoke, being far too preoccupied with the business of gulping sufficient quantities of oxygen and waiting for their frantic heart rates to slow.

Finally, Hermione leaned back against the cushioned headrest, closing her eyes, and let out a sound that was half giggle and half breathy sigh.

“We made it!”

Draco pulled a face. “That, Granger, is a matter of opinion. I think I left half of me in the taxi when he made that last turn right into oncoming traffic!” He blanched once again, recalling the hair-raising
turn in which they’d avoided a collision with a large lorry by only seconds.

“Well, he was just trying to get us here in time,” Hermione said lamely. She felt obliged to defend the driver, whose command of English hadn’t been very good and whose knowledge of the city’s streets had been shaky at best.

Draco let out an undignified snort. “Right! By taking every wrong turn he possibly could, including trying to drive down lanes obviously meant for bicycles and pedestrians only! We’re just lucky we didn’t get stopped!” He paused, pulling down the zip on his jacket and then raking an agitated hand through his hair. “Actually, we’re lucky we didn’t get killed.”

Hermione nodded, sighing again. He was right. But at least they had made it, and now they could relax for the next hour. They’d arrive in London’s Paddington Station at 5.27, barring any delays, then catch the Tube for a half hour’s ride to Queens Park Station, finally boarding the train to Watford High Street station for the last thirty-four minutes of the journey. They were scheduled to arrive at 6.41 pm. Hermione’s parents would meet them at the station.

Hermione thought back to the phone conversation she’d had with her mother the week before.

“Sweetheart, I know you’re awfully busy with your studies, but do you think you could manage a visit home next weekend? It’s Daddy’s birthday, you know.”

“I know, Mum. I haven’t forgotten. It’s a big one too, this year, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is. His fiftieth. What do you think, can you make it? Bring Draco too. If you think he’d like to come, that is. He’d be more than welcome.”

Hermione thought for a moment, assessing the work she had in front of her, and then made up her mind.

“Thanks, Mum! I’ll ask him and let you know. But I’ll be there either way.”

“Lovely! Let me know when you want to come. We’ll drive in and collect you.”

“No, no, that’s not necessary, Mum. We can take the train-- it’s fine, really. I’ll ring in a day or two and let you know what time we’re arriving.”

“Right, then. Talk to you soon, darling.”

And now they were on their way. She’d hoped it would be a quiet weekend, just the four of them, but she wasn’t surprised, in the end, to learn that a party had been planned. It was to be a joint surprise for her dad and her Uncle Robin, his fraternal twin, and there would be both family and friends there. Not a little bit daunting, but she hoped Draco wouldn’t find it too overwhelming all at once. He’d been happy to accept the invitation, she recalled.

The thing was, she was quite certain he’d had no real clue what he was letting himself in for when he’d initially said yes. He couldn’t possibly have done. Even she hadn’t known about the party when she’d first invited him. And then, once the full situation had come to light, there’d been no question for him of backing out, even though Hermione had tried to give him the chance more than once. She recalled one such conversation:
“You’re… you’re sure you want to come? I mean…”

“Yeah, ‘course I’ll come. It’ll be fun.”

“But… I mean… it’ll be cousins and aunts and uncles and my parents’ friends… lots of them, probably! You won’t mind all that?”

The briefest of pauses. Then, manfully, “Reckon I can handle it, Granger.”

Difficult enough under normal circumstances, being the boyfriend that hordes of relatives and family friends have been hearing about and are dying to have a good look at, finally. But these circumstances were hardly normal. Draco had made tremendous strides since leaving home—well, since the last year at Hogwarts, really, when he’d finally begun acting on his changing feelings. And of course these last months at Oxford had been critical. The Muggle world was no longer nearly so off-putting or alien. Not most of it, anyway. Still… a whole houseful of them bearing down on him all at once, first off—and second, the lot of them ready to cast a critical eye in order to assess his worthiness for their darling Hermione. Well, all that did seem just a bit much. And yet, here he was, sitting across from her, giving her one of his patented, bliss-inducing foot rubs. Well, Nobody would give him a hard time, not if she had anything to say about it—not even Uncle Jack, who liked to take the mickey out of anyone, given half a chance.

Resolved, she nodded emphatically to herself, her mouth a determined line. Watching this from the other seat as he kneaded her instep, Draco bit his lip, swallowing a chuckle. He knew that look. It meant business. He wondered what it was she’d been thinking about.

The train to Watford rolled in just three minutes past its time, and as they exited their passenger car, Hermione spotted her mother waiting a short distance down the platform near the entrance to the waiting room and she broke into a spontaneous run, a wide, infectious smile on her face.

“Mum!”

Claire Granger opened her arms wide and her daughter flew into her embrace. The two of them stood that way, quietly hugging, for a full minute before Claire, looking over Hermione’s shoulder, spotted Draco standing back a few paces, a winsome, little smile raising the corners of his mouth.

“Draco,” she said warmly, releasing Hermione and then reaching for his hand. “I’m so glad you could make it! Though I’m afraid you’ll be having to run the gauntlet, as it were, on Saturday night. Don’t worry,” she added, laughing. “Just the family and a few friends, and they’re all very eager to meet you. They won’t bite!”

“I’m sure,” Draco replied politely, though in truth, he was anything but. Instinctively, Hermione slipped an arm through his, drawing him closer as they began walking towards the rain-slicked car park.

“Daddy isn’t with you?” She was curious.

“No, no, he’s cooking, and besides, he’s been very busy with his latest project. Tell you more about that in the car,” Claire replied. “Here we are.”

They’d arrived at a late-model, forest-green estate car, and Claire pressed the small clicker on her key ring to unlock the doors. Draco’s eyebrows shot up and he looked questioningly at Hermione. He hadn’t seen this particular Muggle device before.
“Unlocks the doors automatically,” she whispered. “Works by battery. Oh… well… you know, same sort of thing as a remote control for a telly.”


The Grangers’ home, Stratford Way, Watford

The Grangers’ home in Stratford Way was not a far drive, and Claire deftly manoeuvred through the early-evening rush-hour traffic with complete aplomb. A dense fog had fallen in the past couple of hours, and now the landscape was heavily shrouded in it. Headlamps from oncoming cars appeared like strange, Otherworldly eyes shining eerily through the heavy mist.

Watching the rain-dark streets of Watford flash by with their neat homes, still-bare trees and shrubbery standing in front gardens like sentinels, he took a certain quiet comfort in being an observer, disappearing into near-invisibility in the warm, shadowy recesses of the back seat. Nearly mesmerised at times as he looked out the window, he lost the thread of their conversation occasionally. Now he picked up a piece of it again.

“So what’s all this about a project, then? What’s Daddy been getting up to?” Hermione sat up front next to her mother, and in profile, Draco could see the marked resemblance between the two of them. Looking from one to the other was almost like seeing mirror images in a gentle time warp.

“You’ll see when we get home. It’s down in his workshop. He’s been working on it for ages, it seems.”

Hermione looked over her shoulder. “Dad’s got a workshop in the cellar. He likes to putter about, doing woodworking sorts of things. He builds furniture, did I ever tell you?”

Draco shook his head.

“He’s really quite good! You’ll see.” With a proud smile, Hermione turned to face front once again.
In a few moments, they were pulling into the driveway, the headlamps of the car switching off and plunging the area immediately ahead back into darkness once again.

The house was invitingly warm as they stepped inside. Richard was on his knees by the fireplace, adding a log and stoking the fire, which crackled pleasantly. There was a delectable odour in the air that had both Hermione and Draco sniffing appreciatively. Then she clapped her hands together delightedly.

“Oh, Daddy, you’ve made Bouillabaisse!”

Dropping her rucksack where she stood, Hermione ran to her father and grabbed him in a bear hug, a happy smile lighting her face. Richard gathered her close, resting his cheek on the top of her head, and gave her a fond squeeze.

“It’s been far too long, Kitten! Whatever were you thinking?” he scolded her gently, kissing her head.

“I don’t know! It’s wonderful to be home though!”

Turning a radiant smile in Draco’s direction, she beckoned to him. He grinned a bit self-consciously and moved toward the two of them, accepting Richard’s outstretched hand with a firm shake.

“Thank you for having me, Mr…. uh… Richard,” he corrected himself shyly.

“That’s better. No formality here,” Hermione’s father said, nodding in approval.

“No, wine would be great,” Draco hastened to assure him. He was more than ready for a good, hearty meal and a glass or two of something nice, and then a relaxing sit-down by the fireside. And Bouillabaisse happened to be a favourite of his, from the days when his parents would take him on holiday to the south of France.

“Okay, Dad. Come on, Malfoy,” Hermione grinned, hefting her bag onto her shoulder and heading for the staircase. He was right behind her, and the two of them disappeared up the stairs and into the shadowy landing above. The moment they got there, Draco backed Hermione up against the wall in the narrow hallway, their bags slipping to the floor, forgotten.

“And just what do you suppose you’re doing?” she whispered. He could see the gleam of her teeth in the semi-darkness. She wriggled beneath him as he pressed against her. The sensations that resulted were utterly delightful.

“Oh, something entirely dishonourable, I assure you,” he murmured wolfishly, nipping at her neck.

“Good... I was hoping it would be!” She giggled, and then clapped a hand to her mouth. “Sssh... we can’t do this, not in the hallway!”

“Well, then, we’ll just have to be more quiet, won’t we,” he said, his voice smooth and very low in her ear. “I know just the thing.”

His mouth silenced hers in the next moment. There was a taste of spearmint from the gum she’d had on the train. Then he drew even closer, settling himself against her comfortably, sinking into her, wanting to drown in the softness and sweetness of her mouth, feeling the press of her breasts through
the fine cashmere of his jumper. “Hermione…” he murmured, sighing quietly, his eyes closing as his lips found hers once again.

Every part of him intoxicated her-- his voice as he said her name, the scent of his hair and skin, the taste and feel of him-- and she lost herself in his embrace. Silhouetted in the half-light of the hallway, they stood nearly motionless for long moments, so close that they might have been joined. Only the languid, sweet meetings of tongues and lips betrayed the intensity of the fire that had been ignited and was now on a slow burn.

The sound of a throat being delicately cleared just at the foot of the stairs snapped them back to the present, and reluctantly, they separated, Draco touching his forehead to Hermione’s, both smiling foolishly as they tried to calm their racing hearts. Moments later, their bags stowed in the bedrooms and their hands newly washed, they rejoined Claire and Richard downstairs.

A large tureen sat in the centre of the dining room table. Wine in graceful glasses sparkled in the candlelight like gold under glass. At each place setting there was a large bowl in which were slices of French bread generously seasoned with olive oil, bread crumbs, and chilies. As Draco and Hermione sat down, Richard lifted the lid off the tureen and a cloud of fragrant steam escaped.

“Well, well, everybody pass down your bowls and plates. As I’m the cook, I’ll be mother tonight,” he said jovially, dipping a large ladle into the tureen and serving out portions of the fragrant stew, spooning the rich, thick broth over the bread. Large chunks of fish and seafood were served onto the accompanying plates, and passed down the table.

With a satisfied smile, Richard set down the ladle finally, and took up his spoon. “Dig in, everybody! Bon appetit!”

For several minutes, the sheer pleasure of eating consumed everyone, until finally, Claire laid her own spoon down, and sighed.

“Richard,” she enthused, “you’ve quite outdone yourself this time! It’s divine!”

“Oh yes, Daddy,” Hermione chimed in. “This is definitely your best yet!”

Draco looked from the two women to Richard. “You’ve done this before…” he began.

“Oh yes, certainly! I’m afraid I barge in and take over the kitchen rather more often than Claire would prefer. Isn’t that right, Claire dear?”

Her spoon halfway to her lips, Claire chuckled, shaking her head. “Of course it isn’t, silly! You may take over the cooking any time you like. I’m sure I don’t mind in the least!”

Draco spooned up a bit more of the rich stew mingled with soaked bread, and chewed thoughtfully. He tried to imagine his parents bantering with each other at the dinner table in this offhand, affectionate way, and even further afield, he tried to picture his father rolling up his sleeves and actually cooking a meal for the family. Quite frankly, he couldn’t even envision his mother doing that. So the mental image of Lucius getting his hands dirty with chores that were clearly the domain of house-elves was beyond fathoming. And yet, not only wasn’t it considered strange in this household—such a thing was actually within the realm of ordinary experience. This man who healed teeth for a living chose to build furniture and cook for the sheer pleasure of both.

Not for the first time, Draco was struck by the sense that life in families other than his own truly was an alternative universe—but now, he understood that it wasn’t a question of Muggle versus magical. It was simply people, and the fundamentally different way of living that the majority had, compared
to his parents and the select numbers in their social strata.

He was amazed, now, that he hadn’t understood this very basic truth before, although in his defence, he reminded himself that his rarified upbringing was all he’d ever known. It had established the boundaries for what “normal” meant. Now those boundaries were gradually being swept away.

He glanced swiftly around the table before dipping his spoon into the stew for another bite. Sitting across from him, Hermione was laughing at something her mother had said. Her eyes were shining. Suddenly she sensed his gaze, and turned her eyes to his. There was a warmth in them that took his breath away, and an immediate, quite extraordinary sense of well-being swept over him like a wave. She was in her natural element here, amongst people who clearly cherished her, and she had chosen to share that with him.

A sudden, moist pricking at his eyes had him ducking his head for a quick gulp of wine.

The evening was relaxed, following the meal. Richard led Hermione and Draco down to his cellar workshop and proudly showed off a glass-fronted, hanging cabinet he had nearly finished building. He’d just added a warm, honey-oak stain earlier that day. It really was a fine piece of work, and soon he’d be installing it in the dining room, where Claire could display some of the distinctive pottery she’d collected over the years.

Following a quick tour of the workroom and some of the other pieces in progress, they repaired to the sitting room for conversation, accompanied by after-dinner shots of Grand Marnier and coffee,
along with a luscious mixed-berry pie. Finally, they all lapsed into a stuffed, contented silence, watching small, merry sprites of flame dance and crackle round the hearth logs.


The mantel clock betrayed the lateness of the hour in the warmth and quiet that had fallen over the sitting room. Claire and Richard had excused themselves half an hour earlier.

“Oh goodness,” Claire had said sleepily, stretching as she stood. “I’m all in. I think I shall say goodnight. Coming, Richard?”

Hermione’s father had dozed off in his recliner chair, and now jerked awake at the sound of his name. “What… oh… oh, yes… Goodnight, you two,” he said, getting to his feet stiffly. “Don’t stay up too late.”

He followed his wife to the staircase, turning just before heading upstairs to give Hermione a pointed look. Although mild, its meaning was impossible to mistake. Hermione and Draco exchanged wary glances.

Meanwhile, Claire had reappeared after a quick trip upstairs.

“I’ve left fresh towels in the bathroom for both of you. Hermione, please see to whatever else Draco might need, won’t you? Sleep well, now. Goodnight!” She bent to kiss Hermione, and to his surprise, Draco received a quick kiss on the cheek as well.

After she’d gone, Draco stretched himself out on the sofa full length, pulling Hermione down next to him and wrapping his arms around her. “Your mum’s great,” he murmured into her hair, his voice lazy with the warmth of the fire and the wine and good food in his belly. “I can’t believe her sometimes. She makes me feel so… so…”

“Welcome? At home?”

“Both your parents do that. It’s more than that. She treats me like I’m family. It’s…”

“I know. That’s the way she is if she really likes somebody.”

“Oh, I see!” His voice took on a teasing edge. “So… am I to assume that all my predecessors got this sort of treatment as well?”

Spooned against him, Hermione idly ran a finger inside the cuff of his jumper sleeve, stroking the soft skin of his inner wrist, the veins blue against the pale, translucent flesh. “Naturally.”

Draco grinned. “Mmm. Well, I like it. Just so long as there’s nobody waiting behind me in the queue,” he teased, giving her bum a pinch. “Hey, what was that look your dad gave you anyway?”

Hermione gave a quick laugh, curling their fingers together and then raising their two hands so she could nuzzle his. “Dad is many things, but subtle isn’t always one of them!”

“You mean,” he replied, his eyes wide with mock innocence, “I really do have to sleep in the spare room?”

“Yes, you really do, Malfoy,” she announced firmly. “Otherwise, I’ll be carting you back to Oxford
in a basket. We had a close enough call on New Year’s Day, remember?”

“I just don’t know, Granger…” He shook his head ruefully, ignoring the question. “This really is asking an awful lot of me. Deprivation is quite harmful to a man’s physical and emotional health, y’know. Besides,” he added, a wicked gleam in his eyes, “I’ve grown quite used to being kicked and elbowed and having only a few inches of mattress to sleep on at the weekends. Not to mention having the covers stolen. Don’t know what I’d do with a bed all to myself!”

“Are you implying that I hog the bed?”

“No.” A pause. “I’m saying it.”

Another, longer pause. Then,

“No! Stop! Not under the arms … Granger, I said stop! (gasp of laughter) … NO! You’ll be sorry, little girl! (growling)… leave OFF… okay, OKAY, I take it back!”

The smile she gave him was smug.

“Better.”

*

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear after the rain and fog of the night before. There was a newly washed freshness to everything, a clarity, that brought out the colours of earth and sky and the black of bare trees.

Draco awoke, his head still a bit muzzy with all the alcohol he’d ingested over the course of the evening. There had been several glasses of that delightful Rousanne before and during dinner, the after-dinner liqueur they’d all enjoyed, and then the last of a bottle of champagne he and Hermione had unearthed in the fridge after her parents had gone off to bed, shared as the evening had waned and the fire had died down low.

His initial thoughts on opening his eyes were confused ones, as blearily he gazed round the unfamiliar room and wondered where in the name of Circe he was. Then reality very gradually sank in, and he recalled the previous evening.

Flopping back on his pillows, he allowed his eyes to rove about the room and really take in his immediate surroundings for the first time. The walls were painted a pale, sea-foam green, the moldings and window frames the colour of cream. There was a tall, plain chest of drawers in natural pine, a matching desk and ladder-back chair, a late-model computer and printer on the desk along with an array of framed family pictures. On the large triple window, top and bottom, there were rows of louvred shutters also painted the same rich shade of cream. They were drawn back completely, and sunlight streamed in unimpeded. Draco groaned, covering his eyes with one hand. Too bright. And then he remembered. He’d been so tired, and frankly, sufficiently sozzled that he’d stumbled in, barely managing to pull off his jumper and jeans before crawling beneath the ivory duvet. Drawing the shutters had been the last thing on his mind at the time.

What time was it anyway? He glanced at the bedside table and then at the chest of drawers and desk, in search of an alarm clock. Nothing. Then he recalled his wristwatch, which he was relieved to find was still securely on his left wrist.
Half twelve. Fucking hell! He listened for a moment, and suddenly became aware of sounds of life coming, muffled, from downstairs. He strained to hear better, and found he could pick out both Hermione’s and Claire’s voices above a clatter of dishes and cupboard doors closing.

Yawning and stretching luxuriantly, he slipped out of bed, pulling on a tee shirt and his jeans. He studied his face in the bathroom mirror, running a finger thoughtfully over the golden stubble on his jaw before brushing his teeth and throwing some cold water over his face. He’d shower and shave in a little while. Right now, though, his stomach was demanding sustenance and his curiosity was getting the better of him regarding what everyone was so busy about downstairs.

As he made his way down the stairs, he was surprised to discover himself feeling just a little bit shy and hesitant suddenly. It was his first time as a houseguest of the Grangers, officially anyway—only his second time ever sleeping under a Muggle roof and the first when the entire family were home and about. He’d made it halfway down the stairs when he heard an exuberant “Malfoy!”

Hermione was standing in the centre of the sitting room, a clutch of dirty glasses from the night before in her hands. She wore slim, black leggings and a hugely oversized red tee shirt on the front of which was the word “hornets” in giant black letters, and under that, what appeared to be a moose’s head on a field of yellow and black, beneath the word “Watford.” He had no clue what sport it was meant to suggest, but he suspected that Richard would be more than happy to explain if he asked. In fact, the shirt itself was probably Richard’s—the Hermione he knew was hardly sport-minded.

She beckoned to him with a cheeky grin. “Well, it’s about time, Lazybones! I thought you were going to sleep all day!”

Just as he opened his mouth to reply, Claire walked in from the direction of the kitchen. “Good morning, Draco,” she smiled. “Or perhaps I should say ‘good afternoon.’ Hungry?”

He nodded. “Starved, actually!”

“He might make sure Draco gets something to eat. I’m actually on my way out to do a few errands. There’s still a bit of the vegetable and cheese frittata and some bacon warming in the oven. Does that sound good?”

Oh yes. That sounded fantastic. Thanking Claire, Draco jumped the final three steps and happily followed Hermione into the sun-drenched kitchen, where she bade him sit at the centre island.

“It’ll just be a sec. Coffee?” Her voice broke into the reverie into which he’d fallen, in the warming light that bathed the part of the kitchen where he sat.

“Oh… yeah… thanks, love,” he murmured, and slipped off the stool to move directly behind her, threading his arms around her waist and leaning in to deposit a light kiss on the soft skin just below her ear. “Mmm… you smell good. I missed you last night, y’ know.”

Hermione smiled and put the plate of food down on the countertop, folding his arms within her own. “I missed you too,” she said quietly. “A lot. It’s only one more night though.”

That was true. They’d be back in Oxford by tomorrow night. Much as this weekend was turning out to be an oasis of calm and enjoyment— a sort of mini-holiday in which he was feeling utterly cosseted and quite wonderfully relaxed— he did look forward to having Hermione all to himself again, in the privacy of their rooms. He was struck, suddenly, by just how territorial he’d gradually become where she was concerned, and how comfortably used to their converging routines he’d grown, as well.
She turned in his arms and gave him a peck on the nose. “Breakfast,” she said firmly. “Sit.”

Obediently, he took his seat once again and hungrily attacked the bacon and the savoury mix of eggs, cheeses and vegetables she set before him, along with toast, fruit juice, and coffee. Hermione perched on the stool next to him, her own steaming mug of coffee in her hands, and watched as he ate.

“So here’s what’s happening later,” she told him, as he busily plied his fork. “We’ve booked at Dad’s favourite restaurant and we’re meeting Uncle Robin and his family there at eight o’clock. Everybody else will get there by half seven. I hope. And then when we arrive, voila, the big reveal, and we’re off to the races.”

Draco nodded, his mouth full of the most delectable egg and cheese combination he’d ever had. Finally, swallowing, he shook his head, sighing contentedly. “Merlin, Hermione, I knew your mum was a great cook, but this… this is amazing!”

Hermione averted her eyes, an embarrassed smile and the beginnings of a becoming blush heating her cheeks. “Actually, I made it.”

He stared at her. “You? Seriously? What else can you do that I don’t know about? Never mind, don’t answer that,” he laughed, slipping his hand around the nape of her neck and drawing her close. “Surprise me!”

He was kissing her quite soundly and thoroughly enjoying himself when the noise of the kitchen door opening interrupted them.

“Ah… hello, you two,” Richard said, slightly abashed at the sight. His subsequent efforts to ignore them were an abject failure. Nevertheless, he carried on trying whilst unpacking groceries from the shopping bags he’d set on the kitchen table, keeping up a stream of cheery chatter about the weather and where he’d been and traffic in town.

Hermione had begun helping him put things away, but now she caught Draco’s eye and grinned, briefly rolling her eyes, before turning her attention back to the task at hand. Meanwhile, Draco was just finishing his meal, draining his cup for that last, satisfying gulp of coffee.

“That delicious,” he sighed, patting his stomach happily. “Thanks.”

From the fridge, where she was busy putting vegetables away in a bin, Hermione turned and gave him a bright smile.

Collecting his dishes and cutlery, he brought them over to the sink, ran some warm water over them, and then hesitated for a moment, peering down at the dishwasher. He knew dirty dishes went inside—he was fairly sure he remembered Hermione putting some in there on New Year’s Eve, though that could have been a figment of his imagination, as he’d been fairly drunk at the time-- but he’d never actually used a dishwasher himself.

“Here, let me help you with that. Every one of these is slightly different, I’ve found. Ours opens like this.” Richard was there at his elbow suddenly, turning a knob to release the lock and then easing the door down.

His voice had been kind, and Draco sensed that somehow, Hermione’s father had instantly understood his dilemma. More than that, he could have sworn he spotted a fleeting smile of approval in Richard’s eyes.

He knew that he’d just done something right, but he wasn’t certain precisely what. Parents were
funny that way, he decided rather philosophically. The oddest, most inconsequential things struck them as significant and they never forgot them.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. One rather singular part of it involved a car ride around town. Draco marvelled at Hermione’s skill at navigating the ring road, especially busy on a Saturday afternoon, and was promptly shocked into silence at her Jekyll-and-Hyde transformation into a young woman with a rather colourful vocabulary when they were nearly cut off several times.

“Holy shit, Granger, didn’t know you had such a mouth on you!” he whistled. “You put me to shame!”

Hermione let out a sheepish giggle. “Yes, well, I suppose I can get pretty foul-mouthed behind the wheel sometimes! Oh, look,” she pointed, eager to change the subject. “There’s the shopping centre.”

A huge, enclosed structure with a glass roof, the Harlequin Shopping Centre contained over 130 shops, restaurants, and other services, and was a key attraction adjacent to the Watford Town Centre. The rest of the tour included a look in passing at the Fire Museum, and then at a museum dedicated to Watford’s history, and finally, the Vicarage Road sporting grounds shared by the local football club, the Watford Hornets, and the Saracens Rugby Club.

Suddenly Draco had a thought. “That shirt you’re wearing—is that…?”

“Yup,” Hermione confirmed. “It’s an old shirt of Dad’s, really. I just sort of… borrowed it a while back.”

Draco couldn’t help laughing. “You mean you nicked it.”

“I nicked it, yeah.” She grinned. “Dad’s a huge Hornets fan. Always has been, since he was a kid. He grew up here, y’ know. He and my uncles are just rabid about football. Rugby too. They love the Saracens. We used to go to matches with my uncles and cousins all the time when I was younger.”

He sighed. “Tsk! The vocabulary of a sailor, thievery and a keen interest in sport? My, my, Granger, whatever am I hearing? This from a girl who can’t even follow Quidditch well enough to explain it?”

“I can too follow Quidditch!” she retorted hotly. “I’m just not a lunatic about it, that’s all. And besides,” she said primly, “anybody can follow Quidditch. It’s not exactly rocket science.”

“Not exactly what?”

“Oh, sorry,” she began.

“Muggle expression,” they said in unison, and both laughed.

“One thing, though…” Draco couldn’t help asking, after a pause. “If the football club are the Hornets, why’s their symbol a moose?”

“It’s not, actually,” Hermione replied, shaking her head with a small giggle. “It’s a hart. ‘Hart’ as in ‘Hertfordshire,’ see? And Hertford College, of course. But their colours are black and yellow, like a-
“Hornet. Right.”

They drove on in companionable silence for a time, and then Draco broached yet another subject, one that had, in truth, been giving him small niggles of worry throughout the day.

“What about… well, I mean to say… who’s going to be at the surprise party tonight?”

Hermione slanted a quick, appraising glance at Draco. “Well,” she began, “my uncles and aunts, for starters, and their kids. There’s Uncle Robin. He’s my dad’s twin. He and Aunt Lucy have three kids: my cousin Michael, who’s twenty-one, and then Jamie—he must be about eighteen by now—and then Alex. She’s thirteen, the baby of the family. Then, my Uncle Jack, who’s three years younger than Dad and Uncle Robin. His wife’s Aunt Karen, and their kids are Jody and Kat. They’re fourteen. Fraternal twins, just like Dad and Uncle Robin.” She paused. “Weird coincidence.”

“That doesn’t seem too bad,” Draco started, relieved.

“I’m not done yet!” Hermione chuckled. “There’s still my dad’s parents. And then there’s Mum’s side of the family, the Billingsleys. Gran and Grandpa, of course, and Uncle Peter. That’s Mum’s older brother. His wife’s my Aunt Jane. They’ve got a boy, David, who’s fifteen, and two girls, Vicky and Joanna. We call her Joey. They must be about twelve and ten now, I think.”

Draco sighed explosively. “Is that it, then?”

“Not quite. Mum said that both she and Aunt Lucy invited some of their friends as well. Not absolutely sure who, but I think I can guess regarding my mum’s choices at least. They’re all very nice, really. They’ve known me since I was little. You don’t have to worry, Malfoy, honestly.” She reached over and gave his arm a quick, affectionate squeeze. “You won’t be on your own with them. Promise.”

Nevertheless, disturbing visions of an army of strangers surrounding him with hostile intent began intruding into his thoughts. He shook himself to banish the images and cleared his throat. “So tell me… what’s your family like, then? What was it like growing up with such a large one?”

The question was well-founded. His own family was absurdly small: one aunt who had been a bona fide psycho—no cousins there, thank the gods!—and another aunt, uncle and cousin he’d never been permitted to know, growing up. Now it was too late: two out of three of the Tonks family were dead. Then, of course, there was Sirius, the cousin who for years had had the dubious distinction of being the biggest blot on the Black family name. Ironically, he would be the one that Draco would eventually wish he’d had a chance to know. And his would be the death brought about from within the family itself, in a particularly nasty twist of fate. There was one surviving grandparent, his maternal grandmother, Druella Rosier Black, but she’d been on the Continent for most of his young life; time spent with her on the rare occasions he saw her at all meant nothing more than an elegant figure in a heavy cloud of expensive perfume and luxuriant furs, someone who brought costly gifts but never stayed. Beyond that, there were more distant cousins, but they were just empty names in the very occasional, family-related conversation between his parents he might overhear.

Hermione’s eyes grew warmly reminiscent even as she focused them on the traffic ahead. “Well, first off, it’s really not a big family at all. It’s a relatively small one, actually, by Muggle standards. But it’s always been fun having cousins pretty close to me in age. Especially, you know, because I’m an only child. We got together every holiday, and sometimes we’d spend weekends at each other’s houses, and that was great. All of us cousins would sleep in one room and stay up all night, and act
out stories…Michael was always Peter Pan and I was Wendy…” Hermione’s voice faded into silence and her eyes became dreamy as she retreated into a particularly fond memory.

“Peter Pan?”

She looked at him askance then. “You don’t know Peter Pan? Merlin, Draco—it’s wonderful! It’s a book by J.M. Barrie about a magical boy who can fly and lives in Neverland, and there are Indians and pirates and mermaids and fairies, and he has adventures and never grows up…oh! It was always my favourite! Funny…” Her voice grew soft and wistful. “I loved it when I had no idea that magic was real… I only wished it could be.”

A world in which one had to dream of magic, wish for it to be real… Draco couldn’t imagine what such a thing must have been like.

“Who was Wendy then?”

There was a soft smile on her face as she paused a moment before answering. “Oh, she… she was a girl who longed for magic and loved stories…”

Of course. He smiled to himself and then ventured a quick glance at Hermione. Her eyes were unnaturally bright as she looked straight ahead at the traffic.

The car was silent for a few minutes and then her face lit up once again. “Oh, let me tell you more about my uncles. They’re real characters. First off, Uncle Robin.”

“Your dad’s twin.”

“Right, yes. You can definitely tell they’re brothers, but you wouldn’t know they’re twins. Both he and Uncle Jack are thin like Dad, but Dad’s taller and fairer than both of them. Facial features are pretty similar on all three, though. They all look like my grandfather, Dad most of all. Uncle Robin read English at Oxford, you know, from ’68 to ’71, and stayed on to get his doctorate.”

“Really!” Now this was an intriguing bit of information he hadn’t expected. “What does he do now?”

“He teaches, actually. At the University of Essex. Been there for ages now. That’s where he met Aunt Lucy. She teaches as well. You’ll really like them, Draco. They’re great to talk to. And Uncle Robin’s got loads of Oxford stories… it’s because of him that I always dreamed of studying there someday. And then… there’s Uncle Jack.”

There was a certain cautionary tone in her voice at the mention of his name.

“What about him?” Draco asked warily.

“Well, you want to watch yourself around him. He teases everybody. When I was little, I hated it. First, I’d get really angry, and then I’d cry. It was horrid. I was much too sensitive. Now I just let his teasing roll right off me. Aunt Karen’s got him sussed, though. He doesn’t get away with much around her.”

“What do they do? For a living, I mean?”

“Oh, well, Uncle Jack’s in advertising. He’s a copywriter. And Aunt Karen’s a stay-at-home mum. Last, there’s Uncle Peter. He’s just an old softie, really-- very kind. He always has sweets for all the kids in his pockets. He’s a lot like my mum, very warm and down to earth. He’s a solicitor in London. So’s Aunt Jane. You’ll like her too. She’s great, very sharp.”
Her eyes searched Draco’s suddenly. “You okay with all this? I know it’s a lot.”

“Oh, yeah. No worries.” His tone was light, but strands of nerves had begun to twist themselves into a small knot in his stomach. He glanced at his watch, and despite himself, he began counting the hours until the party. A mere five. Suddenly, he wished for nothing more than to be sitting on his narrow bed in his room in Staircase 5, safely buried within the covers of *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*. Or simply that it was tomorrow morning already, and he could look himself in the eye whilst shaving and know that he hadn’t cocked it all up and embarrassed himself, Hermione or her parents.

And then a rather disconcerting thought occurred to him, and he turned to Hermione as she manoeuvred the car into the driveway and turned the key in the ignition to “off.”

“What have your parents told everybody about… well, I mean, when you were at Hogwarts all those years? Where did everybody think you were? Do they know…?”

“About me being a witch? Nope. Mum and Dad told everyone I was away at boarding school in Scotland, but they never really said where. Bit tricky, that. They made up some daft thing or other about letters tending to go missing in the local post office, and asked everyone who wanted to write just to send the letters to them instead, so they could supposedly put them all together in parcels every couple of weeks. Then they sent all of it to me by owl. Dumbledore gave them one to use for the time I was at school. Must have done for the families of all the Muggleborns. I would post the replies to Mum and Dad, and they’d send them on to my grandparents or whoever. Bit complicated! But there was no other way.” Hermione grinned wryly, shrugging. “We managed. If anybody thought it all sounded a bit dodgy, they never said.”

Draco considered briefly. “And…” he began slowly, “what about us, then? Is the official story that we know each other from years ago, or only since Oxford?”

“I think we’re supposed to have met at uni. But I’ll check with Mum on that. Wouldn’t do for us to have different stories!” She giggled. “What a disaster that would be, can you imagine…”

He could, actually. Only too well. That knot in his stomach gave another violent twist and he swallowed hard.
Go, Hornets!
The Conservatory was the stylish restaurant in the White House Hotel in Upton Road. It was distinguished by its panelled roof, which allowed daytime patrons to enjoy bright sunshine when it was to be had, and afforded evening diners a lovely view of the starry night sky. One long wall was entirely tall windows looking out onto a dining terrace. Tastefully appointed in shades of blue and saffron, it was a comfortable and elegant environment in which to enjoy a meal. Claire and Lucy Granger had booked the entire room for the party, chosen the menu, and arranged for decorations and table favours.

A quarter to eight found Hermione, Draco, and her parents in the car, heading towards Upton Road.

“Do I look all right?” he whispered, in an unconscious echo of Hermione’s own question to him before meeting his parents the day they’d spent together in Oxford. Feeling even the least bit unsure of himself was a sensation to which he was unaccustomed, and it left him uncomfortably off-balance.

Hermione reached over and smoothed Draco’s burgundy silk tie, patting it down against his black, button-down shirt. He wore a matching jacket and trousers and looked elegant and altogether gorgeous, she thought proudly.

“Mmm…” Her voice in his ear sent a small thrill through him. “Brilliant.”
He smiled slightly, threading his fingers through her soft hair. She looked pretty brilliant herself, he thought, in that sexy little plum-coloured frock. Good enough to eat. He raised her hand to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to the back of it.


She merely winked and leaned back in the seat, and a moment later, they pulled into the car park at the hotel.

A “townhouse”-style structure, the White House radiated warmth and welcome from every well-lit window as they approached.

“Richard! Claire!” The voice came from a petite woman with russet hair. She jumped up from the sofa where she’d been sitting with her family and hurried towards them, hands outstretched and a delighted smile on her face.

“Oh,” Lucy Granger enthused, “it’s wonderful to see you! It’s been far too long, you know!” She turned to Richard. “And here’s the other birthday boy. Happy birthday, darling!” she said, enveloping Richard in a hug.
Then she stood back. “My stars—this isn’t our little Hermione! So grown up, I almost wouldn’t have known you! Goodness, Claire,” she laughed, one mother to another, “just wait till you’ve seen our three—they’ve all shot up a foot, I swear!” Then she swooped in and gathered Hermione into a hug of her own.

Stepping back finally, her pink cheeks bespeaking her pleasure at the greeting, Hermione cleared her throat.

“Aunt Lucy,” she began. “This is—”

By then, however, the other four Grangers had walked over.

“Well, well!” The voice was uncannily familiar. “Happy birthday, brother—I think!” A man with medium-brown hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and a smile remarkably like Richard’s laughed somewhat ruefully. “Fifty! Hell. How did we get so bloody old all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know, Rob, but it’s better than the alternative, as Dad always reminds us,” Richard chuckled.

“Too right,” Robin Granger agreed, nodding. “I keep reminding myself of that whenever I’m feeling particularly ancient. Claire,” he grinned, “how are you, sweetheart? Good to see you. And our newest Oxford scholar!” He surveyed Hermione with a mischievous look. “My word, look at you! Beautiful as ever and so very sophisticated now as well!”

“Thanks, Uncle Robin,” Hermione laughed. “Everybody, I’d like to introduce Draco Malfoy.”

Taking the initiative, Lucy stepped forward, her hand outstretched. “How do you do, Draco? It’s lovely to meet you, finally, after all the nice things we’ve been hearing.”

“How do you do?” Draco smiled, taking her hand and shaking it. What nice things? “The pleasure’s mine.” He was strictly on auto-pilot now, his impeccable training from years of his parents’ soirees coming to the rescue. If there were one thing Draco Malfoy knew how to be when push came to shove in a social setting, it was charming. Narcissa would have been proud.

“Draco,” Robin said with genuine warmth, shaking his hand next. “I understand you’re at Oxford with our Hermione.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Draco nodded. “I’m reading English and history.”

Excellent! You’ll want to talk with Michael here. He’s doing a degree in Anglo Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Cambridge. Had hoped he’d follow me to Oxford…” Here, Robin sighed dramatically, turning his eyes to the heavens. “But he had to forge his own path. At least Hermione’s there to represent the next generation of Grangers! Though college loyalty compels me to register my official disappointment that she chose Hertford over my own beloved New College.” He paused, the twinkle in his eyes belying his words. “Michael,” he called, gesturing to a tall young man who had been standing a couple of paces back, his arm around the shoulders of a black-haired girl.

“How do you do?” Draco smiled, taking her hand and shaking it. What nice things? “The pleasure’s mine.” He was strictly on auto-pilot now, his impeccable training from years of his parents’ soirees coming to the rescue. If there were one thing Draco Malfoy knew how to be when push came to shove in a social setting, it was charming. Narcissa would have been proud.

“Dad?” Then he smiled at Hermione with affection. “Great to see you, cousin! And…” He regarded Draco with an open, friendly expression. “Pleased to meet you, mate… sorry, doing a bit of woolgathering before. I didn’t catch your name.” Cheerfully, he stuck his hand out in Draco’s direction.

“It’s Draco Malfoy, and I’m glad to meet you too. Cambridge, eh?” Draco grinned maliciously. “Right.”
Michael rolled his eyes and groaned. “Not fair, Dad! I’m surrounded and outnumbered! Deb, help! Oh, sorry,” he amended. “Additional and honourary Grangers, may I present my girlfriend and fellow Cantabrigian, Deborah Adams.”

‘Honourary Granger.’ Reckon I can live with that. Draco slipped an arm around Hermione, feeling a lot more relaxed already as they exchanged pleasantries with Michael and Deborah.

“Come on, everybody,” Claire interrupted. “I’ve just checked and our table’s ready.” She went around, briskly gathering the group together like a mother hen and shooing them out of the lobby in the direction of the restaurant.

If they thought it the slightest bit strange that they were being pushed to the front of the group, their wives behind them, neither Richard nor Robin Granger had any time to express it. For barely a moment later, as the doors to the restaurant opened, twenty-five people rose to their feet, shouting “Surprise!”

From the center of each table, centerpieces of tall, double-stuffed balloons in clusters rose out of bases that were either shaped as dental chairs or miniature cardboard versions of the Oxford English Dictionary. In addition, there were assorted, framed photos representing various points in the childhoods, adolescence, and adult lives of both twins. A table along one wall was piled with brightly wrapped presents.

From the table nearest the entrance, Alice and Bill Granger rose, and instantly, Draco could see where Hermione’s father had got his rangy good looks from, his height and fair hair, as well as the facial features that marked all four Granger men with a common stamp. At eighty, Bill Granger was still vital and handsome in a classically craggy way, the best possible picture of their future that Robin, Richard and Jack could have. His wife Alice, her white hair cropped into an attractive pixie cut, stood at his side with an irrepressible smile of pride as her sons approached.

Jack Granger hastened to join his older siblings, throwing his arms around both at once in happy abandon. The overwhelming surprise rendered Richard and Robin momentarily speechless, and they could only laugh delightedly once they had recovered their wits.

“Come along, you old relics!” Jack laughed, prodding his brothers’ backs. “You’re both in dire need of some spirits, I’ll wager!”

The rest of the family group trailed in after them, parents finding seats at the large family table, and the cousins directed to a pair of tables nearby, set up especially for them. Several smaller tables were already occupied with couples who were friends of the honorees, and they all smiled expectantly, waiting their chance to offer congratulations. Hermione made quick work of introducing Draco to the five cousins he hadn’t yet met, and then grabbed his hand, pulling him to his feet.

“Come on, Malfoy,” she told him. “I want to introduce you to my grandparents and the other aunts and uncles.”

Hermione was peripherally aware of the moonstruck glances and giggles her four young, female cousins shared, as she and Draco turned to walk away. She had to smile. Apparently, he was a big hit. Her boy cousins noticed as well. A chorus of their groans rose in response.

A moment later, they stood at one end of the table of honour where both sets of grandparents sat.

“Nana,” Hermione smiled, sliding her arms around Alice’s neck and burying her face there. “I’m so glad to see you! And Grandpa!” She moved to hug him next, reveling in the comfortingly familiar smell of pipe tobacco and spicy aftershave as Bill gave her a kiss.
“Don’t we get a hug as well, young lady?” a plaintive voice inquired. It belonged to a woman who Draco realised could only be Claire’s mother. The resemblance was striking, not only in physical terms, but even more in the empathy that resonated so powerfully in her eyes. Then Laura Billingsley and Claire’s father, Dan, opened their arms to their granddaughter, who moved into their embrace with a joyful cry. Over Hermione’s shoulder, Laura turned her acutely observant gaze on Draco as he stood slightly behind Hermione, waiting quietly. The diminutive woman, her luxuriant, silver mane twisted into a chignon, was intrigued by the handsome blond boy at her granddaughter’s side. So this was who all the to-do was about. Her husband glanced at her, an eyebrow inquisitively raised.

“Hermione, dear, aren’t you going to introduce us all to your young man?” Laura asked gently, smiling as she released her granddaughter.

“Oh, yes, of course! Sorry,” she grinned sheepishly. “Everyone--” Here eight pairs of eyes around the table swiveled around to hers. “Meet Draco Malfoy.” Turning her head back towards the cousins’ table, she flashed an evil grin at Michael, reminding him that momentarily, he’d be doing the same with Deborah.

Feeling distinctly exposed and on display, rather like a side of beef hanging in a butcher’s window, Draco offered a smile he hoped would look more engaging and relaxed than he felt at that moment.

The official introduction was done, but there was still the necessity of making the rounds and personally offering at least a bit of polite chitchat to two aunts, two uncles, and four grandparents. Uncle Jack had got up and approached Draco now with almost predatory glee. Hermione felt herself stiffening in anticipation.

“Draco,” he began, an impish glint lighting his eyes. “What a very… unusual name. Don’t believe I’ve ever heard it before.”

“Oh, haven’t you?” Draco inquired mildly.

“No, in truth, I have not,” Jack replied, the glint turning a shade more wicked now. “I’d be most interested to learn what it means. Do you know?”

“Of course I do.”

“And?” Jack had begun reeling in the fish, but his catch was proving a bit more resistant than expected.

“And… it means ‘dragon.’ In Latin, of course,” Draco added.

“Ah. Latin. Of course. ‘Dragon,’ is it? Fascinating. How did you come by such an unusual name, then? If you don’t mind my asking, that is.”

Draco paused dramatically, gathering himself, and looked Jack straight in the eye, his expression grave. “It’s the family curse, you see. Every third generation, one male child is born under a fire sign with dragon’s blood in his veins. He has the mark of the dragon on his left forearm, and must be given the name ‘Draco’ to signify his identity.”

Jack’s eyebrows had risen slightly as he fought to maintain his impassive demeanor. He hadn’t expected such an elaborate and creative response to his rather pointed question. The boy had nerve.

“Care to show us the mark?” he challenged, trying not to allow his glee to get the better of him. The kid was faking, he was certain of it.
It seemed the entire room had fallen silent by now, drawn in by the unfolding drama at the head table.

Draco smiled faintly, hesitated—but only for a moment—and then shrugged off his jacket, laying it carefully over the back of a nearby chair. Then, very slowly, he unbuttoned the cuff at his left wrist.

Hermione’s eyes widened, darting to Draco’s face and searching for a sign of his intentions. Surely he wasn’t really about to… was he? And then the cuff hung open, and he began methodically rolling up the sleeve, a bit at a time. As he did so, he moved forward silently until he stood right before Jack.

Finally, he held out his arm to Jack’s view. The Dark Mark, somewhat faded now but still clearly visible, stood out against the pearly sheen of his pale skin.

Jack’s face paled, his eyes opened very wide, and then slowly, they narrowed. There was a pause, and then the corners of his mouth twitched. In the next minute, he began to laugh in earnest as Draco rolled down his sleeve and buttoned the cuff.

“Have to hand it to you, young Mr. Malfoy,” he said finally, still chuckling. “You really had me going there for a minute! Family curse indeed! Where’d you get that thing, anyway? Round Oxford way?”

“Nah. Tattoo parlour in Glastonbury. Same day I got this,” Draco lied blithely, touching a fingertip to his left earlobe, where the tiny diamond chip Hermione had given him sparkled. He glanced over at Hermione, who was now grinning so hugely, she seemed about to burst. His own mouth quirked into a cocky, little smile, and he gave her a wink.

He’d managed the finesse on sheer nerve alone. Not to brag, but very neatly done it was, too. Somehow, Draco had the feeling he wouldn’t have much to worry about from the incorrigible Uncle Jack from now on.

* 

Dinner was delicious. It began with creamy tomato soup and fanned melon with a ham and fig garnish, and then a choice of grilled salmon on a bed of spinach with a Bearnaise sauce, medallions of beef in a Marsala sauce, or chicken breast baked in a red wine sauce with mushrooms, onions and bacon. By the time the dessert table was set, laden with delicious confections from Crème Brûlée to bread and butter pudding to Crepes Suzette, along with various flavours of ice cream, everyone was pleasantly stuffed. This did not stop most of them from helping themselves to a sweet. However, the pièce de résistance had yet to make its appearance.

Finally, to everyone’s delight, two waiters arrived, wheeling in a cart bearing a large, elaborate birthday cake, a pair of lit candles representing “50” at the top. They made their way over to the two celebrants, and the room hushed, waiting for Richard and Robin to do the honours. They stood.

“Go on, then! Quit arsing about! Unless you haven’t enough wind between you to blow two wee little candles out!” somebody called out from the back of the room.

“Oh, they do, and to spare!” somebody else responded, to loud guffaws.

“Piss off, Armitage!” Robin replied amiably. “And you, McKay. You’re both older than we are!”
Richard held up his hands, laughing. “Oi! Settle down.” He turned to his twin. “Right, are we going?”

The two of them turned as one towards the cake, took an exaggerated breath, and blew. The candles winked and fluttered, but remained lit. The room erupted into howls of laughter, as a startled and chagrined Robin and Richard laughed along with the rest.

“Yeah, yeah…” Robin waved his hands, grinning widely. “Stuff it, you lot, or no cake for you!”

The trick candles were put out, the cake was cut, and slices were handed round to all the guests, along with steaming, fragrant cups of coffee. The party had been a grand success. Reflecting on the evening later that night in bed, Draco felt he’d managed to succeed as well, even more to the point—if the familiar, teasing banter and jokes and goodbye hugs he’d received, as much as if he were a part of the family, had been anything to go by. He was still getting used to all the tumult and informality and casual affection, but he decided that on the whole, he quite liked it.

The White House Hotel, 27-31 Upton Road, Watford
The 4.24 out of Watford High Street Station on Sunday afternoon left precisely on schedule. Draco pulled Hermione on after him as they said final goodbyes, waving as her parents’ figures receded into the distance. They would be back in Oxford in just over two hours’ time.

The train moved through the countryside at a steady clip, its movement soothing as it rocked gently back and forth. Scenery flashed by in a green blur as the first raindrops spattered the dingy glass.

Hermione gazed out the window, her chin resting in the heel of her hand. Draco watched her for a couple of moments, and then returned to the book he’d been reading.

“Tell me.”

He looked up, startled at the suddenness of her words breaking into the relative quiet of the train car. “Tell you… what?”

“Oh, you know… weekend thoughts. How you’re feeling, now it’s all over and we’re going back.”

Draco fell back on the seat cushion, expelling a melodramatic sigh. “Relieved! Hugely, incredibly relieved! I mean, Merlin, what an ordeal! It was bloody awful!”

There was a space of five seconds precisely, during which Hermione’s mouth fell partway open and her eyes went wide. And then they narrowed slightly, one corner of her mouth lifting in a tiny, knowing smile.

“Awful. Right. Turning on the Malfoy charm must have been such a draining experience. S’pose all those little cousins of mine fawning over you was unbearable. Not to mention my aunts, my grandmothers, and all my mother’s friends. Every female in a ten-mile radius, in fact.”
Draco’s grin was disarmingly rakish. He opened his mouth to reply, but Hermione nipped in ahead of him.

“Not to mention my uncles. Uncle Robin thinks of you as a kindred spirit now, Uncle Peter fancies he’s got you tipped to study law, and Uncle Jack… well… Uncle Jack…” And here, her voice changed, becoming softer, more tremulous. “Oh, Draco, you were brilliant, coming up with all that on the spot! You really turned the tables on him! I couldn’t believe you actually pulled up your sleeve and showed him the…” She looked around furtively. “… the you-know-what! I was so proud of you! Do you know what that means, Malfoy? That you did that?”

He looked down at his arm, covered by the heavy wool of his jacket, and absently patted the spot. Then he looked back at her, his gaze clear and lucent. He nodded.

“I reckon,” he said softly. “Yes.”

“That was the very best bit for me, do you know that?” she whispered, winding her arms around his neck and pulling him close. “The very best.” She nuzzled the warm skin of his neck with its naturally pleasing scent, and kissed him, finally resting her head on his shoulder. Then she started laughing.

“Did you see his face when you started rolling up your sleeve? It was priceless! Thought he was going to pack it in right then and there. And then when you showed him—Merlin! He turned white as a sheet! I know he was surprised to see anything there at all, but for him to look like that…” Her voice dropped to a near-whisper. “You must have done something wandlessly. What?”

Draco chuckled. “Yeah, well, I know I probably shouldn’t have done, but… I cast an Agita. Just a very little one, really, enough to make it ripple a bit. Oh, and show its fangs. Couldn’t resist.”

Hermione goggled for a moment, drawing back so she could see his face, and then let out a small laugh. “Oh gods, Draco, no wonder he was so scared! And then I expect he chalked it up to a bit too much drink.” Suddenly, her smile fell away, and she looked at him anxiously. “It can’t… your doing that… it can’t bring it back, can it?”

“Oh no, no. Its power is completely gone. What I did was no different to making any inanimate thing move for just a moment. Like kicking a stone. Don’t worry.”

She sighed and snuggled close again. “Okay.” And then, very matter-of-factly: “Uncle Jack will certainly never bother you again.”

She looked up at him, catching his eye, and they dissolved into fresh bouts of laughter.

Several minutes passed in quiet contentment as the train’s steady movement lulled them nearly to sleep. Then Hermione spoke, her voice soft and lazy.

“Daddy loved your present, you know. That bottle of very old cognac…”

“Thanks to my father’s collection, not that he’ll miss it, of course. He’s got an obscene amount of the stuff.”

“But the book too. He loves anything to do with ancient Rome. It was perfect.”

Hugging her close, Draco glanced out the window. His reflection smiled back at him.
The train chugged along as the dull, grey light of afternoon waned, consumed by the beginnings of evening mist, and eventually, they were on the final leg of the journey between London’s Paddington Station and Oxford.

Hermione stretched. “Can you believe we’ve only got another month of term left?”

“I know,” Draco agreed, nodding. “This year has gone by so fast.”

“Long vac between this time. Four months, nearly.” It was a sobering thought. Hermione picked at a non-existent piece of lint on her sleeve, her brow furrowed.

Four months. Five weeks had been difficult enough, between Michaelmas and Hilary. Draco tried to imagine all the air miles Paladin would be logging, all the manoeuvring they’d have to do in order to have some private time together, all the sneaking about. It was true that they’d made quite substantial progress with both sets of parents—even his father seemed to be softening a bit, if the March visit was anything to go by—but neither the Malfoys nor the Grangers were so progressive that they’d allow the sort of contact he and Hermione were used to, living on their own. Deciding to stay in Oxford for the last vacation had been eye-opening in one important respect. No, two really. One: that he was, indeed, capable of deciding what was best for himself and then making it happen. And two: that his life was infinitely richer when Hermione was around than when she was not.

“Granger.”

“Hmm?”

“Look. I’ve been thinking…”

“Yes?”

“About the summer vac.”

“What about it?”

“It’s too long.”

“What?”

“To be apart. Far too long. I mean, look… let’s… you know, we could…”

“You… you want us to…?”

“Move in together. I want us to move in together.” It all came out in a whoosh, a relieved exhalation, a rush of words that had been bottled up, not given sentience until that moment when he realised that the idea, the desire, had been there, slumbering, for quite some time.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Merlin… I… I need to think, Draco.”

They fell silent then, as the train streaked through the deepening shadows of the dying day. There was no conversation, only occasional, furtive glances and retreats back into the sanctuary of their separate thoughts.
The train pulled into the Oxford railway station at precisely three minutes past its time. They picked up their bags and exited the passenger car, stepping down onto the platform and taking a breath of the crisp, early-evening air. Oxford was spread out before them in a patchwork of ancient and new buildings, green spaces and rivers. Just ahead was the Jam Factory, where on a recent Saturday, they’d spent some enjoyable time examining the art on exhibit and making a cheap meal out of shared starters in the adjoining restaurant. Not far beyond that, the thousand-year-old battlements of Oxford Castle rose up against the open sky. It had all become as comfortable and familiar as a well-loved jumper, or the backs of their hands.

In the most native sense, deep in the bone, it had become home.

She reached for him, slender fingers curling around his longer, tapered ones.

“Yes.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my wonderful betas, mister_otter and kazfeist! Carol and Karen: for all you have done and continue to do, hugs and cups of creamy, rich Ghirardelli hot chocolate with peppermint sticks to you both!

Huge thanks, too, to the wonderful Moonjameskitten, who took the base photo of Hermione and Draco and manipped the lovely dress I had chosen. Hermione looks beautiful!

Thanks to my friend Robin in London for answers to a couple of questions about English football club loyalties. The character of Robin Granger is based, in part, on him.

Agita-- Latin, imperative. “Move!”

The chapter title comes from a magnificently beautiful instrumental by Danny Kirwan (with some help from Peter Green), found on Fleetwood Mac’s “Show-Biz Blues” album.
Friday, 19 May
Early afternoon

“Sshh! Draco, please-- I can’t concentrate!”

Hermione’s voice came out as a frustrated hiss as she pulled the covers of the book up around her face in an attempt to hide behind them.

“Come on, Granger,” Draco wheedled, poking at her with his big toe. They lay stretched out head to foot on his bed, sunk into his rather shapeless, squishy pillows at either end, books in hand. “Take a break! I’m totally knackered. You must be too. We’ve been at it for ages. Can’t see straight anymore!”

Hermione raised herself up on one elbow and regarded him with a patience that was clearly beginning to wear thin. “Malfoy. I’ve got to get through this reading. I’ve got to get through it today. If I don’t, I’m thoroughly fucked.”

Now that got his attention. Contrary to what he’d thought when they were younger, Hermione was
far from being a goody-two-shoes despite her swotty exterior. Generally, however, she reserved her forays into the more colourful expletives for certain extreme situations, stress behind the wheel being one, and pressure related to her studies being another that Draco could nearly always count on. His expression changed to one of solicitude laced with amusement.

“You will never be thoroughly f*cked. Well…” he chuckled, “except by me, of course. What’s got your lacies in such a twist anyway? I’ve never seen you work so hard. Surely you can’t think—”

Groaning, she threw the book down so that it bounced once before landing at her feet face up, its pages fanned out in mute protest. Draco raised a startled eyebrow as he ducked reflexively out of its path. For Hermione to toss a book that way, she must be feeling truly overwhelmed, as giving in to her frustration that way simply wasn’t like her—not to this degree, at least.

She’d flopped back on the pillows, grabbing one and mashing it down onto her face, her arms cris-crossed over the top. Lightly, he walked two fingers along one bare arm until he’d reached one of her hands, and then he hooked his own fingers through hers, gently peeling one hand away and then the other, and finally, despite her muffled protests, the pillow itself. One finger lightly under her chin, he turned her face towards his.

“Hermione, what is it?” His voice was measured and soft now. “Tell me.”

“Oh, Draco!” she wailed, genuine distress etched in her face. “I’m screwed. I really am. I have no idea where I’m going with this essay! I mean, I’ve written all this… stuff… but it feels scattered and pointless! The whole thing’s just rubbish!” She bunched the pillow in her hands, rolling over and burying her face in it.

Patiently, he drew messy tendrils of hair away from her cheek. If she weren’t so obviously distressed, it really would be rather funny. He did not have a death wish, however. Instead, he bit his lip, stifling the grin that threatened.

“Listen to me,” he said firmly. “I think you need to get away from this for a little while, clear your head a bit. Put some distance between you and Tristan and Gawain for a couple of hours.”

“And Cúchulainn and Fionn,” she murmured peevishly.

“They too, yeah. Look, I’ve got an idea. Let’s call in at that housing agency, the one you found. Finders Keepers, wasn’t it? You know, the one you saw the advert for on the notice board. We can pop over there and talk to somebody, see what they’ve got on offer. We’ve got to get cracking on this flat thing, or else we won’t have anything at the end of term. And then we’ll have to go—”

“Home,” Hermione finished glumly. She picked up a pen and began chewing absently on the end of it. “I know. We’ve only got a month. D’you think we can find something in time?”

Draco jumped lithely to his feet, turning and pulling her up after him so that she fell flush against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her snugly, grinning down at her upturned face. “There’s a flat out there somewhere with our names on it, Granger. Come on!”

The walk to Finders Keepers was pleasant and not terribly long, taking them along Catte Street to the High, and then down across the Magdalen Bridge into St Clements. The first-floor offices were
pleasant and airy. Almost as soon as they walked in, they were greeted and asked to wait for one of the student letting supervisors. And would they please fill out these forms in the meantime?

They were just finishing when a blandly attractive woman in a smart, two-piece suit appeared before them, clipboard in hand. She smiled with professional detachment, owing to the fact that she’d already held the very conversation she was about to initiate with Hermione and Draco fifteen previous times that day, and she was tired. Her feet ached from the spiky high heels she wore, and she was dying to go home, take them off, and make herself a nice cup of tea. Or possibly something stronger.

In the meantime, there was a job to do. She smiled again, this time more genuinely, and stuck her hand out. “Catherine Seagrave,” she said. “How do you do? And you are…?”

“Oh,” Hermione started, shaking Miss Seagrave’s hand. “I’m Hermione Granger and this is…”

“Draco Malfoy. How do you do?” he finished politely, and held out the forms they’d completed.

“No, no, keep them for now. There are forms for your tutors to fill out as well, as references. Will your parents be acting as guarantors?”

Draco and Hermione looked at each other blankly. They hadn’t considered this. It went without saying that the Malfoys would not act in this capacity. Draco had already decided that he would not involve them in this aspect of his college life, any more than he had already done up to this point. He had control over his own money now, and it was a sizeable amount. There was no need to involve Lucius and Narcissa. On the other hand, Hermione depended upon Richard and Claire, and the sudden realisation that she would have to discuss this with them before they could proceed was daunting. Nevertheless, she was sure they would agree with the idea of her finding a flat for the next year, in principle at least. Many second and third-year students did.

Oh, who was she kidding? She was doing this with Draco, beginning in a matter of a month, not with a bunch of other girls starting in the autumn. How in Merlin’s name would she even broach the topic?

“Yes, I’m sure they will,” she responded mechanically, just as Draco was saying, “No, they won’t.”

“Well…” Miss Seagrave said uncertainly, looking from one to the other. “We’ll sort all that out momentarily. In the meantime, why don’t I show you some of the properties we have on offer now?”

They nodded.

“When do you wish to begin tenancy? Next term, I assume? It’s a bit late, you know. Generally, students begin arranging for that in January.”

“Oh, well, um… actually.” Draco forged on bravely, “we had got college housing back then, but we’ve just recently decided we want to… share, starting at the end of this term. Next month, in fact,” he finished, raising his eyebrows almost apologetically and giving her a small “you know what it’s like” shrug.

She did indeed. Young love. It caused her no end of headaches. However, the sudden decisions it sometimes wrought also brought in last-minute business. And at the moment, she happened to have several flats on offer in their general price range that might just suit nicely.

She said as much.

“Yes, we would,” Draco affirmed eagerly, in answer to her second question. He took Hermione’s
hand firmly, drawing her closer. “Straightaway?”


She led them out the door into the warm spring sunshine. All around, new leaves had unfurled in splashes of pale, fresh green dappled in gold. By the kerb, what appeared to be a small taxi waited. It was painted with the logo of the company and had a thin, green stripe along its length.

“Hop in,” Miss Seagrave said cheerfully, and they complied, piling into the back seat. “I’ve got several properties fairly close by that you might like. I’ve already shown them today, so the current tenants are prepared for company. However—” Here, she paused dramatically, and both Hermione and Draco leaned forward unconsciously to catch the end of her sentence. “If you do see something you like and you want to take possession by mid-June, you’ll really have to make a decision sometime this weekend. We’ll need a month’s rent in advance, you know, plus a deposit equal to two months’ rent. Oh, and £100 from each of you, for both the application fee and the holding deposit. You’ll have to sort out your parents’ forms now and then you’ll sign the tenancy agreements in a month’s time, before you move in.”

£100 times two, twice, plus a month’s rent and a two months’ deposit…at the current rent rates, according to the agency’s adverts, that would come to…Draco did the sums quickly, and came to the staggering conclusion that they’d have to lay out an amount in the rather steep neighbourhood of about £3000. Close to six hundred Galleons. He knew he could cover that all by himself, but he also knew that Hermione would not consent to anything other than an even split under any circumstances. He sat in the back seat of the car, quietly figuring a way to ensure his stubborn, independent girlfriend’s compliance. He would not allow this to be bollocksed up.

*  

For the next hour and a half, they traipsed from flat to flat, going from one right in St Clements above a block of shops (nice-ish sitting room but a cramped kitchen, and in any case, the rent was too dear) to one on Ablett Close (again, too expensive, with bedrooms that were really tiny and crowded, overall generically pleasant but nothing to write home about) to the one in Hurst Street (nice enough sitting room, but crowded bedrooms and once again, way over their price range anyway. What was she thinking, even bothering to show them any of these?) to one, finally, in Vicarage Road.

Now this one was worth considering. It was a detached house with two nice bedrooms—the second, smaller one would make a great study—a large, airy kitchen looking out onto a small garden, a comfortable sitting room, and best of all—

Draco gave a low whistle and poked Hermione. “Fuck me, Granger,” he said under his breath, “would you look at this bathroom?”

“Large” was putting it mildly. The white-tiled room was huge, bright and airy, and the tub… the tub was fucking enormous. Thoughts of soapy trysts came to mind, and for a moment, he revelled in the delicious images.

Hermione slanted a look at him, her mouth twitching. “Oh, I don’t know. One bathroom’s as good as another. I mean, after all, it’s just meant to be functional, isn’t it?”

Draco glanced behind him and saw that Catherine Seagrave had discreetly left the room. Grinning,
he sidled over to Hermione, grabbing her from behind and giving her a squeeze. “‘Functional’ my arse. Whatever bathroom we wind up with is going to be *multi-use.*”

Hermione giggled, smacking his hand lightly. “Sssh, she’ll hear you!”

“Sod that,” he murmured, proceeding to leave the beginnings of a small, rosy love bite on her neck. Just then, the click of high heels on the bare floor sounded, coming closer, and they broke apart.

“Well, what do you think then?” Miss Seagrave asked brightly, poking her head round the door, clipboard in hand. “Like it?”

“How much?” Hermione’s tone was business-like. No point in waxing rhapsodic if the price were too high.

“Oh, this one… let’s see…” The estate agent glanced down quickly at her notes and then back up again with a smile. “You can have it for £800 a month. An excellent rent.”

It was difficult to dispute that. Certainly this flat—this house—was the very nicest they’d seen so far, with the best rent to boot.

“I like it!” Draco was enthusiastic, although Hermione seemed strangely reticent. “Look… um… can we have a minute?”

“Certainly.” The estate agent retreated tactfully into the sitting room to wait.

“What d’you reckon? I think it’s great,” Draco whispered. “I bet we won’t find anything better for the price.”

“Some price! It’s so much cheaper to stay in college rooms than private flats. How on earth can I justify this to my parents?” There was a tiny note of desperation in Hermione’s voice.

He thought quickly. “Just… well… you can tell them that lots of people move into their own flats after first year. Just tell them you’ll be sharing the expenses. They don’t have to know it’s me.”

Hermione looked at him sharply then, clearly incredulous. “Oh. And just who am I supposed to be living with? What happens when they come to visit? Because they will. You know that.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Hermione gave a weary sigh. “Besides, I don’t *want* to lie to them. I’d rather tell them the truth. I’ll call them tonight. Mum will understand, I think. Not sure about my dad though.”

Draco nodded. His expression was calm, but inside, his stomach had just begun twisting into an apprehensive knot. Suddenly, all his plans were teetering on the edge of ruination.

“Do you think maybe I ought to talk to them?” he found himself saying abruptly. The words were out of his mouth before he even knew what he was saying.

The agitation in her face softened into a wistful smile, and Hermione reached out to catch Draco’s hand in hers. “Thanks, love,” she said softly. “I appreciate that. I’ll let you know, yeah?”

The sound of the estate agent loudly clearing her throat startled them out of their quick embrace. Hand in hand, they walked back into the sitting room, where Catherine Seagrave waited expectantly, her mobile phone in hand.

Before either of them could say anything, she jumped in. “The office has just rung. Apparently,
there’s one more property that’s only just come on the market, if you’d like to see it. It’s a period house, quite old, that’s been subdivided into a number of flats. As it happens, several of them are available for the forthcoming year. I believe the owners have just renovated and refurbished the entire thing. Come along.”

Her heels a staccatoed echo on the hardwood floor, Miss Seagrave led the way back to the car.

The drive back to Abingdon Road and then along a narrow, connecting street to Iffley Road was a quick one. Miss Seagrave pulled the car into a spacious drive fronting a large house of ochre-coloured brick that appeared to be about a hundred years old. A twin-gabled roofline and a pair of triple windows on each of three floors comprised the front view. At either end on the ground floor, an arched doorway led into the house. Hermione and Draco glanced at each other, eyebrows raised. It wasn’t what they’d been expecting, and it certainly wasn’t remotely like anything else they’d seen.

They got out of the car and stood on the gravelled drive, looking up, as Miss Seagrave quickly scanned her notes, tapping on the clipboard with her pen.

“There are… let me see… three flats on offer here,” she said, still reading. “The other three have already been taken. Of the ones that are left, two are on the ground floor, and one is on the first floor. The smallest flat, which is on the ground floor, has one double bedroom and a smaller study or store room. It’s on offer for £630. The other ground-floor flat is in the rear, overlooking the back garden. That one has two double bedrooms and it’s on offer for… yes, here it is. £800. Now, the first-floor flat has two double bedrooms and a third, smaller room that could be used as a study or store room. That one’s £1140. We’ll just begin at the bottom, shall we, and work our way up.”

Obediently, Hermione and Draco followed. Wandering through the rooms of the smaller ground-floor flat, they glanced at each other, an identical, unspoken thought in both their minds. The flat was… well… pleasant. And the price was certainly right. It would do well enough.

The other flat on the ground floor was really quite nice. Furnished tastefully and with rooms a decent size, it had the clear advantage of garden views and a full second bedroom rather than just a small-ish spare room. It would make an admirable study they could both use. Then they walked into the bathroom and Hermione stopped dead.

“Uh-uh.” She shook her head and Draco knew there would be no budging her.

“What?” he asked.

“No tub.”

“Oh.” Well, that wouldn’t do. “Right. Not on.” At least the smaller flat had both a shower and a tub. Very important, tubs. Vicarage Road definitely had the edge at this point.

Returning to the sitting room, they found Miss Seagrave waiting, a politely expectant smile on her face.

“And?” Surely they would have liked one of these two lovely flats. The owners had done a superb job of renovating and refurbishing. She knew none of the flats remaining in this house would be on the market very long.
“Very nice,” Hermione murmured.

"Whilst we're here, would you like to have a look at the one upstairs? I know it's a bit pricey for you, but..." Miss Seagrave gave them what she hoped was an encouraging smile.

Hermione darted a furtive, questioning look at Draco, who raised an eyebrow and shrugged. *Might as well do. We're here. Nothing to lose.*

"All right," she sighed.

They trailed up the shadowy staircase, following Miss Seagrave to the front door of the final flat. She fitted the key into the lock, turning it with a decisive click. The door swung open onto a room so bright, suddenly, that they blinked, their eyes adjusting to the unexpected infusion of light. In the time needed to climb the stairs, the sun had come out and now it shone brilliantly on this lovely spring afternoon.

The sitting room in which they found themselves presented an immediate picture of calm and relaxation. It contained a pair of pale beige sofas at right angles to each other, with a small coffee table of blond wood in front. Large, plump pillows, some in a deep burgundy, added splashes of colour. The triple windows looked out onto the Iffley Road, framed by long drapes in a colourful print on a cream background that brought the eye down to the ivory wool carpeting. A dining table and four chairs stood off to one side.

Despite herself, despite her misgivings, Hermione found herself starting to smile. She couldn’t help it. There was just something about this room that made her want to sit down and stay, curl up on the sofa with a good book, drift gently off to sleep in the afternoon sunshine that slanted across the carpeted floor, bathing the entire room in warm light. It truly was a room to *live* in. She looked quickly at Draco and her smile deepened, became dazzling. He wanted to laugh, so joyful was that smile.

“Come on,” he said instead, holding out his hand to her, his heart suddenly light. “Let’s have a look at the rest.”

They found the kitchen next. It was laid out in an especially pleasing way: blond-wood cabinets topped with black work counters, a brand-new cooker, fridge, washer-dryer and microwave oven lined one long wall of the rectangular room, and a table and four chairs graced the other. Windows at the far end overlooked the very pretty back garden and like the sitting room, the kitchen was filled with light.

Both of the two spacious bedrooms featured generous, comfortable-looking beds under the eaves, alongside large, bright, drape-framed windows with garden views. Free-standing wardrobes and shelving completed the picture. The third, a much smaller room, looked out onto the front of the property and contained a desk and bookshelves and a bulletin board.

And the bathroom? It was entirely brand-new, white tiled with both a shower *and* a tub, a shiny glass partition set at one end. Draco noted with approval that whilst the tub wasn’t anywhere close to the size of the one in the Vicarage Road house, it was quite large enough for two. Hermione merely smiled.

They returned to the sitting room, where Miss Seagrave waited. She looked from one to the other with a keen eye. It didn’t take the many years of experience she’d had in the business for her to know instantly that they were quite taken with the place.

“Interested?” she asked with studied casualness.
Their eager nods were all the answer she needed. However, this flat was above their stated price range. She waited.

Meanwhile, Draco had pulled Hermione off to one side, and now, their heads bent together, they began to speak in hushed tones.

“Look, I know we said no more than £800. But--”

“Oh, Draco, I love it! I really, really do! But… but you can’t--”

“I can, that’s just the thing. Come on, Granger. Let me.”

She shook her head stubbornly. “No. I can’t. It wouldn’t be fair.” Looking down, she studied her hands. “We’ll just have to find something else. Maybe take the one in Vicarage Road, or one of the other two here. They’re all nice. And besides, we don’t need a study and a whole extra bedroom as well. Oh, but…” she began, pained, looking around once again at the sun-filled sitting room and then sighing deeply. “I do so love this room, this whole place. It feels so right.”

Draco thought quickly. Turning to Miss Seagrave, he gave her his most beguiling smile. “Look, can we give you a deposit to hold it, and then let you know tomorrow?”

The estate agent considered. She could do that. She had a feeling about these two.

“All right,” she conceded. “That will be fine. I will need the application fee and the holding deposit, though. That comes to--”

“£400, yes. Okay,” Draco replied, nodding and ignoring the sharp poke in the back that Hermione gave him. “Bloody hell, Hermione, let me, for fuck’s sake!” he whispered, turning back. “You can always pay me back!”

Chastened, she dropped her hand. “Okay,” she murmured. “Okay.” She didn’t know what the point of all of it was, though. The flat was clearly too large and expensive for the two of them, and she’d never be able to justify asking her parents for so much more to cover her housing costs when Hertford offered less expensive housing for all its undergraduates.

236-238 Iffley Road, Oxford
£1140 a month. It was an awful lot. How in the name of Merlin could they afford that! Split evenly, it would nearly double the cost of housing compared to the accommodation fees charged by the college for the three terms of the academic year.

These thoughts were running insistently through both their minds as they trudged silently back along the High into Catte Street and into their quad at Hertford.

Draco felt disheartened, not so much for himself, but for Hermione. He knew he’d be okay anywhere as long as she was there too. But she’d loved that last flat so. Well, perhaps the Vicarage Road house would be best after all, or one of the other two in Iffley Road. The smaller of those was certainly the best bargain financially, though it wasn’t terribly inspiring otherwise. He needed to think.
At the entrance to Staircase 2, they stopped. Hermione turned to face Draco, her hands splayed out on his chest.

“It’ll be okay, Malfoy,” she began. “We’ll… we can… Oh well, I do like the smallest one too, you know! And it’s just about the same cost as living in college, so that’s good, right?” She gave his chest a pat. “It’ll be fine. I’ll ring Mum and Dad tonight and we can let Miss Seagrave know tomorrow. If you… if you can just give her the other deposits, I’ll pay you back just as soon as my parents send me the money. All right?” She looked up at him, her expression the very picture of gallant denial.

“You don’t have to be brave all the time, Hermione,” Draco said softly. “I know you’re disappointed.”

She looked away for just a moment, and then turned to regard him once again, her chin held high. “I’m fine! Don’t worry about me. I’m a big girl. I can handle it. Any of those other flats would be perfectly okay. Even the one without a tub. Besides…” There was a sly spark of mischief in her eyes. “Showers can be quite nice too, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” Draco murmured, leaning in to give her ear a small nip. “Fancy one now, then?”

“Lovely,” she giggled, and tucking his hand securely into the crook of her arm, she led him inside.

Dinner had been rather good that night. Ravioli in a smoked cheese sauce, mixed vegetables and a green salad had all been tempting. But Hermione had been distracted, the reason all too obvious, and Draco felt uncomfortable broaching the issue.

Back in her room, work turned out to be a relatively good distraction for a couple of hours. Hermione sat in concentrated study for the first ninety minutes and with a fair degree of focus for the next thirty, glancing at Draco only occasionally, but finally, both their efforts turned scattershot.

From where he lounged on the rug, his back against the foot of Hermione’s bed, Draco flipped his Biro in a neat, spiralling arc over his knee and it landed with a small ping on the bare floor beyond. He leaned his head back, rotating it slowly to work a kink out of his neck, and then rested it against a corner of her duvet.

“I know he was a brilliant tactician and he unified England and all, but what a bloody great wanker Alfred must have been,” he muttered. “Pious little twat, shoving the new religion down everybody’s throat, not content to let people have the Old Ways. Mixing religion and politics, using one to manipulate the other, forcing conversions as the price for peace treaties and political alliances.”

“Mmm,” Hermione nodded. “Just one more nail in the coffin of paganism in Britain. Well, all of Europe, really.” She stretched luxuriantly and sighed. “How’s the work for your essay coming along?”

“Fair.” He got up and went to the sink to fill the electric kettle. “Fancy some coffee then?”

“Yes, thanks.”

A few minutes later, they sat together on the floor, cross-legged, sipping mugs of steaming instant
coffee and munching on the last of a packet of Walker’s chocolate chunk and hazelnut biscuits. Hermione had learned to keep such treats in her room at all times, owing to Draco’s insatiable sweet tooth. These biscuits were her latest compromise in order to avoid having to buy those disgustingly sweet and gooey, chocolate cream-filled things he loved so much.

As he sat, his hands wrapped around the warm mug, the question that had been hovering at the edges of his thoughts all evening burst forth, begging to be asked at last.

“So… um…” he began. “You ringing your parents tonight, then?”

Hermione glanced at her watch and nodded, setting her coffee mug down. “Yes, except… well, I think I should really do this by myself. You don’t mind, do you, Malfoy? Come back in about an hour, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Draco said slowly. “You sure about this?”

She nodded again. “Yes. I’ll feel more comfortable talking to them if I’m on my own.” She searched his face carefully. “I haven’t hurt your feelings, have I?”

“Course not. Don’t be daft.” His eyes softened and he pulled her in for a quick hug, burying his face in her soft hair for a moment before finally speaking again. “Talk to you later, yeah?”

She smiled, relieved. “Okay.”

Taking a final gulp of his coffee, he climbed to his feet, pulled his hooded fleece over his head, and opened his arms. She moved into them gladly, resting her cheek against his chest and breathing in the scent that was his alone.

Holding her away from him then, his mouth brushed hers in a light, quick kiss. “For luck.”

She nodded, her smile tremulous as he disappeared out the door towards the stairs, turning back once to wave. She seemed very small, suddenly, standing there in the doorway, the light from her room casting a golden, backlit halo behind her unruly curls.

* The voices coming from room six were loud enough that Draco could hear a good deal of what was being said, even as he began to make his way down the staircase.

“Fuck, Gem, what now?”

A wail. “I don’t know! The whole thing sounds very dodgy, if you ask me. Damn him!”

“Well… whatever… we’re buggered. Where are we going to live next term? Probably not even a storing cupboard in Abingdon or Warnock at this point.”

“Look, why don’t we check the notice board in the JCR? Somebody might still be looking to share.”

“Good idea. Come on, let’s go.”

Danny Kirman and his girlfriend Gemma Martin came out of her room next door to Hermione’s not thirty seconds later, only to find Draco lounging by the stairway, a Cheshire-cat grin on his face.
Hermione had just pressed the final button in her parents’ phone number when there was a frantic knocking at the door. Replacing the receiver, she went to the door and opened it just as Draco, his arm raised, was about to knock once again.

“Malfy! What…?”

“Have you rung your parents yet?”

“I was just about to. Why? What’s up?”

By way of answer, Draco stepped into her room and carefully shut the door behind him.

“Look—I think I’ve solved our problem! What would you say to sharing the flat with another couple? It would cut the rent in half for us—make it no more expensive than if we were living in college again next year!”

Hermione’s mouth fell open, and she stared at Draco in disbelief. “But… but… who? How…?”

Here, Draco’s smile turned smug. He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning gracefully against the chest of drawers. “Well. As I was leaving, I overheard Gemma and Danny talking next door. Seems they were tipped to share a flat with two other couples, but then it all fell through and now they’ve nowhere to live next year. What d’you reckon?”

Hermione’s eyes were quite round now, and an irrepressible smile had begun lifting the corners of her mouth. “I think it’s fantastic! But—are they interested? Did you—”

“All taken care of,” he drawled, his grin insufferably cocky now. “They’re just outside. Told them I needed to talk to you first, but they’re quite keen.”

“You know, Draco, this solves more than one problem,” Hermione said slowly, as the realisation hit her. “Not only does it lower the expense, but now I can say in all honesty that I’m sharing with several friends.”

“One of whom just happens to be me,” Draco replied, smirking.

“Right. But if I’m vague enough about it, they might just think that I’m sharing with Gemma and you’re sharing with Danny. They won’t really believe that, but it’ll make things easier, I think.”

“Genius, darling. What can I say?”

“Thanks!”

“I meant me.”

“Prat!” Laughing, Hermione landed a playful smack on his arm, whereupon he grabbed her wrists with lightning speed, pulling her flush against him and pinching her about the waist just where she was most ticklish.

“Oi!” A sudden voice from the hallway interrupted their laughter and scuffling play. Chagrined and still laughing, now with embarrassment, they went to the door. Just as she reached for the door knob,
he gave her one last tickling pinch and she squeaked.

“Sshh!” he told her sternly. “Behave yourself, Granger!”

The very satisfying smack she managed to deliver to his bum just as he was opening the door made him jump.

“How,” he said to their friends, barely managing not to laugh as he swatted her hands away behind their backs.

Gemma and Danny levelled knowing smirks at both Hermione and Draco as they came in. The four of them sat down, and then abruptly, Gemma jumped up again.

“Hang on!” she said. “Be right back!” She vanished out the door, returning within two minutes, juggling a bottle of sparkling pomegranate juice and four plastic cups, stacked. “Just happened to have something very nice saved! Nearly forgot about it. Danny, open this for me, will you, love? Cap’s tight.” She handed him the bottle, and set the cups on Hermione’s desk.

Danny made quick work of pouring out four cups of the effervescent, ruby-coloured liquid and handed them round.

“To the flat!” he said, raising his cup.

“The flat!” everyone echoed, and then lightly touched cups before quaffing their drinks.

“So tell us,” Gemma said, wrapping her arms around her bent knees. “What’s this place like, anyway?”

“Well,” Hermione began, just as Draco opened his mouth. He closed it again, rolled his eyes, and grinned at Danny, who smiled in rueful commiseration. He sometimes had a hard job getting a word in as well.

“It’s in Iffley Road, first of all. The whole thing’s bright and airy and pretty big. Some of the rooms—the kitchen and the two bedrooms—have views of the back garden, which is really nice. There’s a smaller room we could use as a study, as well. They’ve just done it over recently and it’s really pretty and comfortable.”

“How much?” The fatal question, from Danny—really only a formality at this point, as he had a fairly good idea what to expect.

This time, Draco replied. “£1140 a month. Divided four ways, it comes to £285 each. That’s less than what we’d be paying for rooms in college. And it’s not far, really. Walking distance. There’s also a bus that goes from Iffley Road to the city centre.”

“Close to all the shops and restaurants in Cowley Road as well,” Hermione added quickly and then recalled, “Good Thai place there. They do a very nice take-away.” A certain night six months before came to mind, and she slanted a look at Draco, a sudden blush bringing warm, rosy colour to her cheeks. She wondered if he remembered too.

He caught her eye, his secretive grin as he looked away again her answer. In fact, he recalled the night in question with perfect clarity. It had been an evening of several firsts for him: first time ordering take-away, first time trying Thai food, and the first time he’d really acted on his feelings for Hermione. He hadn’t forgotten the sweetness and tenderness of those first real kisses and how incredibly aroused he’d been just from the simplest touches. The memory of it now caused his pulse to race.
Meanwhile, Danny had taken up the bottle of sparkling juice and now held it out to any takers for seconds. Everyone held their cup out and a second round was eeked out of the remainder.

“Sounds great,” he said, sitting down once again. “Can we see it tomorrow then?”

“Yeah, ‘course you can.” Draco drained his cup in a single swallow and flipped it into the small waste basket. “We’ll all go. We need to leave a month’s rent, and a deposit of--”

“Two months’ rent, yeah, we know. Been through it.” Danny rolled his eyes with a world-weary air, and nodded.

“Yes!” Gemma chimed in. “The little git strung us along and then, at the last minute, gave our room away to another couple, close friends of his.”

“We hadn’t signed a lease yet, though, so there was fuck-all we could do about it!” Danny snorted. “Least we got our deposit money back though!”

They totted up the amount each would need to bring in order to secure the flat, and then suddenly, Hermione remembered something. “What are your plans for the summer? Because you see, we intend on moving in at the end of term.”

Gemma and Danny looked at each other, momentarily taken aback. Quite naturally, they’d assumed that their tenancy wouldn’t begin much before the start of Michaelmas, maybe sometime in September or late August, the earliest. This latest bit of information opened up all sorts of interesting, new possibilities.

“Well, you know, honestly,” Gemma told her, “we’d expected to move into the other place in September. But even three months is a long time at home. Maybe--”

“Look.” Draco’s words tumbled out in a rush. “If you lot want to wait to move in until the end of the summer, we can cover a month or so on our own.” He’d been hoping for precisely this scenario, in fact.

Caught off guard, Hermione opened her mouth to speak, and then caught his eye. Don’t you dare, Granger. She closed it again, biting her lower lip.

“We’ll let you know tomorrow, yeah?” Danny said, getting to his feet and holding out a hand to Gemma. “’C’mon, love. Let’s take a walk.” He flashed a grin at Hermione and Draco. “Ta ra.”

Pausing at the door, Gemma grinned. “Lucky thing for us you were outside the door just then, Draco!”

“Lucky thing for us too!” Hermione laughed. “You’ve no idea!”

The quiet of Hermione’s room after the other couple left served as a sharp reminder of something left undone. She glanced at the small clock on the desk. Half nine. Not too late to call. Happily, at least, the prospect seemed a bit less daunting now.
Draco got to his feet as well, pulling his hoodie over his head once more. “Right, this time I really am off,” he said with a small laugh. “Just going back to my room for a bit, see if Applegate and Spencer are around, maybe pop down to the bar for a drink. Back in a bit.”

He pulled her to him for an exuberant kiss, ruffled her hair affectionately, and then headed out the door. His cheerful whistling could be heard all the way down the stairs. Hermione giggled. He’d seemed so pleased. Like a little boy with a present.

A quarter to ten at night was not a time the phone usually rang in the Granger house. Claire had been curled up on the sofa in the sitting room, watching a favourite programme on the telly. Or rather, not watching it. She’d dozed off several times and finally gave up trying to follow the rather complex plot of an old rerun of “Doctor Who.” She’d settle instead for enjoying the performance of Peter Davison, her favourite “doctor.”

Richard was busy putting the finishing touches on the cabinet he’d just completed and would probably be in the cellar for a while yet. She reached for the phone, picking it up after the second ring and murmuring a sleepy salutation.

“Mum! Hi!” came the voice from the other end.

“Oh! Hermione, darling, hello! How are you?” Claire was suddenly a lot more alert.

“Fine, Mum. Incredibly busy, though!”

“End of term insanity, eh?” She chuckled. “I remember what that’s like. My goodness, where has the time gone? Your first year at uni is nearly finished.”

“I know! I can’t believe it, really!”

“When’s the term officially over?”

“June the seventeenth. It’s a Saturday.”

“Right. Okay, so you’ll be needing to move out that day, then. Daddy and I will drive in that afternoon. What time do you want us to arrive?”

There was a pause that seemed to last far longer than its actual three seconds.

“Hermione? What is it?”

“Well, you see… that actually won’t be necessary, Mummy. I’m… uh… well, it’s just that some friends and I have decided to take a flat together for next year.” Another weighty pause. “Starting this summer.”

Those final words came out in a rush. Hermione wasn’t sure if she hoped her mother had registered them or not.

She had.

“This summer? So… you plan to stay on in Oxford? You won’t be coming home at all?” There was
a discernable undercurrent of disappointment mixed with the surprise in Claire’s voice.

“Well,” Hermione hastened to explain, “not for the whole four months, no. But for weekends now and then, absolutely!” She tried to infuse her words with a cheer that even she didn’t really feel at this moment, hearing how obviously dejected her mother was at the news. “And you and Daddy can come and visit me too. You could even stop, if you like. We’ll have room.”

There was another, briefer silence as Claire processed the news. It was completely unexpected and yes—disappointing. She’d grown used to her daughter’s absence for a good part of the past nine years, but at least there had always been summers during which they could catch up and enjoy some really precious time together. Now even that was being taken away. The question was…

“Why? Doesn’t the college provide housing for all its students? I seem to recall–”

“It does, you’re right. It’s just that several of us thought it would be fun to get a place of our own. We’ve looked around a bit and – oh, Mum, we’ve found something fantastic!”

Carefully, Claire schooled her voice into a fair semblance of its usual positive tone. “Really? Tell me about it.”

“Well,’ Hermione bubbled, “it’s in a huge, Victorian brick house that’s been sub-divided. Our flat’s on the first floor and it looks out onto the back garden. The rooms are all big and sunny, and it’s fully furnished. Pretty nice, too.”

Then came the question Hermione had been dreading.

“Who will you be sharing with? Have we met any of these girls?”

“Oh…um…” Hermione began hesitantly. “Yes, actually—except… well… they’re not all girls.”

Claire’s eyebrows rose fractionally as she digested this news. “No?”


Ah. The plot had, as they say, thickened.

Dramatically.

“I see.” In truth, Claire had suspected as much, the moment talk of a flat had started. “Hermione, sweetheart,” she began gently. “Have you thought seriously about what you’re proposing to do? I realise,” she continued, “that you’re twenty years old and no longer a child. I also know that you and Draco have an intimate relationship. Frankly, I would be surprised if you didn’t, at this stage of things. I know how things are. It was just the same when I was your age. Back then, sex was a very free and casual thing, maybe even a bit too casual at times. Premarital sex was common, just like now. So I understand. I really do.”

Her mother’s unexpected candour had started Hermione on a path of intriguing possibilities. She simply had to ask.

“Did… did you and Daddy…?”

Claire smiled to herself. She’d been expecting that one. “Yes. We did. Your father and I fell in love and moved in together in our first year of dental college, and then after we finished, we got married. Three years later, we had you.”
Hermione’s mouth fell open. She knew she oughtn’t be surprised—her parents had come of age in the seventies, part of a generation that had broken ground on a number of fronts, sex, drugs, and rock and roll being only three. Even now, Richard and Claire were still very liberal politically and socially, and had a certain relaxed earthiness about them. On her mother’s dressing table, there was a framed photo of a tall, lanky boy with long, sandy hair, wearing a tee shirt and jeans. His arms were wrapped snugly around a petite girl in a flowing, gauzy peasant blouse and jeans who bore an uncanny resemblance to herself, but with chestnut-brown hair that was even longer, fuller, and more untamed than her own. If she’d taken the time to think about it before this, she’d have realised that her parents in their early twenties were living a relationship very much like hers and Draco’s in some fundamental respects.

Still. The knowledge that her parents had lived together for three years before getting married astonished her. It would take some getting used to.

The sound of Claire’s voice brought her abruptly back to the present.

“Moving in together is a big step in a relationship. It shouldn’t be something entered into lightly. It means that you view the relationship as being on a more serious, committed level. Hermione—” Claire paused. “Do you love Draco? Really love him, I mean?”

Here was the final, pivotal question. She’d thought it, had said the words aloud both to herself and to him, had confided her feelings to her old friends several months earlier, but never declared them openly to her parents. Now was not the time for lies or evasions.

“Yes, Mum,” she said simply. “I do.”

“And… he feels the same for you?” Claire already knew the answer to this, had known it since December. Although he hadn’t been aware of it, the boy’s heart had been plainly on his sleeve the night he’d first come to dinner. And only a week ago, he’d acquitted himself beautifully in the appraising spotlight of the Grangers’ and Billingsleys’ collective scrutiny. Now she only needed to hear the truth in her daughter’s voice.

“Yes, he does. He’s told me. And I just know. I feel it.”

“Then I think you should trust your instincts.”

“But Mum…” A certain hesitancy had leached into Hermione’s voice now. “Can I? What if… I mean… what if I’m making a mistake? I love him so much, I really do! There’s something deep inside me, filling me up, when I’m around him that feels so empty when he’s not there. But what if my feelings are blinding me? How do I really know I can trust my instincts? What if I’m wrong about what he feels?”

Claire spoke gently. “Do you honestly believe that, Hermione?”

“No…” Hermione’s voice was subdued. “I’m just… scared.”

“It is a scary thing. It’s true. Love is a very scary thing. Every time we love, we take a risk. We make ourselves vulnerable, we open ourselves up to potential hurt. But darling, we must, don’t you see? Because what’s the alternative, really? We can’t live only unto ourselves and never let anyone else in just because we’re afraid of getting hurt. You know,” she said, “this reminds me of that Simon and Garfunkel song, “I Am A Rock.” You remember I used to play their albums for you?”

“Of course.”

“One of the lyrics goes, ‘I won’t disturb the slumber of feelings that have died. If I never loved, I
never would have cried.’ We’re meant to know that it’s not a good thing to be an island unto oneself. Pain is a part of life. What I’m trying to say, sweet girl, is— don’t be afraid to love. Trust your feelings, and just as important, trust his as well. Let me ask you something.” Claire paused.

“What?” Hermione asked in a small voice.

“Is Draco worth the risk?”

The quiet reply-- when it came, finally-- seemed buoyed by a certain strength. “Yes.”

“Well, then.”

*

Half an hour later, there was a quiet knock on the door.

Hermione opened it to find Draco standing there, a sizeable paper sack in his hands. A delightfully pungent odour wafted from inside.

She stood back to allow him entry. “What’s that?”

He sailed past her, a cheeky little smile on his face, looking just like the cat that swallowed the canary. Hermione stifled a giggle at the thought. She moved towards the desk, thinking to help him.

“Ah ah, just sit down, “ he said blithely, setting the sack down on her desk. “I have brought a feast. I hope you’re hungry. You didn’t eat much at dinner.” He swept an appraising gaze down to her feet and back up again, raising an amused eyebrow. “Pyjamas so early, love?”

She wore a small, form-fitting tee shirt that had shrunk down to nothing in the wash so that now it clung to her, revealing every line and curve beneath, and a pair of baggy, flannel pyjama trousers that sat low on her hips. A glint of metal drew Draco’s eye to her navel, where the belly button ring she’d got that day in Glastonbury sparkled.

“Hey, I like to be comfortable,” she replied with a small shrug.

Meekly, she sat down in the butterfly chair and watched as he unpacked an assortment of containers, setting each one down on the desk with a dramatic flair.

“A bit of Goong Tempura… some Chicken Pad Thai… stir-fried veggies with tofu and cashew nuts… Drunken Noodles with Prawns… What?!” he demanded, struggling to maintain a straight face as he questioned the look of surprise on Hermione’s face.

“Drunken Noodles?” She started to laugh despite herself. “Why that? And what’s in it, anyway?”

“Just because,” he replied airily, waving his hand to dismiss her silly question as one would swat away a gnat. “And whisky, if you must know. It’s great. Tried some in the restaurant.”

“Restaurant…” Hermione repeated slowly. “Where did you get all of this?”

“Oh… I took a walk over to Cowley Road. Felt like some exercise, and I wanted to see what was there anyway. You know, as we’ll be living practically in the next road and all. Found myself standing in front of Oxford Thai, of all places. You barely touched your food at dinner. Being the
soul of generosity that I am, I thought you might fancy some take-away. So here you go.”

“I am a bit hungry, actually, but I can’t eat all this by myself! You did plan on sharing with me, didn’t you?” Hermione laughed.

“Oh, I reckon I could force myself… with a bit of incentive,” he said suggestively, a roguish little smile on his face.

“And…” she said softly, moving to stand directly in front of him. “What sort of incentive did you have in mind? Isn’t your appetite incentive enough?”

He slipped his arms around her waist and drew her very close, so that their bodies were pressed firmly together. His voice was a silken tease in her ear. “Oh, I am a man of many and divers appetites, Granger.” He snaked his tongue around the tip of her ear lobe. “Mere food will satisfy but one.” His tongue had begun tracing tiny figure eights on the sensitive skin just below her ear, and she shivered pleasurably. “Mmm… at the moment, I find myself craving… some of those prawns.”

Leaving a kiss where his tongue had just been meandering, he laughed as she pushed him away in mock exasperation.

*D*

Dinner shared out of containers with a single spoon and fork is ever so much better than off stodgy old plates. It’s even nicer if you’re sitting in the lap of the one you’re sharing with, and very necessary, too, so as to avoid dropping a single grain of sticky rice or even one noodle. And fingers are best for the tricky work of getting those larger, more slippery food items from container to mouth intact. Not only are they marvellously dextrous that way, they also lend themselves excellently to licking, so as to get every last drop of sauce.

Hermione informed Draco of these conclusions as he busied himself sucking on each of her fingers in turn. So as not to waste any of the incredible whisky sauce they’d dipped the prawns into, of course.

“Hmm, Granger… I don’t know if it’s the sauce or you, but this hand in particular is really tasty,” he murmured, moving from her fingers to her palm with feathery strokes of his tongue.

“I think it must be the sauce,” Hermione told him, her expression grave.

“Oh no, it’s definitely you, Granger. I’ve decided,” Draco replied matter-of-factly between nuzzling licks that had begun to trail from her palm up the sensitive flesh of the inside of her arm. “Sweet with just a touch of saltiness, and tender. Very tender. Yum.”

His mouth had reached the inside of her arm just above the elbow, and Hermione wriggled in an agony of pleasure. It was one of “Granger’s special spots,” as Draco had dubbed them as he’d discovered them over time. Once catalogued, they were never forgotten or forsaken, and just now, his lips and tongue were busy feasting on the tender flesh.

Finally, bracing her with one arm behind her back, he lowered her gently to the rug so that she lay comfortably. He settled himself alongside her, one hand hovering just above her breasts. Hugged by the thin, cotton tee shirt she wore, they were firm and well-proportioned, each one ending in a perfectly rounded little nub of furled flesh. He ached to touch them, but still he held back.
“Merlin, Hermione, what did you do, use a shrinking spell on this thing? I like it,” he said with a wolfish leer, and his hand descended like an arrow straight to her left nipple which, he’d discovered some months earlier, was the more sensitive of the two. He still didn’t touch her though. His fingertip waited an inch above the hard little peak, now painfully erect in anticipation of the contact.

She huffed in mock indignation, a warm throbbing beginning between her legs. ‘I most certainly did not shrink it on purpose. It was an accident.” A happy one.

His finger descended until it rested lightly on her nipple, not moving. Then, he commenced a lazy, circular journey around the areola but avoiding the nipple itself, until she thought she would scream with frustration. Just when the point of no return had nearly been reached, he began a desultory flicking of first one rosy nipple and then its twin, that nearly had Hermione weeping with the exquisite torture their arousal was causing.

“I think the shirt will just have to come off,” he sighed finally, shrugging. “As titillating as it is, it’s keeping me from my dessert.”

“Can’t have that,” she grinned, and raised her arms obediently so that he could peel the snug, little shirt up over her head. Tossing it carelessly over his shoulder, he lowered his head with a purpose and took one of her tight little nipples deep into his mouth, his lips forming a seal around it as his tongue moved over it in sinuous caresses. He trailed tiny, light butterfly kisses from one breast to the other, moving his mouth between the two, licking and suckling and leaving small, tender bites on her smooth skin.

The sensations this was producing were most exquisite, and Hermione writhed beneath his bent head, pressing her thighs together in an attempt to relieve the ache that had begun to spiral now. Sensing her need, he slipped his hand inside her pyjama bottoms and slid it along her hip and over her pelvic bone until it rested in the cradle of her groin, lightly stroking the softly curling hair of her mons.

Suddenly he bit down sharply on her nipple and she cried out, reflexively opening her legs, and in that moment, he plunged a finger deep inside her and then withdrew it to spread the slick wetness of her arousal over her clit, already swollen and exquisitely sensitive to the touch.

“Oh… yes,” she moaned, and then, “no, I want…”

His smile was feral. “No worries, darling. I know exactly what you want.”

Clothing, both his and hers, was dispensed with in a trice. And then there was the delightfully ticklish sensation of warm, moist breath fanning her most private parts. He’d parted her legs, bending them at the knees so that her feet rested flat on the floor, and then slowly lowered his head to the soft, warm flesh of her inner thighs, commencing a tortuously slow series of kisses and tiny bites that moved him ever closer to where she was aching to feel the caress of his mouth.

In the last moment before his mouth took her completely, he raised his head, his eyes lit with a wicked gleam as he regarded her. Her head was thrown back, her mouth open as she panted, her back arched so that her breasts were thrust high, and in that moment, all he wanted was to claim them for his own all over again. All things in good time, though. He could be patient.

And then he was there, and all it took were a few probing thrusts of his tongue, coupled with the sweetly desultory suckling that both soothed and drove her mad, and her climax ignited, torching her from the inside.

All she needed after that, all she craved, was to feel him deep inside her. Opening her arms, she drew
him down into her embrace, twining her arms and legs around him like a flowering vine that grows up around a sturdy young tree. She could feel his erection pushing against her belly, hard and hot. He bent his head to kiss her again and again, long, deepening kisses as he teased her tender opening with just the tip of his cock. And then, in a single, powerful movement, he impaled her, commencing a driving rhythm that brought him deeper with each thrust.

The final surrender, when it burst upon them both, drew cries of unrestrained exhilaration and wonder, and then there was sweet repose as they lay, still entwined, two hearts moving to a single rhythm.

* 

“She knows.”

“Who knows? Oh-- your mum, you mean?”

“Yes, I… I told her. Well, she guessed, really.”

They lay utterly relaxed in Hermione’s bed, their bodies entangled beneath the light coverlet, skin to bare skin. One of his feet stroked hers playfully. The room was shrouded in shadows, the only light coming from somewhere outside in the quad, shining in buttery yellow shafts through the blinds.

There was silence for a couple of heartbeats.

“And? What did she say? Is it all right?”

“She understands, Draco. She really does, She told me she and my dad lived together when they were students too. I didn’t know!”

Low whistle. “Bloody hell… really?”

“Uh-huh. She said that living together is a serious thing, though, and not to do it lightly. She asked me how I feel about you.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That I love you very much, of course.”

Smiling. “I like that answer. What else?”

“Well, she asked me if the feeling were mutual.”

“What did you say then?”

Completely deadpan. “I said that I wasn’t sure.”

Dead silence for two seconds.

Then a warning growl. “Granger…”

Giggles. “Okay, okay, I said that it was. Mutual, I mean.”
“Hmm. That’s more like it!”

And I said that I was scared, Draco. Because I am. I’m not sure I’m totally ready. Or you. Is it too soon? What if…

“Come here, baby. I sleep better when you’re close.” He threaded his arm around her, drawing her back to him so that she could hear his heart beating, slower now and steady beneath the warm, smooth skin.

In this moment, in his arms, she was safe. She closed her eyes against her fears, lulled by the gentle rise and fall of his chest beneath her cheek like wavelets in a harbour, following him into uncharted, dreamless slumber.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to my lovely and quite indispensable beta, mister_otter. Carol, I can’t say enough how much I value your sensitive and thorough reads, the intuitive feedback you share with me, and your very helpful suggestions!

Continuing thanks to Robin in London for the same, and for being such a great reader besides.

Thanks to everyone at HP_Britglish for their ongoing assistance as well. Fantastic resource!

Tristan, Gawain, Cúchulainn and Fionn—all heroic characters in English and Irish literature/mythology. Tristan is one half of the legendary and tragic “Tristan and Iseult” (or the Germanic “Isolde”), dating originally from the 12th C. Gawain is the brave knight from the 14th-C. chivalric romance, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” Cúchulainn is the epic hero of Irish folklore featured in The Táin Bó Cúailnge and the Ulster Cycle. Fionn, or more properly “Fionn mac Cumhaill,” is the mythic hero/hunter/warrior of Irish folklore.

Draco's mention of "Alfred" is a reference to Alfred the Great, "king of the southern Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex from 871 to 899. Alfred is noted for his defence of the kingdom against the Danish Vikings." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_the_Great

About the house in Iffley Road: it is real, and actually is sub-divided into six separate flats. However, I took the liberty of choosing my favourite rooms from three of them, and then combining them to create the flat I had in mind for Draco and Hermione.

Abingdon and Warnock are the residence halls where Hertford houses second- and third-year students.
Wednesday evening, 31 May

“Right,” Hermione muttered. She sat cross-legged in the centre of her bed, piles of books, index cards and papers surrounding her like a haphazard cityscape. However, none of it concerned her at the moment. Her attention was focused solely on the yellow, lined pad balanced in her lap.

“Okay. Gem and Danny, of course, and Mags and Mark.” She began to write. “Tony and Suze… Chris and Fiona. Gil and Steve, right. Now… who else in his staircase?” She paused, surveying the list critically, her eyebrows knit together. “Oh! Eric, Peter and Colin. And Alex. That’s fourteen, plus another four, possibly, if that lot want to bring somebody. Plus us. Twenty.”

She chewed thoughtfully on the end of the pen and then tapped it against her bottom lip.

*We could do it at the KA. Or maybe the Lamb and Flag. Or the Turf. I’ll ask Mark and Tony what they think.* She sighed with satisfaction. “Good.”

Flopping back against the pillows, a dreamy half-smile lifted the corners of her mouth. This would be the very best birthday Malfoy had ever had. She would see to that.
Memories of their years at Hogwarts came, unbidden, into her mind then. Birthdays were always special events there, she remembered. A huge and rather dazzling cake blazing with candles would materialise after dinner at the house table of anyone who was celebrating a birthday that day.

One memory stood out now—something she hadn’t even been aware she’d taken special note of, at the time. It was towards the very end of sixth year, she recalled. That evening, one of those spectacular cakes, a constellation of candles illuminating the elaborate swirls of butter cream icing on top, had appeared on the Slytherin table directly in front of Draco Malfoy. Except—Hermione remembered-- he had not seemed particularly happy to see it. Nor had he even seemed terribly well. His face had looked positively drained, its pallor almost grey. He’d looked exhausted too, his eyes dark and deadened, seeming not to focus on the excitement and chatter swirling around him as his house mates congratulated him.

She recalled the momentary chill that had left her hugging herself as she turned back to her own table, feeling oddly disturbed and yet curious at the same time.

Now—now -- she had a pretty fair idea of what it was she had seen that evening. It had only been a short time later that Professor Dumbledore had been killed. At last, she knew the truth of what had been behind Draco’s part in that. Gods. He must have been torturing himself, consumed with the terrible task he’d been given, the consequence of not completing it unthinkable. And by the time of his seventeenth birthday, it had been bearing down on him. That birthday cake must have seemed an utter mockery to him in the face of the dreadful spectre constantly hanging over his head. What he’d told her about that time in his life came back to her now with complete and awful clarity. The task had been the first thing he thought of when he opened his eyes in the mornings and the grim companion of his nightly dreams.

Her heart twisted at the image of that pale, hollow-eyed boy of three years earlier. Subsequent birthdays were beyond her knowledge, though she was sure that the next one, his eighteenth, would have been utterly subsumed by the chaos that had descended on Hogwarts once the final battle against Voldemort and his minions had begun in earnest. She hadn’t paid him much attention in the year following, their “eighth,” as he’d seemed to fade into a quietly marginal figure, a loner keeping very much to himself. If he’d marked his nineteenth birthday at all that year, it was likely all alone by his own choice.

Staring down at the pad in her lap, the writing on it suddenly blurry, she wiped roughly at her eyes with the heel of her hand, swallowing hard.

His twentieth birthday would make up for the last three. It just had to.

* 

Monday, 5 June

Trinity term was drawing rapidly to a close. A general epidemic of quiet, controlled panic seemed to infect virtually everybody, as they scurried back and forth between tutorials, the libraries, meals, and their rooms. Less than a fortnight remained before final essays would be turned in, bags would be packed, and parents would arrive to carry their children and the detritus of an entire academic year away in their cars.
Warm sunshine streamed in, hitting Draco’s face and causing him to wince. He rolled over in bed, pulling the covers up over his head.

“Granger,” he groaned, one arm shooting out from under the duvet and feeling around blindly.

Nothing. She wasn’t there.

Momentarily confused, he emerged from his burrow, hair tousled, one piece sticking straight up at the back in a little cowlick. She had been there last night. He distinctly remembered. Mmm… yeah… He grinned at the recollection, rubbing his bare belly absently under the waistband of his pyjama trousers.

He squinted at the clock on his desk. 9.30. Still early. Well, relatively. Where the fuck was she anyway, and on his birthday too?! Feeling faintly disgruntled, he rolled over and shut his eyes.

He’d just begun drifting back into a half-sleep when there was a knock on the door.

“Malfoy! Open up! Hurry!”

It was Hermione and she sounded faintly frantic. Leaping from his bed, heart pounding, he was at the door in two strides.

She stood there, out of breath, her cheeks rosy and her hair somewhat dishevelled from the wind, clutching a large paper sack. Moving quickly past him, she set the bag down on his desk with a clunk. “Phew, that was heavy! I was afraid it was starting to leak!” She turned to him, sighed, and gave him a dazzling smile as she threw her arms around his neck.

“Happy birthday, Draco!”

Draco grinned. Now this was more like it! He twined his arms around her waist and gave her a quick kiss on the tip of her nose.

“Thanks! And just what have you been getting up to?” he asked playfully, though his nose had already told him the answer.

“Well,” Hermione said slyly, “as it’s your birthday—and a big one, too, this year! Twenty!-- I thought a special breakfast was in order. So I took a walk over to the Rose and picked up a few things. I’ll just set everything out here whilst you do…”—she gestured vaguely—“whatever it is you need to do.”

He nodded happily. Suddenly this day was shaping up very nicely, thank you very much. “Right, okay. Back in a tick.” Pulling a tee shirt on over his head, he disappeared out the door, padding down the hall in the direction of the shared bathroom. He was back momentarily, and proceeded to brush his teeth (she’d been too nice to mention his morning breath earlier, but he was sure she must have noticed) and wash, splashing icy water on his face to banish the remains of sleep from his still-foggy brain.

“Sit!” Hermione commanded, still busy setting out their breakfast and not turning around.

“Bossy cow, aren’t you,” he muttered fondly. “Okay.”

Perched on his bed, he watched as a really delectable meal took shape before his eyes, transforming his spartan desk into a café table. In addition to a pair of flavoured coffees, there were two covered plates of scrambled eggs mixed with chives, rashers of bacon, flaky croissants, butter and jam in small pots, and freshly squeezed orange juice thick with pulp, just the way he liked it best. The
aromas that wafted up into his nostrils immediately set the juices flowing. He shook his head admiringly.

“Granger, you’ve outdone yourself this time. I can’t believe…” His voice grew soft. “You did all this for me?”

Hermione stopped taking the plastic cutlery and napkins from their cling-film wrappers, and looked at him straight on. Then, without a word, she walked over to the bed, sat down beside him, and put her arms around him, resting her head in the crook of his neck. They sat that way, perfectly silent except for their joined breathing, for a minute or two. And then she got up, cleared her throat, and pulled out the desk chair.

“Come on, birthday boy,” she smiled brightly. “Tuck in!”

“Oh!” Hermione put down her coffee cup suddenly. “I nearly forgot! I stopped by the porter’s lodge and checked your post. Look—something from your parents, I think.”

She pulled an envelope from her shoulder bag and laid it on the desk in front of Draco. He eyed it for a moment before picking it up, and then he did so in an almost gingerly fashion, as if he were not quite sure it could be what it seemed.

And then he slit it open in a single, quick movement. There was a letter inside. Unfolding it, he began to read. Hermione watched his eyes moving back and forth as he scanned the lines quickly, his face carefully composed.

Finally, his eyes clouded in a brief flicker of cryptic emotion, and he handed the letter to Hermione.

5 June 2000

Dearest Draco,

Happy birthday!

I hope this letter finds you well and that it has arrived in good time.

It is difficult to imagine that already you have attained the very grown-up age of twenty. Nevertheless, here you are, a child no longer—and yet, not the man you might have become, had you not taken your life into your own hands.

Even now, it is sometimes difficult to completely understand this decision you have made, one that will continue to shape your life directly for the next two years at a minimum, and for a long time after that, I believe. Admittedly, we did not approve of your choice to leave our world in order to follow this path, particularly knowing that others from your year at Hogwarts who now study at Muggle universities have not taken things to quite the extreme that you have. And yet, the fact that you are at Oxford at all, never mind that you have chosen to forego all magic and instead, live as the other students there, demonstrates an ingenuity, a resourcefulness, and a bravery that are clearly admirable. In addition, you have a fine mind—something we’ve always known, of course—but now
Draco, cherished son, we are so very proud of you on this day. You have grown into a remarkable young man.

There is a gift waiting for you at home. We hope it won’t be long before we may give it to you.

Much love,

Mother and Father

“Oh, Draco!” Hermione breathed. “This is—”

“From my mother. Clearly.” Draco’s mouth was set in a tight line and he looked away. The fragmentary disappointment in his eyes had been impossible to miss, however.

“But--” she began, frustrated. “It’s from both of them. Couldn’t you maybe give your father the benefit of the doubt, just this once?”

“Don’t be naïve, Granger. This is my father we’re talking about. Not yours. Mother would like me to believe that he’s come around, miraculously, that he suddenly accepts me, what I’ve done in the past, what I’ve chosen to do, but that’s just bollocks. You don’t see anything from him in this envelope, do you?” He shook the envelope dramatically and then tossed it down on the desk. “I know my mother well enough to recognise that these are her words and hers alone.”

Hermione thought back to the day they’d spent with the Malfoys two and a half months earlier, images of Lucius at various points in the day coming to mind. The way he had briefly rested his hand on Draco’s shoulder in the apothecary, the apparently genuine interest Lucius had seemed to show in the bookshop and antique maps, the conversation the two of them had had whilst she and Narcissa had browsed the shop windows. That most of all, Hermione thought. Surely that must mean something. Draco had clearly been struck by it at the time. Could he really be so ready to dismiss it out of hand now?

“Oh, but--” she said, once more.

“Leave it, Hermione.” There was a clipped finality to his words that stopped the conversation cold. He downed the remainder of his coffee, turning back to her with a smile that seemed momentarily just a bit brittle. “Fantastic breakfast, love. Thanks!”

His ill-disguised bitterness and the disappointment it betrayed simply could not be allowed to ruin his birthday breakfast. Jumping up, her voice just a trifle too chipper, she said, “Wait! It’s not over yet!”

Digging hurriedly into her overstuffed shoulder bag, she pulled out two green foil-wrapped packages. One was small-ish, square, and fairly flat, and the other a bit larger and rectangular. Both were festively done up with silver ribbons.

“For you,” she said, moving closer until she stood right before him as he sat in the chair. “Happy birthday, Draco.”

Without a word, he pulled her into his lap so that the presents were mashed between them, and kissed her fiercely.
Almost immediately, the fervency of the kiss became something sweeter and slower and more tender, as they tasted and explored and caressed one another. Finally separating to catch their breaths, they sat back, Hermione pulling the flattened presents out from between them.

“Here,” she giggled, handing them over. “I think they’re still okay!”

“If not, I shall expect immediate replacements,” he informed her.

“Oh, I see! Even though it’s your fault they’ve been squashed!”

“I beg to differ, Granger. It’s entirely your fault for being so… bloody… irresistible!” He made a grab for her once again, but this time she hopped off his lap, dancing lightly out of his reach.

“Open the damn presents, Malfoy!” she ordered, laughing.

“Yeah, all right, all right,” he muttered, grinning as he threw his hands up in defeat, and then pulling the ribbons off the larger present. The wrapping paper came away in two neat sections as he ripped it.

“Oh. Wow.”

Hermione smiled shyly. “You like it?”

“Like it? Merlin’s beard! I’ve wanted this book for ages. How did you--”

“I overheard you asking about it in one of the bookshops in Glastonbury. I… well… I found it two weeks ago in The Bindery.”

“You remembered that? It was nearly six months ago!”

She nodded. “I was really hoping I would find a copy. Wickenden’s didn’t have it, but luckily, The Bindery was able to get one for me.”

He ran his hand lovingly over the front cover, and then opened the book, examining the first few pages with a sense of wonderment. The Crucible of the Dragon was a novel by Crispin Partridge, a renowned dragon expert in the wizarding world who, years before, had turned from working with the creatures to writing about them. It had long been out of print and copies were rare.

He looked up at her then, his eyes shining. “This is… wow! This is amazing, Granger. Thank you!”

She nodded, pleased, and gestured at the other, smaller package. “Open that one now!”

“Oh, Wow.”

“Okay,” he chuckled, setting the book down carefully before turning to the other present.

The wrapping and ribbons were off in an instant. There, in a box, was…

“A… you got me one of those what-d’you-call-its? I’ve seen people with these things. A DC player?”

“No, silly, a CD player. Portable. So you can listen to music no matter where you are. And look—there’s something else!”

There was indeed. A very thin, flat box lay beneath the CD player. Inside it was a disc.

“Vivaldi, The Four Seasons,” he murmured, and then eagerly thrust the player and the disc into her hands. “Show me how it works!”
“Okay.” Quickly, she slipped the disc into the player, positioned the headset in his ears, and pressed the “play” button. Then she sat back on the bed to watch his reaction.

Almost instantly, his eyes widened, and then a blissful smile began spreading slowly over his entire face, lighting up his eyes as the music filled him. Eventually, his lids slipped shut and he sat as if in a trance, his head bobbing slightly and his brow creasing from time to time as the music intensified. Hermione watched with a soft smile as the first concerto, “Spring,” swept him up.

When his eyes opened, finally, he fixed a gaze on her that was softly lambent. Silently, as he continued to listen, she opened the liner notes that had come with the CD, pointing out the first of the sonnets that had inspired the composer in his work.

“Springtime is upon us.
The birds celebrate her return with festive song, and murmuring streams are softly caressed by the breezes.
Thunderstorms, those heralds of Spring, roar, casting their dark mantle over heaven,
Then they die away to silence, and the birds take up their charming songs once more.
On the flower-strewn meadow, with leafy branches rustling overhead, the goat-herd sleeps, his faithful dog beside him.
Led by the festive sound of rustic bagpipes, nymphs and shepherds lightly dance beneath the brilliant canopy of spring.”

Scanning the lines quickly, Draco nodded. Finally, he pulled the ear plugs out, laying them in his lap. Hermione reached over and pressed the “off” button and then grinned. “Well?”

“Granger, you’ve managed to completely astonish me twice in the space of ten minutes. It was sublime! And this thing”—he held up the CD player—“is bloody fantastic. I love it!” He patted his lap. “Come here, woman, so I can thank you properly!”

“I’m so happy you like everything,” she murmured, snuggling in and laying her head on his shoulder. Soft wisps of his hair tickled her cheek, and she took a deep whiff of its clean scent. She was confident she’d managed to waylay the blackness that had begun to threaten the day.

All the arrangements had been made for that evening. Under the guise of needing to speak to one of her tutors, Hermione had slipped away in the mid-afternoon to search out Tony and Mark, making sure that, along with her, they would spread the word about the party. It would be at the Turf, a pub hidden away in a narrow passage that zigzagged between Holywell Street and New College Lane.

All Hermione had to do was get Draco there by eight. The rest would presumably take care of itself.

It was actually much easier than she might have imagined. He was far from averse to the idea of skiving off studying for an evening, after the hard slog they’d all been through lately. And today, of all days, he felt particularly entitled. So when she suggested taking a walk over to the Turf for a
birthday drink, he was all for the idea.

They’d gone back to their own rooms after an early dinner in order to change their clothes. Draco had thought it a bit silly, but he’d laughingly given in to Hermione’s request that he wear her favourite charcoal-grey jumper and those (really sexy, tight) black jeans of his—on condition that she put on that little skirt he liked. The choice of top was hers, as long as it would provide him sufficient ogling opportunities.

At a quarter to eight, Hermione was just dabbing on a bit of lip gloss in front of the mirror when there was a knock at the door. Pressing her lips together with a tiny smack and giving her hair a final fluff and scrunch, she opened the door-- and caught her breath.

Tall and slim in the dark clothes, his hair shining moon-pale and soft in the light from the corridor, he was looking almost unbearably handsome tonight. Once again, she was very glad he’d decided to let his hair grow longer. The rather rakish look suited him. Catching the expression on her face, he winked, and then he let out a low whistle as his own gaze travelled appreciatively from her head to her toes.

“Very nice, Granger! You’ll do,” he pronounced, and then moved a bit closer and sniffed. “Mmm, you smell good too!”

“Gosh, thanks,” she replied with a wry little grin, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “I’m ready. Shall we?”

Bath Place and outside tavern sign
As they walked along New College Lane on this balmy, early-summer evening, the setting sun flooded the street with mellow, golden light, casting the Bridge of Sighs into sharp, backlit relief. Bath Place, the narrow, cobbled passage that led to the Turf, would be easy to miss unless one knew it was there.

Hermione took a furtive glance at her watch. Nearly eight now. Right.

The plan was for everyone to wait in the side garden, an area of wooden picnic tables under large, green umbrellas, surrounded by a stone wall. Hermione could only hope that Tony and Mark had done their bit in making sure that they were all there.

Walking through the front room, Draco indicated an open table near the rounded, wooden bar. “What about here?”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. Too… noisy. That’s it. Let’s go in a bit further ,yeah?” Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed his hand and pushed on, winding a path through the many people already standing in small knots, drinks in hand.

The middle room, with its old, stone walls, wood panelling, and red-cushioned stools, was comfortable and inviting, and again Draco stopped them, indicating a table in a secluded corner.

“This’ll do fine. Let’s sit here,” he said.

“Um… no, you know what?” she replied, realising how lame she probably sounded. “I’d really love to sit in one of the gardens. It’ll be, you know, romantic… right?”

Draco’s mouth quirked into a tiny, rather roguish smile. “Well, all right, Granger,” he said slowly. “Though we don’t really need to work too hard at that, do we?” He winked and then sighed, resigned to her whims. “On to the garden. Side or back? Your choice, my lady.”

Hermione smiled with relief. “Side, definitely. Much nicer.”

The side garden had been noisy with chatter a moment before, and then somebody spotted the two of them approaching. “Sshhhh! They’re coming!”

Instantly, a hush fell over the place, so when Hermione and Draco finally appeared on the threshold, an eerie silence greeted them.

For about five seconds.

And then the place erupted.

For several seconds more, Draco stood stock still, an astonished grin slowly splitting his face. Watching him, Hermione felt flooded with the pleasure of the surprise and his delight in it.

“Fucking hell!” he muttered under his breath, laughing. “What…? What’ve you done, Granger?”

“Oi! Malfoy!” somebody yelled. “Get your sorry arse over here! You’ve got some catching-up to do!”
And then they were surrounded, drawn to a table in the centre of the covered patio space.

Mark gave him a wide, snarky grin, sliding a pint into Draco’s hands. “Here! Already ordered for you! A pint of their best White Horse…” He paused dramatically, doffing an imaginary hat in Draco’s direction. “…‘Village Idiot!’”

“Bugger off!” Draco shot back, laughing, and then turned quickly at the sound of a penny plopping into his drink. Hermione sat there serenely, her mouth twitching with barely contained laughter as she thought back to her own pennying several months before.

“Serves you right, love, and after all, it is your birthday!” She crossed her arms expectantly, one eyebrow raised.

He raised the glass to his lips, fixing her with a cocky grin, and winked. *Piece of cake. Observe and learn, Granger.* Instantly, the chant began, beginning at their table and quickly moving to the others.

“He’s a pisshead through and through!
He’s a mate of everyone
But he can’t down that shit in one!
Down it! Down it! Down it! Down it! Down it!”

Finally, Draco slammed the glass down with a gasp followed by a small belch. “‘Scuse me,” he muttered to nobody in particular. “‘Village Idiot’! Okay, Applegate, you useless pile of shit, let’s have another go and we’ll see who the village idiot really is!”

Orders of crunchy onion rings, chips, and cheesy garlic bread appeared on all the tables before long, thanks to Hermione. Drinks were covered by the kitty collected at each table by passing an empty glass around for contributions, except from the guest of honour, of course, in deference to the occasion.

Eventually, Chris stood. “Right, who’s ready for another?” He scanned the table, bending to scribble quickly on a napkin as orders were called out. “Right… that’s one Bacardi and Coke, a white wine, pint of lager, pint of Stella - no, make that a half, one whisky and Coke, orange and lemonade, one cider, and a half of Guinness. Come on, Kirman, give us a hand.” He and Danny disappeared in the direction of the bar.

“Can’t believe the term is almost over,” Jamie Etheridge mused. She’d come with Eric. “What’re you lot doing for the summer vac?”


“Actually, I’m going to the States this summer.” Jamie leaned back, sipping the last of her wine. “Working in a kids’ summer camp.”

“Really!” Hermione sat forward, moving out of Draco’s embrace, and leaned in a bit closer. “Where?”

“In Massachusetts. West Stockbridge. Going to be in charge of a group of eight-year-olds for two months.”

This was greeted by a chorus of groans. “Hey, no,” Jamie protesting, laughing. “I think it’ll be fun!”
“What do they do at summer camp?” Draco couldn’t resist asking, though he hoped his complete ignorance of the subject wasn’t quite as obvious to everyone else.

“Well, you know, all sorts of sport, hiking and swimming, crafts, the arts, hobbies, trips to different places, stuff like that.”

“A lot of American kids go to these camps, do they?” Gemma chimed in.

“Apparently, yeah. It’s a big thing over there,” Jamie affirmed. “Eric, give us some help here, why don’t you? You’re going too, after all.”

All eyes turned to him and he laughed lightly. “True, true. Didn’t want to say and make you lot jealous. But yes, yours truly is going to have a fabulous summer in the States, teaching football to hordes of probably annoying little kids, and then Jamie and I are off to do some travelling round the country, have a bit of time at home, and then back here again by the start of term.”

“Wow, sounds great,” Maggie put in wistfully. “Do they hire a lot of people from out of the country, then?”

“From what I understand,” Jamie responded, “yeah, they do, actually. From all over Europe, Israel, Australia, South Africa, everywhere, really. Quite a few from the UK. You get to meet loads of people. It’s pretty cool.”

Just then, Chris and Danny reappeared, each of them carrying a fully laden tray. When the next round was on the table, it was not a pint of Village Idiot that Draco raised to his lips, but, at Hermione’s eyebrow-wagging suggestion, Dragon Hill. With a nod to her, he took a fair swig, setting the glass down with a satisfied grin.

Drinks were claimed and the conversation veered off in a different direction.

“Hey, Danny,” Steve called from the next table. “Heard you and Gemma got fucked over by--”

“Yeah, we did, mate,” Danny cut in. “No need for names. S’all sorted out now anyway.”

“Living in college again next year then? Heard there’s a long waiting list now.”

“Nope,” Danny replied smugly. “Got lucky, didn’t we. Found another place. Or rather, it found us, more like.”

He let that one hang and waited as the intrigued expressions grew around him, and then casually added, “We’re sharing with the birthday boy and his lovely lady. Big old house in the Iffley Road.”

Apparently, this was news to just about everyone, Draco and Hermione having kept their hunt for a flat quite close to the vest. Now the talk became an excited buzz as the girls pressed around Hermione and Gemma for details.

The boys settled in for some serious drinking instead as snippets of the other conversation flitted over their heads.

“So.” Tony ran a finger absently round the rim of his pint glass, down now by two thirds. “You lot are really moving in together. Should be… interesting…” He snickered ominously and took a generous gulp of his ale. “Tell me, Malfoy—does Hermione know what a pig you really are?”

“Sod off, Spencer,” Draco drawled amiably, and bit into an onion ring, idly licking his fingers.
“I hear the scouts when they get to your room, Malfoy,” Mark continued, with a conspiratorial, sidelong wink at Tony. “Sounds like they’re having fucking heart failure.” His voice rose into a sharp falsetto. “ ‘Oh my God, what’s this under his bed? Looks like month-old cheese! Or is that a sock?’”

They laughed, and Draco gave Mark a friendly poke.

“And Kirman there— you want to watch out for him as well.” Chris leaned in to add his two pence. “Plays the guitar. At all bloody hours. I should know—I’ve taken a broom to my ceiling often enough, to shut him up!”

Danny grinned blithely. “Lying twat. Good job Malfoy isn’t moving in with you, Pullman. Be kept up half the night listening to you having it off with yourself!”

A shout of raucous laughter rose up at that.

“You reckon Kirman’s had his ear to the floor?”

“No need, the whole sodding staircase has heard!”

“Fuck off!”

More good-natured poking and laughter.

The time for final orders was approaching and Draco stood. “Last round’s on me,” he announced, a woozy, lopsided smile on his face. “Because it’s my birthday and I say so.”

No arguments from anyone there. He, Steve, and Mark loped over to the bar, the drink orders scrawled on napkins, and in Mark’s case, the palm of his hand and partway up his wrist.

The other two had already returned with trays of drinks, but Draco was still waiting at the bar a few minutes later for the tail-end of the large order. He leaned against its polished wood, a rather beatific smile on his face. No doubt about it, Hermione thought to herself, studying him. She stifled a somewhat tipsy giggle. He was well and truly pissed. A sudden and very powerful need to visit the loo swept over her then, and she glanced down at the bench in search of her shoulder bag. Ah, there. It had fallen to the floor beneath the table. She bent to retrieve it and surfaced, slightly dizzy, huffing a stray curl out of her eyes as she got awkwardly to her feet.

The tableau that met her eyes seemed to unfold before her in eerie slow motion.

Draco was still lounging, loose-limbed, against the bar as he had been a moment before. Only now, a tall, willowy, raven-haired girl approached him, and she had a definite come-hither look on her face. She looked oddly familiar. Hermione had definitely seen her about, though she couldn’t put her finger on where, precisely… No, wait! She remembered now. It was in the Swift Room. She’d been there with Draco one day, and this girl had caught his eye and smiled at him. Hermione had had the distinct impression that it wasn’t the first time, either. He’d shrugged it off. It had happened before, he affirmed, but it meant nothing to him. But the girl was tenacious, apparently, and now—Hermione’s blood began a slow boil—now, she saw her chance. Blatantly on the pull, she’d set her sights on the tall, dishy, somewhat inebriated blond she’d tried unsuccessfully to snag before.

The girl moved closer still, until she managed to wedge herself between Draco and the bar itself. Now, there were only a scant few inches between their bodies. Of necessity, he shifted slightly back on his heels and turned enough that Hermione could no longer see his face even in profile, as before, only the back of his head. However, she could see the girl’s face a few inches to the side of his left shoulder and all too clearly, and there was a disturbing, distinctly rapacious sensuality there. Then, in
a moment that chilled Hermione’s blood, their eyes met, and she gave Hermione a slow, deliberate wink.

If it all seemed like slow motion, what happened next also seemed, somehow, like just the blink of an eye.

In the next moment, the little slag’s hand was at the nape of Draco’s neck, sliding into his hair, and then she was pulling him into a kiss.

Suddenly, all the air seemed to have been sucked out of the room. Hermione turned blindly, her throat closing, her eyes stinging suddenly, and stumbled to the loo, where she leaned over the sink, a sudden wave of dizzy nausea rolling over her.

*Why* had he permitted her to do that? How *could* he have allowed… Could he maybe even have *wanted*… *What*…?

She retched convulsively, but there was no relief, only a weight now lodged in her chest, squeezing her heart. The picture of that hand slipping sinuously, possessively, into his hair, drawing him to her, was etched behind her eyes now, and she couldn’t escape it.

Suddenly the idea of going back out there seemed unbearable. She had to get out. But she *couldn’t*. She’d organised the party, she’d invited them all. She couldn’t simply disappear. And yet, the thought of having to go back out there as if everything were fine when really, her guts were churning, was just unthinkable. She wouldn’t even be able to *look* at him.

And then the solid mass that had been squeezing her heart and lungs together broke apart, suddenly, and she made it into a stall, dropping to her knees only just in time to lose the entire evening’s food and drink down the loo in a wrenching upheaval.

Afterwards, shaking and weak, her eyes streaming, she sank to the cold floor and sat there, taking in great gulps of air as she tried to calm her breathing.

By the time she finally emerged, everyone had become aware of her absence. Draco started up, swaying slightly, at the sight of her.

“Fuck’s sake, Hermione, what…? You’re white as a sheet! What’s the matter, are you all right?”

Avoiding his gaze, she mumbled, “Feeling a bit manky is all. Need to go home. Sorry.”

The looks of genuine concern everyone exchanged eluded her completely. Worry seemed to have sobered Draco up considerably in the space of the last two minutes, and now he slipped a solicitous arm round Hermione’s waist to support her. She stiffened at his touch but allowed it only because she was simply too wobbly to do otherwise. If he noticed, he chose to say nothing.

“C’mon, love,” he told her gently. “Let’s get you out of here.”

The walk back to Holywell Quad was mercifully brief. Finally they arrived at Staircase 2 and took the steps slowly, Draco’s arm still bracing Hermione as they climbed. Inside her, in a place buried very deep, a dreadful mixture of fear, anger and grief seethed.

“D’you need help getting undressed?” he asked, worry in his eyes. “I’ll stay with you.”

Mutely, she shook her head, the pure misery impossible to hide. It was easier for now to let him to think it was nothing more than the after-effects of drink. A small muscle pulsed in her jaw as he pressed a tender kiss to her forehead before slipping out the door.
The moment it closed behind him, she locked it and threw herself onto the bed, curling miserably into a foetal ball, her arms hugging her bent knees. The weight was back on her chest again, and now it was closing her throat and burning her eyes dry with the tears that refused to come.

He was at her door the next morning at half nine. She hadn’t shown for breakfast at their usual meeting time. When the door opened slowly, he was startled to see her still in her clothing from the night before, her hair wildly unkempt, her eye makeup smeared so that she appeared hollow-eyed and wan.

“Gods, Hermione! You look like absolute shit. I can’t believe it—you slept in your clothes, didn’t you!”

He didn’t think he could ever remember a time when she’d done that. This whole thing was more than a bit dodgy, now that he really thought about it.

“What the fuck is wrong? You couldn’t have been sick from drink, you didn’t even have all that much!” he finally blurted out.

She shook her head dumbly, her gaze steadfastly averted.

Exasperated, he strode into her room, shutting the door behind him. “What is it?” When she still refused to speak, he seized her by the shoulders and gave her a little shake. “Fuck’s sake, Granger, tell me!”

Twisting out of his grasp, she sat down on the bed, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them, rocking slightly. Finally, she raised her eyes to his.

“Go. Away.”

Go away? Go AWAY? What the bleeding hell was she on about?

“What?”

Her voice was weary. “You heard me, Malfoy. I said go away.”

Now anger was beginning to overshadow the worry that had made his sleep the night before restless and broken.

“Why? What have I done?”

Hermione turned a baleful eye on him now. “You know.”

“I know? What the fuck are you talking about, Hermione?”

“Everybody knows.”

Draco raked an agitated hand through his hair, taking two steps towards the door and then pivoting sharply on his heel, backtracking in the direction of the bed.

“You are seriously brassing me off with all this cryptic shit! Just what am I supposed to have done?”
he all but shouted now.

“Shut up!” she hissed. “I don’t want the entire staircase hearing our business!” Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she fixed a cold glare on him.

“I didn’t sleep all night. Not one wink. And do you know why? Because all I could see,” she gritted out, her face chalky and her eyes reddened and smeared with mascara where she’d just rubbed them, “all I could see when I closed my eyes—all I can see now, when I look at you—is you and that… bitch… together! How could you, Draco? How could you do that to me? And in front of all our friends, too?”

What was she… Who…? Draco was momentarily confused. And then a memory came struggling out of the fog that now comfortably blanketed certain portions of the party. That girl—what was her name again? Carrie? Kate?—the one who’d been doggedly coming on to him all year… she’d… fuck yeah, now he remembered! She’d wrapped herself around him and given him a big birthday kiss, so she called it. The whole thing had seemed to come out of nowhere and had happened so fast. He’d been nonplussed for a second or two, and then had pushed her away, holding up his hands whilst taking a step or two back from the bar. The drinks tray he’d been waiting for was ready finally, and he had paid and escaped back to the table. Now he remembered wondering, through the pleasantly stonkered haze that surrounded him, where Hermione was as he had sat back down, and continuing to wonder when she failed to return. Somehow, she must have seen.

So that was what it was. He chuckled in sheer relief. “Granger, you idiot, no—you’ve got it all wr--”

“Don’t laugh at me, Malfoy! I know what I saw!”

“No, no, sorry, I wasn’t laughing at you, I was just— well, the whole thing’s daft, that’s all! She kissed me. I didn’t kiss her!”

She laughed derisively. “Oh, please! What a load of rubbish! I’m not naïve, Malfoy! I see the way women look at you! Do you really think I don’t remember girls falling all over themselves at Hogwarts, trying to get you to notice them? The whole school knew your reputation! I used to wonder just how much of it was actually true. I suppose now I have a better idea!”

His sigh was explosive and frustrated. “You don’t have a clue, Granger! A lot of that was just… just crap! I allowed it, all that shit, because it fucking made me feel good, do you mind?!” His voice turned bitter now. “Or is that another crime in the long list that I should be condemned for?”

Hermione’s lip was trembling, but she stuck her chin out defiantly, ignoring his question. “She’s been after you for ages. She’s beautiful. You must have noticed. And sexy. What was it like kissing her, Malfoy? Did you like it? I bet you’ve secretly wanted her all year!”

“Hermione, stop it! This is crazy! What are you--”

“Admit it, you liked it!” Her voice had become impossibly shrill.

“I don’t even remember it!” Draco roared. “That’s how much of an impression it made on me!” It was like being trapped in a surreal nightmare where nothing made sense anymore. He made one final, last-ditch attempt. “Look, Hermione, you can’t be serious about any of this. It’s just crazy, the whole thing! You’ve really lost the plot if you think--”

She continued, heedless of his words, her own now hard-edged and bitter. “One warm, female body is just as good as another, don’t you think? Or no, actually, hers is probably better—her tits are bigger than mine! That should please you!”
She shook her head and now her voice was simply sad and defeated. “You’ve shown me that I can’t trust you, Draco. It’s all down to that in the end.” She paused, and then asked dully, “Why don’t you just ask her to live with you in our lovely house instead?”

Turning her face to the wall, she clamped her mouth shut, her eyes glittering with the tears that had finally come. She wiped them away furiously, willing them to be gone.

Five seconds passed in which Draco stared at her, completely incredulous. “Fine!” he yelled at last. “Maybe I will!”

The door slammed so hard that several framed photos on her chest of drawers toppled, one of them the ceramic frame holding the pair of photos taken six months earlier, the night he’d come to dinner at her house for the first time. Carefully, she set the picture frame right again. There he was, leaning over her shoulder, both of them smiling at something in the old photo album on the dining room table. And the other one—sitting on the sofa holding hands, looking so purely pleased with themselves and the whole world…

There was one more besides. Despite herself, knowing what it would do to her to look, Hermione pulled one of the photos out of the frame with trembling fingers. There, hidden beneath it, was the third, a magical, moving picture of Draco that he’d never seen. They’d been snuggling beneath a blanket together, watching an old movie and eating leftover apple tart and cream out of a shared bowl on New Year’s Eve. He’d just smeared a dollop of cream on the tip of her nose, and she’d retaliated, painting a creamy moustache and goatee on him. He’d thrown his head back, then, laughing with abandon at a funny bit in the film, and she’d captured it forever with her camera. He’d find such a picture mortifying, no doubt, but she loved it, and had squirrelled it away behind the other picture to look at whenever the fancy took her.

Suddenly, there was a rending deep inside of her, a sense of loss and grief and confusion beyond anything she could remember. The tears fell freely now as she sank to the floor, the picture still in her hand.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: Only the original plot and characters are mine. I make no money from this story.

A/N: Thanks and huge hugs to my betas, kazfeist and mister_otter! Their encouragement while I was writing this chapter was tremendously important.

Thanks to the very kind people in the HP_Britglish community, for their help with sticky bar-order protocol questions, and to stormwreath, in particular, for inadvertently giving me some ideas for what might go into a typical order.

Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* may be heard in its entirely at this website: http://magnatune.com/artists/albums/abaroque-seasons/
Thursday, 8 June

For at least the fifth time that afternoon, Hermione had turned her head at the rustlings and footsteps indicating that someone had entered or was leaving the library, or on their way to the stacks. Each time the electric ripple of nerves mixed with excitement and hope would surge through her, only to be dampened by disappointment laced with a perverse relief.

He hadn’t come in all day. She found herself wondering where he was, what he was doing, how his final essays of the term had turned out. They’d planned to study for exams together all this week, help each other review for all the papers they’d taken in common. That was impossible now.

At one point, searching through the stacks, she’d spotted a book she remembered him mentioning, one he needed. She’d reached for it, her fingers closing around its spine, and had begun to tug it from its spot on the shelf, wedged between two massive volumes.

And then she’d remembered, her hand falling back to her side.

The work was massive and seemingly endless this close to the final days of term. Exams would begin in only a matter of a few days. The weekend ahead promised to be hellish. But even as she found herself thankful for the constant distraction studying provided, she resented having to worry
about exams when she had something so troubling constantly intruding into her thoughts.

And it did—often, and almost completely involuntarily. His face would insist on appearing in her mind’s eye at the oddest, most unpredictable moments. She half-expected to hear his voice behind her in the queue in hall at mealtimes, or see him bounding out of the entrance to his staircase to join her for a study session or do some research at the Bod, or for a simple walk or to have a coffee at the Rose.

Nights were hardest of all, these last nine days before the end of term. She’d never noticed before just how preternaturally quiet her room truly was when she was the only one in it. Quiet—and empty. He was just one person, but he’d seemed to fill the entire space with his irrepressible cheek and cocky swagger, his wit and keen intelligence, the teasing and laughter he always brought to the time they spent together, and the challenges he consistently set her. She’d had to work hard, be at the top of her game, to keep up with him. He had never let her get away with anything less than her best. She knew she’d done the same for him.

She’d driven him away. She knew that too, now.

But why?

The following night, Hermione sat at her desk, doggedly ploughing through a stack of index cards containing primary notes and annotations on several important texts. Both the outer and inner doors stood open, and despite herself, her ears remained pricked for the slightest sound—his footsteps, perhaps, or the unmistakable sound of his voice floating ahead of him up the stairway as he greeted any one of a handful of their friends on his way up to her room.

The knock that sounded was light, tentative.

She turned sharply, her breath catching in anticipation.

Gemma poked her head around the doorframe. “Can I talk to you?”

Hermione sank back in her chair with a tiny sigh. Nodding as she laid the index cards down in a neat pile, she turned to face her friend, who was now perched on the edge of the bed and regarding her expectantly.

“How long has it been now? Since you talked to him.”

Gemma sat back, stretching her legs out and crossing them at the ankle. The look she gave Hermione was penetrating and sober. For a moment, Hermione busied herself with an imaginary piece of lint on her sleeve. Finally she cleared her throat. “Three days.”

“No word at all?”

She shook her head miserably.

“What the hell happened between the two of you anyway?”
Hermione expelled a weary sigh. “It was that Carrie Dunstan. She--”

Gemma let out a snort. “Oh yeah. That. I saw! Stupid bint. Ugh!” She shuddered, drawing her knees to her chest. “But Hermione—surely you didn’t think--”


“Oh, Hermione…Well, I can understand totally why you’d jump to a wrong conclusion at first, but why--”

“I don’t know! He just… well, it just seemed as if…How could he let her do something like that right before… you know… I mean, we’re just about to…”

“The flat. Yeah.” Gemma nodded, her brows knit together. “But Herm—did he actually let her? Did you ask him? Because from where I sat, it didn’t look that way.”

“He said he didn’t. But…” Here, her voice dropped to a shamed whisper. “I didn’t believe him.”

“Oh gosh…” Gemma shook her head slowly. “What are you going to do? And--” A very disturbing thought suddenly struck her. “What about the flat, then? Oh, Hermione, the two of you need to talk! Straightaway!”

Before Hermione could even process the implications of the conversation, the phone rang. Gemma gave her a significant glance, waggling her eyebrows, and stood.

“Talk to you later,” she mouthed, and silently slipped out the door.

Her heart speeding up, Hermione gave Gemma a quick wave and picked up the receiver.

“Hello?” she said, and there was just a tiny quaver in her voice.

“Hello, Kitten!”

“Oh…” She expelled a breath. “Hi, Daddy.”

“How are you, sweetheart? Very busy these days, I suppose?”

There it was, her father’s voice, so familiar. A kaleidoscope of memories spun through her head at the very sound of it, the chief one simply that of his face with its kind smile and the total, unconditional love shining in his eyes. She remembered how he’d been there for her—always—with his quiet, steady support. And then her heart was in her throat, and she had to swallow once, twice, very hard indeed, in order to fight back the tears.

“Oh… Daddy…” The words came out in a rush. “I’ve made a complete mess of everything! It’s all ruined!”

“What are you talking about, Hermione? What’s ruined?”

And then, she told him. The whole stupid, nasty, ridiculous episode, and how a single moment had somehow managed to poison the thing she valued more than anything else in her life now.

She ended in a tearful hiccough, and then there was silence, briefly, before Richard spoke.

“You know, Hermione,” he began, his tone measured. “I called to talk to you one last time about your decision to move in with Draco. I was going to suggest that maybe the two of you ought to give
it a bit more thought, not rush into anything. Now, though, from what you say, it would appear there is even more reason to reconsider than I’d realised.”

“What… what do you mean, Dad?” Hermione asked in a small voice, though she knew perfectly well.

“Well,” he replied, “it seems to me there are two issues here. One-- whether Draco is really ready for such a commitment. From what you say, it sounds as if he might not be, although there is the very strong possibility that you did seriously misjudge the situation. And I must say, from my own observations of him lately, he does seem very much in love with you. Which brings me to the second issue, and this, I think, is an even more serious one.”

He paused. “It’s whether you are truly ready for such a commitment, sweetheart, if you are so quick to believe the worst of the man you say you love, without even giving him the benefit of the doubt. What does that suggest, really?”

Her father had never been one to mince words; it was a quality she’d always valued, because all her life, she’d known she could rely on him always to tell her the truth, even when it was a truth she didn’t especially want to hear. His question now was painfully close to the bone.

“See, Daddy, it’s just that… well… he could have anybody he wanted. Anyone. What if… what if he gets tired of me after a while? What if he decides we were just a big mistake? I mean,” she rushed on, “we don’t have to do this now, do we? We could just go on as we are. We’ve been so happy!” Her voice was tinged with a certain desperation.

“I see,” Richard remarked quietly. “So this really wasn’t about him at all, then, was it? You’re afraid that somehow, you’re bound to fall short if you put the relationship to the test in this way. You’re afraid that you might lose him. Is that it?”

“I don’t think I could bear that,” Hermione whispered, swallowing hard. “Not now. Oh, Daddy, when I saw him with that horrid girl…”

“Yes,” her father sighed. “I understand. But Hermione, my darling girl who is never satisfied with herself and always striving—love requires a leap of faith. A really big one. Nobody can ever be completely sure. We can’t totally control things. We can only hope and believe, and – yes -- trust.

“If you can examine your feelings,” he went on, “and honestly say that you love Draco and that you believe he loves you just as much in return—” He paused for a moment. “Can you, Hermione?”

There was barely a second’s hesitation before her answer, low and tremulous. “Yes.”

“Well, then, that’s as much as you’ll ever have to be going on. You won’t ever be more certain—and he will never be able to make you more certain—that you are right now. Because…” Richard stopped, allowing himself a small smile born of experience. “There’s always that tiny grain of uncertainty when you love somebody. It goes with the territory. That’s where the leap of faith comes in. Do you see?”

“Yes, but… still… even with that… maybe we’re just too young and we’ll be stupid about things, and cock it all up! Maybe…”

“You are young, both of you. It’s the reason Mum and I have been concerned, though I must confess…” He gave a quick chuckle. “Overall, she’s a lot less worried about this whole thing than I’ve been. Over-protective dad. Sorry, can’t help myself.”

Hermione laughed fondly, wishing very hard at that moment that she could see the smile she heard in
“And the sad fact is, there’s no age limit on stupidity. People do really idiotic things in relationships at all ages, which is why the divorce rate is so high. I know telling you this doesn’t make the decision any easier, but I don’t want you to delude yourself either. Being older can help, certainly, but it doesn’t guarantee that you’re any the wiser necessarily.”

Hermione remained silent for the better part of a minute. “Hmm…” she murmured. “I suppose.”

“Look, Hermione. You can put this off if you really want to, if you think Draco will understand and agree — and truthfully, I think he would do in the end, even though he’d be hurt and disappointed at first -- or you can go forward with the plan, and take the flat together. But either way, you’ve got to-”

“Talk to him,” she finished quietly. “Yes. I know. I’m rather dreading it, to be honest. I behaved so badly! Oh, Dad!” she wailed, her terrible words rushing back to her suddenly. “I told him I wasn’t sure I could trust him anymore! How could I have said that to him?”

Richard shook his head. Love. Never easy, especially in its first intense throes. He remembered that particular roller coaster ride all too painfully.

“I hate to say it, darling, but you have good reason to feel upset now. That’s a terrible thing to say, especially to someone you love. But--”

With that affirmation, suddenly it all just seemed too much, the whole, bloody thing-- the argument, the words she was afraid she’d never be able to take back completely, and just when she needed them least, end-of-term exams breathing down her neck. “What should I do?” she broke in wildly.

Richard’s tone was unequivocal. “Calm down, first of all! You can fix this! That’s what I was about to say. Go to him. You’ll find the words. No matter what you two decide to do about the flat, you mustn’t leave things this way.”

A long minute passed. The emotional miasma inside Hermione began to dissipate just a little as she took a deep, steadying breath, and she laughed shakily. “What would I do without you, Dad? Honestly!”

“Have I helped at all?” he asked gently.

“Yes, actually. A lot,” she said. “Look… um… I’ve… I’ve got to go! Thanks, Dad!”

Richard replaced the receiver slowly, his expression pensive.

“How did it go?” Claire had just walked into the kitchen.

“Well, apparently, the situation is a bit more complicated now than we thought,” he answered, resuming his seat at the table and patting the chair next to him. “Sit down, love.”

There was an uncanny sense of déjà vu as Hermione sprinted from her room over to Staircase 5. She burst into the small entrance area on the ground floor slightly out of breath, stopped for a minute for a
quick gulp of air, and then began the run up the three flights of stairs. A frantic knocking at Draco’s door yielded nothing.

She tried Mark’s next. No answer. Merlin, *somebody* had to be around!

She banged on Eric’s door. It opened after an excruciatingly long minute, revealing Eric in an old pair of fleece running trousers and a tee shirt. His hair was stuck up around his head in messy spikes.

“Hermione,” he grinned. “You’re a sight for sore eyes. Been swotting for the last five hours straight, and my brain’s completely fried.”

She managed a brief smile. “Yeah, I know what you mean! Um… look… I’m trying to find Draco. I’ve checked his room but he’s not there. Any idea where he might be?”

Eric considered for a minute. “Well,” he began slowly. ‘I did see him with Spencer earlier. But that was hours ago. Sorry I can’t be more help.” He gave an apologetic little shrug.

“Thanks, Eric. Really. Good luck with your exams.” With a final attempt at a bit of cheer, she gave him a small wave and then turned resolutely to Tony’s door, knocking loudly.

The door opened on the second knock. Tony’s girlfriend Susan stood there. She looked very tired. Over her shoulder, Hermione could see that the two of them were in the middle of studying together. Notes and books were in alarming disarray on the floor.

“Oh, sorry! Didn’t mean to interrupt, Suze! Look, have you lot seen Draco anywhere? Tony, Eric said you were with him earlier.”

Tony was stretched out on the floor, poring over note cards he’d spread out in a fan before him. He looked up, and the expression of concentration on his face turned to one of regret as he got to his feet, joining Suze in the doorway.

“Yeah, I saw him a while ago.”

“Where is he now? Do you know?” Hermione couldn’t keep the growing urgency out of her voice.

“He’s gone.”

Everything stopped. There was a moment, in fact, during which Hermione was fairly certain she’d stopped breathing altogether.

“What do you mean, ‘gone’?”

Tony stared down uncomfortably at a speck on the floor, and then raised his eyes to meet Hermione’s gaze. ‘I mean… he left. We came back from dinner together. Didn’t see him for a couple of hours, and then he knocked on my door and said he was off. Just like that. Wouldn’t tell me where. Just that he had to go. Heard his door close, and that was it. ‘Bout half an hour ago, I think it was.”

The sensation in her solar plexus was like the sudden clutch of an icy hand. Everything inside Hermione went very still. Murbling something, she backed away slowly, turning and moving woodenly down the staircase as if blind. Tony and Suze glanced at each other, shaking their heads sympathetically as they shut the door behind them.

*Gone.* No. He couldn’t be. That wasn’t possible. Where on earth would he *go*? Her mind raced in a hundred directions, none of them making the slightest sense. What was the point of wondering,
anyway? It didn’t matter. All that mattered was that he had left. Her. He had left her.

*Oh gods.* He really had done, hadn’t he! What else could this mean? He had exams coming up just like everybody else. What else but an attempt to distance himself from her could explain his sudden disappearance at such a critical time?

*ShitshitSHIT.*

Feeling sick, her palms chilled and clammy, Hermione walked back to her room, oblivious to everything. The days stretched out before her, now, like an infinity of sterile space, white and silent and numb.

* *

His room was quiet and dimly lit as he materialised in its centre. In his absence, the drapes had been partly drawn, and now shafts of moonlight cast pools of milky light on the Turkey carpet.

He hadn’t planned to be here now. He should have been sprawled on Hermione’s fuzzy rug, buried in books and pages of notes. He should have been attempting to ignore the invariable and incessant tapping of her Biro against her notebook, and then giving up eventually, pleading for some quiet. Her exaggerated sigh would have followed, he knew. He might reasonably have expected a pen to be chucked at his head next. After which his own revenge would most surely have been exacted in a decidedly pleasurable manner.

Instead of which, he was here. Where he did not really wish to be, where suddenly, he felt oddly uprooted, displaced.

He dropped his satchel on the generous, canopied bed where, as a little boy, he’d felt so very small, not sure for the moment just what to do with himself. Coming home had been the impulse of a particularly distraught moment. Choosing to Apparate, rather than sticking with his general preference to travel in and out of his non-wizarding life in the Muggle way, was the result of the urge to just get away and do it fast. It almost hadn’t mattered where. He’d chosen Malfoy Manor because he simply couldn’t think of anywhere else at that moment. Pathetic, really.

Sinking into the comfortable desk chair, he bleakly surveyed the objects before him. There was the brilliantly coloured quill Hermione had given him for Solstice, lying alongside the accompanying pots of enchanted inks. The journal she’d given him, with its leather cover richly worked in the design of a dragon in flight, was in his satchel. Whilst he’d left the quill and inks at home, he’d taken the journal back to uni after the winter vacation, because he’d relished the idea of such a special place for his thoughts, and hadn’t wanted to leave it behind. It had felt right to have it wherever he was. And it had been from her, reason enough in itself.

Now, there was a terrible irony to writing in it for him. Hermione had encouraged jotting down his thoughts as something not only creative but therapeutic as well, and it had really taken hold, and yet, when he opened the journal now, it was to spill his guts about the pain she had caused him.

Nevertheless, the relief he got from doing it mattered to him more. Rooting around amongst the belongings he’d hastily thrown into the satchel, he found the journal and pulled it out, setting it on the desk with the vague idea of writing in it again later.

Flopping down full-length on the bed, arms folded behind his head, he stared blankly at the shirred
canopy above, listening to the slow, measured tick of the bedside clock.

At a little past eleven, Narcissa was on her way back to the master suite from the dining room, a pair of small goblets in hand. She’d had the sudden urge, whilst reading, for a small nightcap, and she thought perhaps Lucius might like to join her in this small indulgence before bed. Desiring to stretch her legs, she hadn’t troubled to summon any of the house-elves.

As she padded quietly along the corridor, its wall sconces casting a flickering glow on the portraits and landscapes in their gilt frames, something caught the corner of her eye. It was a light. Dim, to be sure, but a light nonetheless, and most curious of all, it was coming from beneath the closed door of her son’s bedroom—a room she knew to be unoccupied at present.

Cautiously, she pushed on the door, and found it ajar. A slightly harder push had the door swinging entirely open on its hinges, revealing a shadowy figure in the centre of the bed.

Eyes widening, Narcissa advanced towards the bed, and as she approached, Draco stirred, rolling over to lie on his side facing her, curled up and hugging one of the pillows to his chest.

For several seconds, his mother stood there, astonished, and then the initial surprise turned to concern. He hadn’t indicated he’d be coming home this weekend. She knew full well that the term wouldn’t officially be over for more than a week yet. He’d never once turned up at home unannounced whilst a term was in session in the past.

Letting out a pent-up breath quietly, she moved to sit in the desk chair and simply studied him for a while. Lying there, he looked anything but peaceful. The crab-like, coiled way he held his body in sleep was tense, disturbed. His fringe of pale hair fell in a soft curtain obscuring his eyes, and for a moment, she felt the urge, as she had done when he was little, to brush it gently away. Instead, she sat back, watching him breathe quietly, his brows knitting into a vague frown.

Eventually, Narcissa turned her gaze from him, and it fell on the dragon journal before her on the desk. Perhaps it would… Should she…? She hesitated, her hand suspended above the book, and then gingerly lifted the front cover. The pages fanned open, coming to rest at the last pair of entries.

5 June 2000

My 20th birthday!

I cannot fucking believe Hermione! What she did today—bloody amazing! She always seems to know exactly what will please me most. My favourite breakfast from the Rose. The book I’ve wanted for ages. (How the fuck did she find a copy?) The music player thing, and the disc—fantastic! (Vivaldi— incredible!)

Nobody has ever given a shit about me the way Granger does. Well, except for my mother. Somehow, I don’t know, I must have done something very right to deserve Hermione Granger coming into my life!
FUCK

How could she accuse me of something like that? She should know me better than that by now! Hell, okay, I suppose it’s something I would have been capable of a few years ago. But that’s just the point, isn’t it—I’m NOT a bloody kid anymore, and I’m not who I was back then. I’m NOT. I thought she knew that! I thought she believed me.

I don’t need this trust bullshit, especially not from her of all people. I’m so bloody tired of all of it. This is how it always is in the end. People let you down. They can’t be arsed to fucking listen. They think they know you, and they just shut the door in your face.

Even you, Granger.

Fuck it all.

Closing the journal quietly, Narcissa sat in horrified silence. She’d been privy to something that hadn’t been meant for her eyes, part of it a confession of raw, despairing pain. What on earth could have happened in such a short span of time to change his birthday three days earlier from a joyful celebration to an utter disaster?

Moving silently, she left the room and quickly made her way back to her own bedroom, where Lucius sat dozing in the wing chair by the fire, his book face down in his lap.

Narcissa gave his shoulder a little shake.

“What—is it, Cissa?”

“I mean exactly that. I just discovered him sound asleep in his bed!”

Lucius frowned briefly. “I was under the impression… Why in Merlin’s name has he--”

“She accused him of something he hadn’t actually done. It would appear, too, that she
told him she didn’t trust him. I’ve no idea what the specifics are, but oh, Lucius! I believe he’s devastated!"

Narcissa sank down on the edge of the bed, her eyes large with worry, awaiting her husband’s reaction.

Lucius was silent for a moment. When he spoke, finally, his tone remained guarded. “Admittedly, I know relatively little about the Granger girl, but in the brief time we spent in her company, she always struck me as unusually level-headed, not the sort who would be given to the vulgar displays of hysterics that characterise so many others with her unfortunate heritage. In addition, I cannot deny that she appeared genuinely attached to Draco.” He paused, considering. “But perhaps we have misjudged her after all. Perhaps in the long run, this is for the best. Better to discover the girl’s true mettle now rather than later, when such an entanglement would be all the more…” His mouth turned down in an expression of distaste. “…complicated.”

“Lucius! How can you say such a thing? It is quite obvious that she is in love with him, and he with her!” Narcissa’s eyes had begun to fill, and she dabbed at them with a finely embroidered lawn handkerchief and then stuck her chin out defiantly. “She’s been so good for him! It’s been wonderful seeing him so happy, finally!”

“I want his happiness too. That’s why… oh, hang it all, Cissa, do stop crying!” A tactical retreat was clearly in order now. He waved a hand dismissively. “Look—she can’t have stopped caring for him just like that. This is merely a silly lovers’ quarrel, I’m sure.”

She blew her nose and then looked at him pointedly, one delicate eyebrow raised. “Are you? Whatever it was, it must have been quite serious for her to have made such an accusation, albeit mistakenly.”

Lucius sighed, taking her hands and bringing her to her feet. “Never fear. We shall get to the bottom of it before very long, I have no doubt. Come along, dearest. Enough worrying. To bed with you.”

* *

Saturday, 10 June

Breakfast passed with no sign of Draco. The meal was an unusually circumspect one for both his parents. Coffee was poured and the sideboard laid with the usual, rather lavish Saturday morning meal, though it was consumed with less than their customary enjoyment. Both Narcissa and Lucius—though he would have denied it—had one ear open for any evidence that Draco was on his way into the dining room.

Finally, Lucius drained his coffee cup, setting it down in its saucer with a clink, wiped his mouth with the snowy linen napkin, and leaned back in his chair.

“Excellent. What have you got planned for today, my dear?”

He allowed himself a small chuckle. “I refuse to take that amiss, no matter what your intent. I suppose,” he added, “that we have no choice but to wait for our son to make an appearance in his own time, eh?”

Narcissa took a sip of her coffee. “Mmm. I rather think not. He came home for a reason, and we must allow him to broach the subject with us when he’s ready. If at all. He might not want to discuss it with us, you know. Either way, we cannot let on that we know anything!”

That was true enough. Lucius toyed with a fragment of buttered crumpet that remained on his plate. “Of course. Let us hope he decides that you, at least, are worthy of his trust in this matter.”

The rest of the sentiment, unspoken, was all too clear to Narcissa. If he chooses not to confide in you, husband, you have brought it upon yourself was her first, rather bitter reaction, followed almost immediately by a wave of contrition at the hint of remorse that tinged his words.

In the end, she simply nodded, her silence and the regret in her eyes the most eloquent reply.

*

It wasn’t until late afternoon, just as a very nice plum cake had been served for tea, that Draco poked his head around the double doors of the blue drawing room.

Narcissa froze, her fork midway to her lips. She cleared her throat discreetly, at which Lucius looked up from behind his issue of Wizarding Wall Street. Hastily, he folded the newspaper, tossing it onto the coffee table, and stood.

“Draco,” he said.

“Father,” Draco replied carefully. He advanced into the room and dropped, loose-limbed, into a comfortable armchair, at which point Narcissa suddenly seemed galvanised into maternal mode.

“Darling, you haven’t eaten all day! You must be famished! Here, at least have some tea and cake.” Quickly, she served a generous slice of the cake onto a plate and poured out a cup of fragrant, steaming tea. Without asking, she added milk and two lumps of sugar, and handed the cup and saucer to him, along with the plate. “Start with that, and I’ll see about finding you something else.” She opened her mouth to call for Tibby when Draco caught her wrist.

“Mother—no. It’s all right. This will be fine. Thank you. I’ll let you know if I want anything else. I’m really not all that hungry.”

Not very hungry, and not very energetic either, from the looks of him. He’d apparently slept a good part of the day, and yet he looked exhausted. He ate slowly, chewing each bite with deliberation before swallowing, and then washing it down with a gulp of the hot, milky-sweet tea. Looking up at one point, his gaze fell upon the bouquet of fragrant miniature roses standing in a porcelain vase on the long, low coffee table.

“From the conservatory, Mother?” he asked.

Narcissa nodded. “Special hybrid I experimented with this year whilst you’ve been away. Do you like them?” How odd to be talking about roses.
“They’re beautiful,” Draco murmured, almost to himself. *Hermione would love them.*

The room fell silent, the quiet space filled by the steady crackle of the fire in the hearth and the low ticking of the mantel clock. Narcissa caught her husband’s eye and he lifted a questioning eyebrow. She shook her head slightly and raised her cup to her lips, affecting casual interest.

“He’s really not going to tell us,” she remarked, amazed, and then, suddenly, she had an epiphany: her son was an adult now and completely in charge of his own affairs, and it was quite possible that he would *not* seek their counsel. At all. The realisation left her feeling vaguely melancholy.

“Surely you must have known there was a chance he would not,” Lucius replied pointedly. “Although there is still tomorrow, of course.”

Eventually, their tea was finished, and Draco stood up, stretching extravagantly.

“Thanks for the tea, Mother… Father. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got reading to do,” he said, and disappeared out the door and up the Grand Staircase to his room.

Lucius inclined his head but said nothing as his son turned to go, waiting until the door shut behind him.

“That went well,” he observed laconically.
“Tomorrow. Yes,” she agreed, and just as precipitously as her hopes had seemed to be dashed, they were now resurrected.

“Come, Cissa dear. Let us take our coffee upstairs.” Lucius rose, cup and saucer in hand, and his wife followed.

At ten o’clock the next morning, there was a knock at the door of the master suite.

“Come,” Lucius called out. He and Narcissa were enjoying their breakfast on trays that Missy had brought up at their request, an indulgence they enjoyed from to time. Draco appeared in the doorway, a curiously sheepish expression on his face.

“There’s something I need to tell you…” he began.

Instantly, his parents’ attention was fully his. Startled, he was ushered into their bedroom. Sitting down in the wing chair, he found himself facing a rather eager mother, and a father who, for all his apparent detachment, could not completely hide his own curiosity, although he managed to veil it behind his customary, controlled demeanor. He watched Draco with the attention of a hawk, the glint in his eye belying the nonchalance of his posture as he prepared to listen.

“Well, see,” Draco began, “it’s like this. I have decided to stay in Oxford this summer instead of moving back home at the end of term next weekend.”

“Oh!” Narcissa had clearly not been expecting that. She shot a quick, rather startled glance at her husband, who shrugged in ill-concealed surprise from where he stood by the hearth.

“And—pray tell—where do you plan to live, Draco?” Lucius folded his arms over his chest, leaning back against the mantel, his voice betraying a certain scepticism. “Have you in fact made some sort of arrangement?”

Draco stiffened slightly. “In fact, I have, yes, Father. Found a place not too far from the city centre. Going in on it with some friends,” he added, neatly nipping his father’s next question in the bud.

There was silence for a moment whilst this information was processed.

“If I might ask--- why?” Here was one question from Lucius that Draco had somehow not anticipated. He thought quickly.

“Because… because I wanted to get out of student housing. Thought it would be fun to have a place of my own finally. Lots of people do it after first year, you know.”

The conversation was rapidly being carried off in an entirely different direction to what Narcissa had hoped for, and she saw her chances of finding out what was troubling Draco receding further and further from her grasp. Perhaps if she took an unexpected tack, she could bring the focus back around to a more productive point.

“Draco darling, I think it’s really a wonderful idea. Will it be very expensive for you?”

“No, in fact it won’t cost any more than living in college housing would do,” he answered, gratified
at his mother’s support, and then the words popped out before he realised what he was saying. “Well… that is, I don’t believe it will…”

Narcissa leaned forward from her place on the chaise lounge. “What do you mean, you don’t ‘believe’ it will?”

“Well… um…”

“You are perfectly capable of being articulate, Draco. It is unattractive to hem and haw,” Lucius remarked, in the tone that his son knew so very well.

Draco rolled his eyes resentfully at that, but continued. “To answer your question, Mother, there were supposed to be four of us sharing. It’s just… well… at the moment, I’m not totally certain about one person.”

“I see,” Narcissa replied, and then she had a sudden flash of intuition. “Draco,” she said quietly “Is that one person Hermione?”

He didn’t reply right away, instead staring down at his hands resting on his knees. “Yes,” he said simply, at last. “It is.”

“Is that why you’ve come home? Has something happened between you?” Narcissa asked gently, keeping her gaze steady.

“Yes… you could say that.” Draco’s tone was unmistakably bitter. “I’m suddenly persona non grata.”

Slowly, Lucius folded his arms across his chest. “So. The two of you have had a falling-out.” There was a chilling finality to the statement.

“But… why?” Narcissa moved to perch at the end of the chaise. What on earth did you do? “What can possibly have happened?”

Draco sat back with a sigh. Sod it. He might as well tell them.

“It was my birthday. Best day ever. That night, we were at the Turf. It’s a pub,” he added, in answer to his parents’ questioning glances. “Hermione planned this whole surprise party thing. Anyway, we were having a great time. At one point, I was waiting at the bar for a round of drinks for the table. There was this girl. I knew her slightly—been coming on to me for months. Well, out of nowhere, she just… came up and sn- kissed me. For my birthday, she said. Stupid slag had this weird smile on her face afterwards, sort of gleeful. When I finally got back to the table with the drinks, Hermione was looking really ill. She’d just sicked up in the loo, apparently. We went back to her room, and I offered to stay, but she wasn’t having it. Reckoned she was still feeling a bit ill, so I left.

“The next morning, I went to check on her. And she… she was…” Draco swallowed, remembering. “The thing is, she’d bloody seen. I tried to tell her it wasn’t me doing it, it was this girl. She didn’t believe me. She believed what she thought she saw. And… and she said… oh hell!” He couldn’t say the words. They simply hurt too much.

This trust bullshit. Draco’s words came back to Narcissa with excruciating clarity. Gods, she had told him she no longer trusted him. Oh, Hermione, what have you done… do you even know what you’ve done in saying something like that to him?

Narcissa cast a fleeting, pained glance at Lucius, whose own expression had turned grave. He caught her eye, and he closed his own briefly, with a small shake of his head.
It was as they had suspected.

“That’s it, then,” Draco finished dully. “I had to get away. So I came home.”

“Have you had any contact with her since that last time?” Lucius wanted to know.

Draco looked at his father sharply. It was a question that didn’t appear to have a judgement attached to it, merely sympathetic interest.

“No,” he replied warily. “Seen her about, of course. Didn’t want to talk to her. Don’t want to.”

The truth was, he could have put his fist through a wall, the hurt was so bad. Very nearly had done, in fact.

“I mean, I just don’t get it!” His voice suddenly began to rise. “How could she not believe me? No matter what she saw! No matter what! I mean, shit…”

“Language,” Narcissa said mildly, but it was more force of habit than anything else just now.

“Sorry! It’s just… she knows me better than anyone else. Anyone. I’ve told her things… things nobody else knows. Merlin…” he breathed, and his face crumpled suddenly. “I love her. So much it hurts. But sod it all, I need her to trust me!”

“Do you really believe she has lost all faith in you?” Narcissa asked softly.

“I don’t know anymore. I just don’t know.” Draco raked a hand through his hair distractedly.

“More to the point… if her trust in you is so easily shaken, how strong could it have been in the first place?”

Both Draco and Narcissa turned to stare at Lucius. He gazed back implacably, his words hanging like something noxious in the air between them.

“Just what are you trying to imply, Father?” Draco’s tone was controlled, icy.

“That is perfectly obvious, I should think,” Lucius answered, unperturbed. “Perhaps it is just as well that this regrettable incident happened now instead of later. The girl has apparently shown her true colours. She—”

“Lucius!” Appalled, Narcissa had started up abruptly from the chaise, and now she hastened to his side, her voice dropping to an agitated whisper. “What in the name of Circe would possess you to say something like that to him now, even if it is what you believe? Can you not see how hurt he is?”

Lucius’ mouth closed in a grim line, his nod terse. She turned to Draco then. His eyes were dark with anger in a face that seemed bloodless.

“Your father didn’t mean to suggest—” she began, reaching to him.

“No. He did. You know he did. It’s okay. It’s no more than I would have expected from him,” Draco spat the last word out with a grimace and turned back to Lucius. “Just you listen, Father. Hermione has already more than shown me her ‘true colours,’ as you put it. She was just… just confused, is all. She was just being emotional. We’d all been drinking. She wasn’t thinking straight! Probably still a bit hung over. She loves me, I know she does! That is not something one can mistake, not when it’s real! Don’t you ever speak about her that way again!”

He turned and slammed out of the master suite, throwing himself down on his bed once he’d reached
the sanctuary of his own room.

It wasn’t a thought Draco himself had not already had. But he’d pushed it away, unable to accept the possibility that everything that their relationship had been built on – the very heart of it -- could have been a lie. If she didn’t trust him to tell the truth now, then had she ever really trusted him? About anything? Had she believed any of what he had told her about his past, and the changes he had undergone? Did she believe he was truly capable of change, or did she secretly doubt that as well? Oh fuck. Maybe she did. Maybe she was secretly scared of a deeper involvement with him! Maybe all this shit was just a smokescreen, really, because she wanted out of the relationship and just didn’t know how to go about it!

NO.

NO.

NO.

He could not, would not, accept that.

*  

Draco paused in the middle of stuffing his belongings into his satchel at the sound of the light knock on his door.

“It’s not locked,” he said wearily, and resumed pushing his books down. The recalcitrant zip caught on a tee shirt inside, and he swore at it softly.

Slender fingers touched his wrist, stopping him.

“Draco, sit down. I want to talk to you,” his mother said quietly. She turned the desk chair around and sat down.

Nodding, he sank down onto the end of the bed and waited. He hadn’t slept well once again, and there were faint shadows under his eyes.

“I know how hurt you are, my love,” Narcissa began, and indeed she did. Her heart ached for him. Nobody knew better than she the long road he’d travelled to get to the place he had begun to carve out for himself. And she could only imagine what an important part of that road Hermione had become over time. There had to be a way to help him get past the terrible sense of betrayal he felt at the loss of her trust.

“You were misjudged, and that hurts. But—did you ever stop to think that perhaps there is another reason Hermione reacted the way she did?”

“What other reason could there possibly be? She didn’t believe me. She thought I was messing about with another girl, and doing it in front of our friends. Thought I’d humiliated her.”

“Draco, I don’t mean to pry, but… was your relationship an exclusive one? Or did you have some sort of understanding about seeing other people as well?”

“We never said it in so many words, but yeah, we just sort of … became exclusive, I suppose. I
didn’t want anybody else. I really don’t think she did either.”

“And this other girl-- who is she, anyway? Tell me about her.”

“She’s isn’t anybody. I mean, she’s in our college. I’ve seen her about now and then. She’s… well, she fancies me, I think. No, that’s wrong. I know she does.”

“She’s made that plain, has she?” And not only to you, no doubt. “I see,” Narcissa replied. “What does she look like?”


The tall, fashion-model type. “Hmm.” Narcissa sat back, a pensive expression veiling her eyes. “And you’re surmising that Hermione must have seen this girl kiss you, is that right?”

He nodded miserably. “I’m sure now that she did.”

“Can you not think of any reason that Hermione might feel just a bit threatened by a girl like that?” Suddenly, it was all too obvious to Narcissa.

“No! I can’t! Honestly, Mother, she--” Draco stopped. Hang on. There was something she had blurted out in anger just before he’d slammed out of her room. “Well, actually, now you mention it, she did say something about Carrie being taller and having bigger--”

“Yes. Precisely. Darling,” Narcissa said gently, “does that not perhaps suggest something to you?”

“But--” It was an idea Draco had never considered, not once. Hermione feeling insecure about her looks, about his attraction to her? No, that was just daft, she couldn’t be. Could she? “I suppose… maybe…”

Men. Narcissa sighed. They were all the same about certain things. Thick as posts. “And…” She did a quick calculation. “All this took place less than two weeks before the end of term, when I assume the two of you and your other friends were planning to move into this flat of yours?”

He nodded again.

“Oh, darling! Don’t you see? She was probably already a little bit scared. It’s quite a big step. How do you suppose she must have felt, under the circumstances, thinking she was seeing you kissing somebody else? Especially if she’s the least bit insecure. Most women are. Perhaps another girl could have laughed it off more easily, but from what you say, it sounds as if your Hermione is rather sensitive.”

Draco looked at his mother doubtfully. Maybe. It did make a certain sense. Fuck’s sake, though-- it was just so stupid and irrational! And Hermione was nothing if not logical and precise in her thinking.

Still…

“What can I do?” he asked quietly, and Narcissa smiled.

“You must tell her once again what really happened. Convince her that she has no reason at all to doubt your feelings. But most of all, Draco-- forgive her, and then let it go.” There was a pause, during which she searched his face carefully. “You are certain that this move is what you truly want?”
“More than anything.”

“Then tell her so. Make her know it beyond a doubt.”

If he could. If she’d listen. If…

Draco frowned briefly.

Then something occurred to him, and he regarded his mother curiously. “You know, before all this happened, I had intended to come home anyway, so I could tell you and Father about my plans. I expected you would react… well… differently.”

“Ah,” Narcissa chuckled wryly. “You thought I’d disapprove. I might have done, once. But I feel differently about a lot of things now. I’ve lived by the rules and values of others almost all my life. But I’ve come to see that this is not a good thing. I don’t want you to make the same mistakes I did. I honestly see nothing wrong with what you want to do, as long as you’ve thought it through very carefully.

“And it’s not really such a surprise, anyway. Not to me, at least. I don’t know about your father. I haven’t had a chance to speak with him about it yet. But—I know you, my headstrong, impetuous son who is used to getting what he wants. And I know how you feel about this girl. I’d have to be blind not to see it. And you have the means to do what you like now. No,” she laughed softly once again. “It’s not a surprise. Though no doubt it will be intriguing grist for the gossip mill. I almost look forward to seeing their faces!”

There was a glint in her eye as she thought of her circle of friends. They would positively fall upon such juicy news. But this time, she would control it. She’d make sure they got a proper earful about the bright and lovely young Muggleborn witch her son would be living with. What a delightfully double-barrelled shock it would be. Narcissa loved her friends dearly, but really, they were such awfully hidebound snobs at times. She nearly laughed out loud.

Draco grinned in return, the first time he’d felt remotely like smiling in days. Hopping off the bed, he wrapped his arms around his mother and hugged her tightly, as he had done when he was small. “Thanks, Mum,” he whispered into her pale hair.

* *

He was ready to leave. He’d Apparate to the village—to that spot just behind the White Hart—and then find a taxi to drive him the twelve miles to Bath, where he’d hop the next train to Oxford.

He made his way down the magnificent, curving staircase to the spacious front hall, where he found mother waiting. Tibby was there with his jacket, and Missy, too. She pressed into his hands a small, loaf-shaped, wrapped package that was warm and smelled tantalisingly of chocolate.

“For the journey, young Master,” she said, in her high, piping voice. He smiled and slipped it into his satchel for safekeeping, turning to his mother’s open arms.

Narcissa folded him into her embrace. “Forgive,” she whispered, and then released him, smiling encouragingly. “Your father is waiting for you in his study. Go on now.”

Lucius was sitting at his desk, a flat, rectangular package lying there before him. It was wrapped in
When Draco appeared in the doorway, his father stood.

“We didn’t have a proper opportunity to give you your birthday present. Here it is.”

Solemnly, he picked up the package and held it out to Draco, who took it with a certain confusion mixed with intense curiosity. That it would be his father who presented him with the gift was strange enough, but even more so considering the nature of the last conversation they’d had.

And then Lucius surprised him yet again. He held out his hand.

“Happy twentieth birthday, Draco.”

Draco hesitated and then accepted it, and immediately felt his hand enclosed in a warm grip. It lasted only a second and then the contact was broken.

“Thank you, Father,” he said stoutly, and then, not quite knowing what else to say, “Goodbye.”

He thought he heard his name spoken very low as he closed the door behind him.

* *

Somehow, Draco managed to resist unwrapping the package until he was finally back in his room in Staircase 5. Once there, however, his curiosity overwhelmed him, and he threw his satchel onto the bed and sat down with the package on his lap, ripping at the paper eagerly.

Finally he had the last of it off, scattered with the rest on the floor. On his lap lay a framed picture, the back of it face up, a wire strung from one side to the other. Carefully he turned it over.

Astonishingly, there was the beautiful map of Wiltshire his father had bought the day he and Narcissa had visited Oxford, a flawless reproduction of the four hundred-year-old original. But now it was magnificently framed in smooth, polished wood of deep forest-green, decorated with tiny, silver dragons. They coiled and lashed their long tails, tossing their heads, curling and darting their tongues out between sharp teeth, and sending roiling balls of flame out of their mouths as their diaphanous wings flapped. At the bottom center of the frame, between two of the dragons, there was a rendering of the Malfoy family crest.

And there was a card. It had fallen to the floor in Draco’s haste to pull the wrapping paper off. Still dazed, he bent to retrieve it, slitting the envelope open and pulling out the small, white card inside.

Its message was brief.

*Draco,*

*Your mother and I hope you (and Hermione) will enjoy this map. You might like to hang it on a wall in your new flat.*

*You may Charm the dragons to remain quiet and still. They are yours to command.*

*If you study the map very carefully, you will find a rendering of our house and grounds. I rather think the cartographer did a good job of it, don’t you?*
Happy birthday.

Father

TBC
The short, black, sleeveless gown flapped as Hermione hurried along the High Street towards the Examination Schools, mortarboard in hand. Running in a skirt and these bloody dress shoes with their narrow, mid-sized heels was no mean feat either. A small puddle was suddenly before her as she crossed Queen’s Lane, and she jumped over it in an awkward little leap without breaking her stride. Automatically one hand went to cover the pink carnation protectively, but apart from wobbling a bit, it stayed pinned to the black gown. The white one she’d worn the afternoon before, signifying that it was her first exam, now sat forlornly in a glass of tepid water on her desk. After today’s marathon slog of Intro to Lit in the morning and then Celtic Mythology and Folklore in the afternoon, the pink one would join its sister in the glass. Must remember to buy a red one for tomorrow afternoon. It would be her last exam of the year and then she would be free.

Free. Now that was a relative term. Free to do what, exactly? Free to pack her bags— all the stuff she’d accumulated in the last five months—and…what? Just go home? Free to break the tenancy agreement she’d signed for the flat? Or…free to go ahead with the move, not knowing whether
Draco would even be there or not? She’d never felt more burdened in her entire life.

A couple enjoying cups of espresso at an outdoor table in front of the Queen’s Lane Coffee House waved cheerfully, calling out, “Good luck!” With an obligatory grin, Hermione waved back and ran on, wishing in that moment that she could trade places with them and spend the next three hours idling over a cup of coffee.

There it was, directly across the street—the Examination Schools. An imposing, 19th-century, Jacobean-style structure made of stone, it was a hive of activity now, as students milled about in the street outside. They resembled nothing so much as a flock of penguins in their traditional, formal “sub-fusc”—black suits, white shirts and white bow ties for the men, white blouses, black ribbon ties and black skirts or trousers for the women, and for first-years, the shorter-length, sleeveless gowns over that. Mortarboards were to be carried, but not worn. Mostly pink carnations added spots of colour in the sea of black and white.

She disappeared into the rippling, buzzing mass as they waited for the doors to open. Finally, they swung open and the group surged inside, into the vast and very grand interior, filling the huge room. Everyone’s attention was on the giant television screen overhead, where listings of exam locations were to be found.

Hermione craned her neck, eyes quickly scanning the screen in search of Intro to Lit. Ah—there! Same room in which she’d had her Victorian Lit exam the previous afternoon, as it turned out. As splendid as the rest of the building, with its columns and marble floors and the gallery overlooking the lobby, the exam room was gilded and there were officious-looking portraits lining the walls, their subjects seeming to stare down their patrician noses with disdain at the current crop of aspiring young scholars.

The crowd in the lobby was gradually dispersing now, as various exams were announced over the intercom. Hermione was swept along, the horde of people moving in the same direction as she like a river cresting and then settling again, as they streamed down the corridors.

Suddenly, far up ahead, moving with the crowd as it surged up the stairs, there was a familiar head, white-blond and bright against the smart black of the gown. Her heart leaped into her throat even as she felt it beating wildly in her chest and at her temples.

Oh. How she wanted to sweep everybody before her out of the way and simply throw her arms around him and hang on for dear life! And yet, if he were to turn around and look at her right now… she quailed at the thought, remembering once again those dreadful things she’d said.

And then he did turn his head just slightly, and she wondered if somehow he had sensed her eyes on him. The next moment told her he had not. He’d turned simply to greet a girl who’d gone to several of the same lectures as they had done for their Intro to Lit paper. Hermione’s stomach clenched and she felt herself die just a little more inside.

They moved en masse into the exam room and found their seats. The desks were marked with their names, each with a small pink card Cellotaped to the top right corner. Each student dutifully laid his or her student card on the desk so that examiners could make sure, once the exam was underway, that the identity of the test taker matched the name on the desk.

Hermione sat quite still, staring down at the desk, her back straight, her neck tense with anticipation of what loomed ahead of her, heightened by a keen, tingling, nerve-wracking awareness of his presence somewhere in the room. Cautiously, she raised her eyes just a little, and allowed her gaze to wander tentatively round the room, to the extent that she could without overtly turning her head in either direction. No sign of him anywhere, but she knew he was there.
Ten rows behind, Draco sat staring at the back of Hermione’s head. Despite himself, he’d glanced around as he’d walked the route from Hertford along Catte Street to the High, and then down past the shops—past All Souls, University and Queen’s—wondering if he’d catch sight of her, and yet not entirely sure he wanted to. He did, very much, and yet he didn’t. A thousand very troubling questions crowded his thoughts, pulling and pricking at him. What if she still clung to her mistaken belief that he’d cheated on her? What if, once again, she refused to hear him out? Worse yet, what if all of that were simply a means to an end—the end being… well… the end? What if he were about to be dumped? Bugger it all, if anybody should be doing the dumping, he should, considering how unfairly he’d been treated by the girl who’d professed to love him! She had a nerve, didn’t she, calling his trustworthiness into question when it was really hers that was looking rather ragged at the moment! He’d laid himself bare to her, holding nothing back, trusting her with his heart, and this was how she repaid him?

And yet… and yet… Just turn around, Hermione, please. I need to see your eyes. I need to know! Ah, fuck. Just shoot me now and put me out of my misery, why don’t you…

The invigilator had been calmly reading off the rules, his voice droning on hypnotically, and then suddenly he paused, checked the time—9.30 precisely—and said, in a clear and precise tone, “You may now begin.”

Instantly, all heads bent and all hands took up their pens and opened their examination books. After that, there was near-silence, the only sounds an occasional cough or sneeze, or the clearing of a throat, the creaking of a chair as its occupant shifted in the seat, or the quiet scuffling of feet on the floor.

At precisely twenty minutes past twelve, Hermione laid down her Biro, glancing at her watch. She had filled two exam booklets and checked them over three times, and now she raised her hand for them to be collected. Ten minutes to go. Nobody could leave any time in the first or final half hours of the exam, so she would have to bide her time.

And then finally, it was done. She had a two-hour break before her second exam of the day. Time enough to have a quick bite to eat and maybe try to unwind a little bit, if she could. She stood, stretching, and despite herself, her eyes darted around the room quickly. She sighed. No sign at all. He must have finished well before she had, and left.

She couldn’t deny that a part of her felt hugely relieved that the inevitable confrontation had been postponed again. You’re such a bloody coward, she berated herself. Somehow, though, she just wasn’t certain she’d be able to look him in the eye and get the necessary words out. She’d been such a fool. And even worse, she’d let him down so horribly. He’d trusted her, and what had she done? Stuck a knife in his heart with the accusation, and then twisted it when she’d said she couldn’t trust him anymore. She really didn’t think she could have found a more efficient way to wound him if she’d tried. He probably wanted nothing to do with her anymore, not that she blamed him. That must be why he hadn’t come anywhere near her. It was his way of telling her that it was over between them.

Finished.

Swallowing hard, she collected her things and followed everyone out into Merton Street, wandering blindly back around to the corner of the High, her feet taking her almost automatically to the place in which she’d so often spent time over the course of the three terms.

The Rose was jammed with lunchtime custom, and Hermione was lucky to find a small table by the front window, partially obscured by a large, potted plant. She placed her order at the counter, and
then gratefully dropped into the seat, exhausted, burying her face in her hands.

She didn’t see the figure gazing fixedly at her from across the street, and then, agitated, pushing long fingers through his pale hair, turning on his heel, and striding away as quickly as his long legs would take him.

The following day, the third and last in the examination period, was universally greeted with relief. By that evening, it would all be over for just about everybody, and they could get on with the business of enjoying the early-summer sunshine and warm weather, and do some serious end-of-term partying.

For Draco, the day would be a long one. At half past nine, he had his History of the British Isles exam, which, perversely, he found himself rather looking forward to, as the period he’d chosen to focus on was one for which he had a genuine passion, and he felt he had a firm grip on the subject matter as a result. Old English Lit was scheduled for the 2.30 exam slot. It was the other paper he’d taken together with Hermione-- the one for which they’d done the Beowulf essay. He thought back to those autumn months of early friendship and then the budding of something more. That project and the accompanying tutorial they’d shared had been instrumental in drawing them even closer together by virtue of the sheer amount of time they’d needed to spend together.

It also meant that he was bound to see her again today, even if only briefly and in passing.

His stomach clenching at the thought, he slipped into his gown and gave his bow tie a last tweak in front of the mirror. Pinning the sadly wilted pink carnation to the front of the gown, he made a mental note to stop in the Covered Market at lunchtime and pick up a red one for the afternoon’s exam. Right. Finally, retrieving a clear, plastic pencil case containing his pens and student card from a drawer, he plucked the mortarboard from the top of the desk where he’d tossed it, Frisbee-style, the day before (pain in the arse having to carry that silly, useless thing about, but it was Tradition, and who was he to fly in the face of that?) and closed the door behind him.

As he made his way through the quads, heading ultimately towards Catte Street, he ran into several friends also walking in the same direction, a light breeze lifting the corners of their gowns and making them look rather like a clutch of dapper crows.

Steve Holdstock grinned and waved, slowing his pace so Draco could catch up. With him was Tom Moreton, a Staircase 2 denizen Draco knew because Tom lived on the same floor as Hermione. He, too, gave Draco a cheerful greeting.

“Holdstock, Moreton,” Draco replied amiably. “So--where’s Gil?”

“Sleeping in. Her last exam’s this afternoon. Lucky!” Steve sighed, thinking about his girlfriend Gillian and how nice it would be to be tucked up snugly with her instead of spending the morning taking yet another grueling, three-hour exam.

Draco nodded and grinned knowingly. Translation: she’d just done an all-nighter and was utterly dead to the world as a result.

“And where’s Herm--” Tom began conversationally, and then was stopped dead by a murderous look from Steve. Draco pretended he hadn’t heard; he walked on, studying their surroundings with
sudden, rapt attention, as Steve pulled Tom back a few paces and carried on a conversation in hurried whispers, after which Tom nodded, clearly chagrined.

They made their way down towards the High, joining the procession of black and white-clad students moving in the direction of the Examination Schools. And once again the end-of-term ritual, now so familiar to them all, began.

*

2 pm

Mellow afternoon sunshine warmed the cobblestones, still damp from the early-morning rain. Shafts of sunlight glinted on their smooth, variegated surfaces, charging puddles with rainbows and casting the leaves in patterns of dappled gold and green.

The very last exam of term. Finally. It was a milestone of sorts, a marker. Her long-cherished goal, an education at Oxford, was one-third complete. This first year was the test. Now Hermione had proven to herself that she could indeed succeed here, that she belonged-- that there was real substance behind all the so-called “books and cleverness.”

Lost in thought, she walked along the High Street from the Covered Market, a fresh red carnation pinned jauntily to the front of her gown. In half an hour’s time, she would sit her exam in Old English Lit. She was definitely ready, she knew that. Hours spent methodically reviewing carefully detailed notes left her feeling relatively confident of that much, at least.

But it was hardly “Beowulf” or “The Wanderer” on her mind at the moment. Instead, there was a tape loop that insisted on replaying itself over and over: images of herself, her eyes smudged with runny mascara and her hair wildly untamed, saying hateful things. And then the look of utter incredulity on his face that she’d written off, at the time, as merely a good job of covering up.

She had never imagined dark thoughts of this sort would be plaguing her at this juncture. It should have been a time to celebrate the year’s end and all she— they – had accomplished.

A deep sigh of regret escaped her as the Exam Schools loomed before her. Eyes straight ahead this time, she moved automatically into the building with all the others, willing herself now just to do what needed to be done and get through it without disgracing herself.

The many students there to take the same exam, as well as those sitting another one in the same large room, shuffled in and gradually found their seats, settling in to listen as the invigilator read out the obligatory rules. Examiners in their academic finery, required to be present during the first and last thirty minutes of the three-hour span, sat looking rather grand, their collective gaze detached and faintly amused.

“You may begin now.”

Hermione picked up her pen, giving her head a tiny shake to clear away the question of where Draco might be sitting. Still, it hovered, moth-like, at the periphery of her thoughts. Suddenly, he intruded again forcefully, as she remembered something—a private challenge they had set each other for the exam: to include the word “floccinaucinihilipilification” somewhere in an answer. She wondered
briefly if he even remembered. Well, she thought with a rather grim smile, she would try to do it, anyway.

So strange, knowing that he was here somewhere and yet not having the faintest notion where, in this vast, ornate space with its aura of ponderous age.

Draco was, in fact, far enough away on the other side of the room that he nearly hadn’t spotted Hermione at all. Not at first, anyway. Much as he’d tried not to, though, he couldn’t help casting small, searching glances around now and then. And eventually, it was with a small start of surprise that his gaze had fallen on a familiar head bent over her exam booklet, her pen tip poised above it. He knew she was having to forcibly restrain herself from tapping it against the booklet’s cover. In spite of himself, he felt the corners of his mouth tugged into a tiny smile at the thought. 

_Gods_, he missed her.

Missed all the silly, inconsequential little things. The way her brows would meet in an unconscious little frown whenever she was concentrating very hard. He knew they’d be that way at precisely this moment. The glee that was so evident in her eyes when she knew she’d trumped him in a debate, no matter how trivial the topic. The way those same dark, long-lashed eyes would go all soft for no reason at all when she looked at him sometimes. He’d catch her at it and then she’d blush and smile and look away again.

Abruptly, lines came to him from a song, one of several from a record album belonging to Claire that Hermione had played for him that last visit. Dating back thirty years to Claire’s own college days, the song was poignant and full of yearning. _Each and every night, I wonder about you. Love, open the door... Please hear me this time_...

It had been eight long days. Suddenly, those words seemed to capture with awful clarity his own feelings of isolation and longing that vastly overshadowed the periodic flarings of hurt and anger still plaguing him.

His heart aching, he turned his head away again, forcing his attention back to the exam question before him. He would need to put his misery aside for a couple of hours. He had no doubt it would still be there after the exam was over.

At half five precisely, the invigilator’s crisp “Time!” rang out and everyone put their pens down and closed their books. They were tired, it was the last of three difficult and demanding days, and now, finally, it was really over. Chairs scraped back and they stood, stretching, collected their things, and moved en masse towards the back door exit into Merton Street.

Instantly, congratulatory yells greeted the first of the finishers as the doors opened and they hit the cobbled street. Behind metal barricades, well-wishers were waiting, and they were prepared. Tradition and the sacred bonds of friendship demanded that finishing that last exam was to be celebrated in a variety of styles, and that just as you received, so you would give. Waiting friends were armed with everything from confetti to tins of silly string and shaving foam to flour, eggs, and tomatoes. Some offered balloons and tossed Hawaiian leis round the necks of exiting friends as they came through the wrought-iron gate. Others had brought bottles of imitation champagne, and these were shaken and sprayed liberally over their hapless victims. Occasionally, somebody got drenched with a bucket of water. Later, after everyone got cleaned up, the real celebrations would begin in earnest, involving some serious alcohol consumption in as many creative settings as could be imagined.

Hermione walked slowly towards the exit. Despite the noise that welled up just beyond the door, she remained preoccupied. When she stepped out onto the street, that first colourful length of silly string
flying over her to settle round her neck like a lime-green lasso took her by surprise.

“Oi! Hermione!”

“Congratulations!”

“Well done!”

Ropes of red, blue, yellow and orange followed in quick succession, landing in her hair, all over the front of her blouse, tangling in the narrow, black ribbon tie knotted round her collar, trailing down in a spider’s web of long, rainbow tendrils.

Gemma, Maggie and Suze stood there, laughing, the spray tins in their hands. Hermione couldn’t help herself—she really had to laugh as well, and it felt good.

“Reckon I should count myself lucky,” she giggled, “that you only used this stuff and not something like that!” Pointing at somebody who resembled a lump of raw pastry dough on legs, raw eggs running in rivulets down the flour that liberally covered him from head to foot, she laughed again and reached out to give her friends a hug. “Thanks!”

“Oh!” Mags exclaimed abruptly. “Hang on, we’re not done with you quite yet, my girl. There’s something else. Though it’s not from us. We’re only the messengers. Close your eyes.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes with a wry grin. “You’re not about to dump a bucket of water over me, are you? I wouldn’t put it past you!”

“No worries! Just shut them! And put your hands out.” Gemma grinned, crossing her arms in front of her as the three girls stood close together, clearly shielding Hermione from the sight of whatever last surprise they had in store.

Across the street and down a ways, a tall boy stood surrounded by his own friends. His hair, already the palest possible shade of blond, was now virtually white with flour, and smudges of the white stuff dusted his cheeks and nose, and much of his gown. Amidst the high-spirited laughter and teasing that rose up around him, his attention seemed locked on the girl covered in Silly String, her eyes shut and her hands held out expectantly.

He watched, mesmerised.

Dutifully, her eyes shut tight now and her hands extended, Hermione waited, half expecting to have them filled in the next second with shaving foam. Instead, she felt one of the other girls closing her left hand around the neck of a bottle, and her right around the stems of a rather weighty bunch of flowers, their delightful scent reaching her nose even as her eyes were still shut.

“Right! Now open them!” Suze’s voice was curiously edgy.

Hermione’s gaze fell upon a bottle of real champagne, not the cheap imitation stuff, and a bouquet of miniature rosebuds in a multitude of colours, their incipient perfume promising to be heady and rich. The effect was nothing short of dazzling.

She stood there, frozen into silence for a long moment.

“Look, there’s a card,” Mags said quietly, pointing.

There was indeed. Nestled between tiny, exquisitely formed rosebuds was a small, white envelope. Carefully, Hermione drew it away and slid the card out from inside its holder. The handwriting was as familiar to her now as her own.
You’ve done it, Granger! the note exulted. Not that I’m surprised. I mean, it’s really rather anticlimactic, isn’t it, because I knew, even if you didn’t, that this would be a piece of cake for you. Wanted to say how proud I am of you though. Because I am. Really. Well done!

Love you.

D.

P.S. Not my mother’s roses, but I hope you like them. The colours reminded me of you, somehow.

The words, so neatly inscribed on the smooth white card stock, suddenly swam out of focus. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could, but a couple of large tears rolled down her cheeks before she could wipe them away.

The other girls looked at each other, horrified. They’d suspected the bouquet and champagne might be from Draco, but they hadn’t known for certain. First thing that morning, everything had been delivered to Gemma’s room anonymously with specific instructions about the intended recipient, but that was all. What were they to make of this gesture, lovely though it was? Was it an apology?

“Did you know he was going to do this?” Hermione’s voice trembled, and she swallowed hard, fighting for calm.

The three girls shook their heads.

Across the street, the boy closed his own eyes, feeling suddenly sick. He’d arranged for the flowers and champagne long before his birthday, set the plan in motion, and then… then the shit had hit the proverbial fan. And he’d forgotten completely about it. Until five minutes before, when he’d seen the girls approach her, flowers and champagne in hand. And then, despite the impulse to get as far from Merton Street as he could, he’d been rooted to the spot, unable to look away.

Just then Hermione looked up. Across the street, Draco was gazing back at her with an expression frozen somewhere between fear, hope, and utter chagrin.

And then it was as if everyone around the two of them had melted into the foliage or the old stones beneath their feet, because suddenly, they seemed quite alone. Taking her courage into her hands, Hermione began walking towards Draco, who was still standing motionless, hardly seeming to breathe.

When there was a foot of space between them, she stopped, unable to decide quite what to do.

“You… this… it’s just… how could you…”

How could he?

“What the fuck are you on about? I was just trying to…” he began, pure exasperation crowding out all the other emotions that had confused and stymied him up to now.

“No, no, I meant… how could you want to do this for me? I don’t deserve it!” Hermione wailed, waving the champagne bottle and the flowers in his face like a pair of weapons. “I mean, you… you’re…”
Turning away from him, she bit her lip and shut her eyes tightly, struggling valiantly to hold back the tears that had begun pooling in her eyes once again.

Draco flushed slightly, glad at that moment that her back was to him. “I didn’t,” he admitted. "I mean, I did, but… I’d arranged for it before we… well, you know. Before.”

“Oh.” Her voice was very small.

“Do you like everything, at least?” Draco asked softly.

She nodded vehemently, but did not turn around.

“I’m glad. Look, Hermione, you’re… you’re upset. I’ll just go. ” He’d said the words. But his feet refused to move.

“Don’t. Please.” Hermione swallowed, and it felt as if something large and nasty were caught in her throat. “I need to say some things to you first. But…” She paused for a fraction of a second, getting her bearings. “I need to do it like this. I can’t look at you when I say… what I have to say.”

Draco nodded, and then could have smacked himself. Fuckwit! She can’t see you. “All right,” he said finally, his voice measured. “I’m listening.”

“All right,” Hermione whispered, and took a deep, calming breath, hugging the bottle of champagne and the flowers to her chest like comfort objects or shields.

“I’m sorry. I behaved very badly. What I said… what I said to you was awful. I do trust you. I always have. I didn’t mean it. Truly I didn’t. It was… it was me. I was afraid. You scared me when you asked me to live with you.”

“Why? Why didn’t you tell me?” His voice was low, but there was anguish in it, and confusion.

Hermione remained steadfastly facing away, but he could see her shoulders slump at his question. “I thought… you wouldn’t want me anymore if I wasn’t ready.”

“You thought so little of me? Of how I feel about you?” An edge of anger had begun creeping into his voice. “Do you believe my feelings for you are so shallow, then? That I couldn’t be patient?”

“Yes… I mean no, it isn’t that! It’s just—you seemed so excited about it… so sure… I thought you’d be hurt… disappointed… that you’d think I didn’t love you enough…”

“Fuck’s sake, Hermione, what are you saying? That’s bollocks!” But… was it, really? It was true, he probably would have felt exactly that way if she’d shown herself to be reluctant. “Well, okay, hurt… maybe. A little. Disappointed? Yeah, probably—but shit, Granger, give me a little credit, can’t you?” ’Oh, not fair,’ a small voice inside his head told him. ’You know she’s probably right about this.’

He pushed on, ignoring the voice. “Anyway, what’s this got to do with--”

“I saw what she did, Draco! I had just got up to go to the loo, and there she was, and she got really close to you, and Merlin, she looked right at me, and ugh! She smirked. And then she winked. Because she knew exactly what she was about. And then she kissed you!”

A fleeting recollection of his mother's insights came back to him, but indignation crowded them out.

“Right—point being she kissed me, not the other way round! I didn’t want her! I tried to tell you that!”
“But--” Hermione whirled around to face Draco now. “Why did you... How could you have let her do that? Why didn’t you stop her?”

“I did! Are you totally daft?” Heat suffused his face. “I didn’t 'let' her! And I pushed her away! Where were you?”

“In the ladies' with my head in the toilet, puking my guts up!” Her eyes blazed, and two spots of pink burned high on her cheeks. “Where the fuck did you think I was? Why do you suppose I was so sick? It was seeing you… with her… and knowing… knowing we were about to... I mean, we’d just signed the bloody papers! I couldn’t believe…!”

“But if I tell you—if I tell you that you were wrong, that it wasn’t what you thought—then you should believe me! You should! Because damn it, Granger, I don’t lie to you. I never have done!”

Now everything seemed to grind down to a painful halt. It seemed as if everyone in the street must be giving them a very wide berth, because they were virtually alone.

“I know that now.” She looked away, ashamed.

“Why didn’t you know it then?” His voice was a furious hiss. “When it fucking mattered? Do you really think I’m capable of messing about with some other girl when I can hardly see straight for wanting you?” The gorge had begun climbing in his throat, and he looked away, swallowing hard, fighting it down.

“I should have listened and... I should have known I could trust you. I’m…” She halted, her eyelids sliding wearily shut, sucking in a deep, shuddering breath as she struggled for control, the weight of those awful words she’d flung at him pressing on her once again. “I’m just... just so...Oh, gods, Draco, can you ever forgive me for what I said?”

The silence that hung between them now was like a stone wall. Draco’s face was still stiff with the anger he had just felt wash over him again, but deep inside himself, something cracked, splintering into knife-like shards.

She stood there, her eyes huge and liquid in a face gone quite pale, her arms hanging limply by her sides, her heart hanging in tatters between them. His own twisted violently in his chest, and then there was no thought at all. There was only the need, powerful and unstoppable, to get to her. He moved swiftly, pulling her to his chest, the bottle and the flowers crushed between them as he wrapped his arms around her.

“I thought…” he whispered raggedly into her hair. “Hermione, I thought I’d--”

“Lost you,” she wept. “I thought I’d lost you!” She squeezed her eyes shut against his shoulder, rubbing her tears into the fabric of his gown, unmindful of the flour that still coated the fabric.

“Here, give me those!” he muttered, commandeering the bottle and the bouquet in one hand and then slipping the other arm around her waist, drawing her even closer. Raw, consuming, palpable need for each other was pulsing between them now.

Tipping her chin up, he crushed his mouth to hers, and then it was all about being able to breathe again finally, as he drew the sight and taste, the scent and feel of her, in through his mouth and nose and fingers, and the very pores of his skin. Eagerly, he slipped long fingers deep into her hair, closing them tightly around handfuls of curls. As if he needed to hang on, make himself believe this was really true.

That they were in the middle of the street seemed to have become immaterial. This assault on her
senses was what Hermione needed desperately now, and she clung to him, murmuring her regrets over and over as he pressed tender kisses to her hair, her temples, her eyelids and cheeks, her jaw, her chin, and finally, once again, her lips.

She had missed the sweetness of his mouth terribly. Her breathy little sigh against his lips warmed him and he smiled, opening his mouth and then hers to draw them together more deeply.

“Love you so much...” His whisper was raw and thready in her ear, and then her earlobe was in his mouth and he was caressing it with his tongue.

“Wait!” she breathed. “Not here! Let’s--”

“No!” His sudden vehemence surprised her. “I’ve got a much better idea! Here,” he said, thrusting the bouquet at her.

“You carry this! Come on!” Grabbing her hand, Draco began pulling Hermione in the direction of the High once more. They moved in an awkward, shambling half-run, their gowns flapping about them like ravens’ wings.

“Where...?” Hermione began, and then, suddenly, as Magdalen Bridge loomed in the distance, the light of understanding came into her eyes. “Oh!”

The way to the Iffley Road and the house at numbers 236-238 was not long, but it could have been covered in half the time, had they not found it absolutely essential to stop four times along the way: beneath the sheltering branches of a venerable old beech, its trunk broad and gnarled; against the finely variegated stonework of the travel agency at the corner of the High and Longwall Street; along the low wall that fronted a part of Magdalen College, and on the bridge itself, the waters of the Cherwell running in twin streams beneath, newly replenished by the early-morning rain. Kisses became increasingly heated, touches more provocative and harder to resist, and just when it felt as if both of them would very likely combust on the spot, one or the other would break away to grab hands and tug the two of them onward.

Remarkably thirsty from their exertions, they’d giddily popped the cork on the champagne halfway between Merton Street and the bridge, pausing to take several quite liberal swigs straight from the bottle en route. Passersby smiled fondly at the young couple so obviously in love, finished with exams and clearly elated with that fact and with each other, oblivious both to their dishevelled appearance and to the world around them in general.

The house stood, quiet and serene, as they approached. Two cars were parked in the space immediately in front, apparently belonging to new tenants. Draco drew Hermione under the arched alcove of the entrance and, eyes dancing, she clapped a hand over his mouth.

Giggles. “Sshh!”

“Why are you shushing me? We’re allowed to be here, we live here now! Or we will do, anyway, in a couple of days!”

A moment of silence.

Sudden note of panic. “ Won’t we? I mean… you’re not...”

Softly. “No, I’m not. Promise. We will.”

Relieved sigh. “Okay then! Right.” Poking about beneath the doormat. “She said she’d leave the key here for us. Aha! Found it!” Triumphant grin, as he held up a pair of brass-coloured keys on a metal ring. “Come on!”
“Ugh, stairs…” Peals of breathless laughter.

“Come on, Granger, move that adorable little arse of yours! Just a few hundred more! I’m right behind you!”

“Very funny, Malfoy… Hey! Watch where you put those hands!”

The door to the flat opened to golden, late-afternoon sunshine streaming in through the triple windows that looked out onto the Iffley Road. Hermione ran to the kitchen.

“Just let me find something to put these gorgeous flowers in!” she called over her shoulder.

Opening several of the cupboards, she discovered a large, glass pickle jar that was perfect. She set it in the sink, filling it with water, and put the roses in, fanning them out so that they stood graceful and luxuriant, the late-day sun lighting their many colours and glinting off the glass. With a satisfied smile, she turned only to find Draco right behind her, grinning as he leaned in to catch her mouth in a long, leisurely kiss.

“Bedroom… more private…” she murmured between kisses, her hands slipping from his soft hair to cup his face.

“Nobody here but us. And besides…” His grin was truly wicked now, his voice a sensuous whisper. “I intend for us to try out every room in the flat. Starting…” Warm lips grazed her neck, leaving butterfly kisses in a ticklish trail down her throat to her suprasternal notch. “*Here.*”

Nimble fingers slipped the black gown from her shoulders and then went to work on the buttons of her white blouse. The narrow black ribbon he left in place around her now-bare neck, the blouse having joined the gown where it lay puddled on the floor.

The pristine white lace of her bra was somehow more erotic than anything he could imagine in that moment. The smooth skin of her upper breasts was tanned in an oval that dipped into her cleavage, where it had become exposed to the sun in the last several weeks of warm weather.

Brushing the tops of her breasts with trembling fingertips, he pressed his hands to the warm, smooth skin of her back before swiftly unhooking her bra. It fell away to the floor, unheeded. His attention, and hers, were elsewhere.

He could gaze at her forever and never tire of it, he felt certain. She was so beautiful to him. Just now, his breath caught in his throat and he simply looked his fill, looked steadily and silently, a tightness constricting his chest. He had come so close to losing her. The full, terrible flush of that realisation swept over him, and he kissed her urgently, his hands moving over her bare breasts.

Time seemed to be racing and standing still at once. There was nobody and nothing else; it had all dropped away, and there was only *here* and *now* and *this*. A tender urgency marked their contact, a cavernous hunger and thirst that demanded satiating, and yet each kiss, each touch, sparked the need for another and another.

She had made quick work of his own gown, shirt and tie, and now she pressed herself against him, eager for the sensation of his warm, bare skin against hers. They moved into a close embrace and simple stood there, breathing raggedly, not wanting to let go, for what felt like an infinity of time. And then, in one quick, fluid movement, he hoisted her onto the countertop and moved in very close, bending his head, his mouth questing.

His tongue was warm and slippery as it explored her breasts, mapping the rosy nipples and making
its way into the soft, fragrant valley between them, and tasting her skin, which had always reminded him of honey and almonds. Suddenly he felt almost dizzy with the proximity to what he’d been missing so desperately.

Hermione closed her eyes and abandoned herself to the sensations he was evoking in her. Palms and fingertips, lips and tongue and teeth, the warmth and delicious wetness of him caressing her skin, ignited an incendiary trail as he traced the familiar, beloved pathways of her body.

His hands had slipped under her skirt and were travelling languidly up her legs now, making small, feather-light excursions across the tops of her thighs and then back to their soft, inner sides, until he reached the top of her tights. Hooking his thumbs around the elasticised waistband, he began their inexorable downward journey, making a sudden discovery as his hands skimmed over her bum, to his surprise and delight.

“You’re not wearing knickers!”

Hermione laughed softly. “No, silly—I don’t need them with tights!” She leaned in close to his ear, giving it a soft lick. “Convenient, isn’t it?”

“Indeed!” He leered at her wolfishly. “I’ll just find out what’s underneath, shall I?”

The tights made the rest of their trip down Hermione’s legs rather quickly, and she toed them off, discarding the now-tangled pair with a careless kick of her feet. They flew across the room and landed to dangle over the back of one of the chairs at the kitchen table.

He flashed her a roguish grin. “Lean back, love.”

She obeyed, whilst he pushed her legs up so that they were bent at the knees and parted wide. Then, with a wink, he disappeared between them, so that only the top third of his head was even visible. Every once in a while, he’d peek up at her, his eyes full of mischief, and then get back to business, that of driving her utterly mad with the pleasures of his tongue and fingers, relentless as they kindled a slow, explosive flame in that most intimate of places.

And then the sweet, unbearable coiling deep inside of her exploded, and she clamped her legs around his head, holding him to her, wanting still more of him, needing more. She was ready now, more than ready. Still clenching inside with the pleasure he’d wrought, she drew in a shuddering breath, all her muscles melting. Then, very slowly, she sat up, her lips curving in a provocative smile. It was the work of a moment for her to open his belt and unbutton his trousers. “Your turn, I think,” she murmured, as she drew the zip down and slipped a hand inside his boxers. Rigidly distended, his cock felt like velvet, quite warm to the touch as her fingers closed around him.

A deep sigh escaped him as she began moving her hand up and down his shaft, falling into a steady rhythm, all the while pressing soft kisses everywhere she could reach from her perch on the countertop. Her mouth found the spot at the base of his neck, just at the juncture of his left shoulder, that was deliciously sensitive, and she bit down, sucking the soft skin into her mouth, marking him. She was rewarded with a soft moan from deep in his throat as he threw his head back, offering her more.

And then, quite suddenly, he caught her wrist, stopping her.

“No more,” he gritted out. “I don’t want to come this way!”

She trembled as she watched him step out of his trousers and move closer, pulling her to the very edge of the counter and tilting her back slightly. And then he was inside her in a single, fluid thrust.
And in that instant, there was wonder and glory and relief and it was coming home, and it was good, so fucking good, at last…

He knew he wouldn’t last long, and in the end, he didn’t. His climax barrelled through him, no way to slow down, his seed exploding, warm and profuse and like thick cream as it filled her.

And in those first moments afterwards, as their breathing gradually slowed, his cock still throbbing almost painfully inside her with the force of his ejaculation, she cradled his head and stroked his hair, tightening her legs around his waist, willing him to stay inside just a bit longer.

loveyouloveyouloveyouloveyou

* 

The moon rose, flooding the centre of the room with its milk-pale light. It shone on two figures who lay drowsy and sated in the bed, the dark-haired girl curled, spoon-fashion, in the arms of the blond boy who held her close—protectively, contentedly, peacefully at last.

She stirred in his arms, wriggling closer to him and patting his arm as it rested comfortably in the dip of her waist.

He dipped his head to nuzzle gently at her neck, and she smiled in the shadows.

“I should have listened,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“Me too,” he murmured behind her, tangling a hand in her hair, and idly playing with a soft tendril. “I mean, I heard you but I didn’t really listen. Look, never again, yeah? No matter how angry we might be. Okay?”

“Promise.” She kissed his palm and then tucked it between her hands. Then she turned, craning her neck to get a glimpse of his face in the gathering darkness. “Hey—did you do it?”

He looked at her curiously. “Do what?”

“The challenge. Did you use the word?”

“Oh, that. Did you?” He paused dramatically, letting her wriggle around to face him.

“Yes, of course I did!” She waited a moment longer. “Well? Did you?”

“Yep,” he replied lazily. “Want to hear?”

She sat up, folding her arms expectantly. “Go on.”

He cleared his throat dramatically. “‘The floccinaucinihilipilification of the work in translation on the part of a certain segment of academe prevails, but I feel such an attitude is invalid.’ ”

She sucked in her breath. “Malfoy, that is very good! Do you really feel that way?”

He nodded. “What about you? What did you write?”

She flushed slightly. “It’s not anywhere near as good as yours. Okay, okay,” she laughed. “Let me
see if I remember it. ‘The average student’s floccinaucinihilipilification of works in Old English is unfortunate but all too common.’”

“What d’you mean, Granger, that’s really rather good! Not,” he teased, “quite as erudite as mine, of course, but very good nevertheless!”

A pillow to the head silenced him briefly. Chuckling, he rolled them over, covering her body with his own. And then there were no words, only the quiet murmurs of moonlight and shadows in the long, liquid hours before the dawn.

*

In the kitchen, a shaft of white light fell, too, upon the impromptu vase in which the bouquet had been left hours before, forgotten.

Six tiny, perfect rosebuds had opened.

By sun-up, there would be still more.

TBC

The beautiful song Draco was thinking of:

“Open the Door” by Danny Kirwan
Fleetwood Mac, Madison Blues

Open the door.
Let me see the sign.
I want to know the treasure you hide.
Each and every night, I wonder about you.
Love, open the door.

Can’t you hear me cryin’?
I’m losing my mind.
Can’t you hear me pleading?
Please hear me this time.

Open the door.
Let yourself be mine.
Let me see your little light shine.

You know I want you to welcome me home.
Love, open the door.

Can’t you hear me cryin’?
I’m losing my mind.
Can’t you hear me pleading?
Please hear me this time.

Each and every night, I wonder about you.
Love, open the door.
Love, open the door.
Love, open the door.

Oxford Photo Album:

The Examination Schools, 77-82 High Street
Circa 1905

Interior, Examination Schools
Students in Sub-Fusc--Photo by Holly Hayes

Finishers and others exiting into Merton Street—Photo by Holly Hayes
Finishers--Photo by Holly Hayes

Festive Finishers and Friends!

Photo by Holly Hayes
Walks along the River Cherwell, by Magdalen College

Photo by Holly Hayes
Magdalen Fellows’ Garden

Punting on the Cherwell, beneath Magdalen Bridge

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Bottles of champagne, fragrant bouquets of miniature roses, and huge thanks to my wonderful, hardworking betas and friends, Karen and Carol-- aka kazfeist and mister_otter!

Thanks to the very kind folk at HP_Britglish LJ, for their forthcoming and incredibly detailed answers to my questions about exams at Oxford.
Thanks to my friend Robin for the same, as well as for Britpickery odds and sods in
general.

Thanks to a very nice reader, Marty, for taking the time to email me with answers to
questions I had on a few little Britpicked points.

**Invigilator:** Another term for proctor.

**Floccinaucinihilipilification:** The longest word in the first edition of the OED. It means
the act of evaluating something as worthless. Read more about it at the website listed
below. One of my favourite t-shirts is the one that came with my compact OED. It has
this word and its definition on the front!

Information about a slew of other things that crop up in this chapter can be found here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Floccinaucinihilipilification

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magdalen_Bridge


http://www.headington.org.uk/oxon/high/tour/south/075_082.htm

Holly Hayes’ wonderful Sacred Destinations blog, with photos:

“I’ll light the fire.
You place the flowers in the vase
That you bought today…”

---Crosby, Stills and Nash
“Our House”

Friday afternoon
16 June 2000

The pile of belongings waiting outside in the quad was daunting. Three canvas duffels, one large suitcase on wheels, one smaller suitcase on wheels, two large cardboard boxes of books, and another
carton of assorted odds and ends were clustered together.

In that last box there were two electric kettles, one of which had a faulty wire and, by rights, ought to have been chucked out, but Hermione simply couldn’t part with it -- sentimental tosh, according to Draco, who couldn’t see getting all mushy about a simple kettle, merely because it had taken her—both of them-- through so very many late-night study and essay-writing sessions this first year at uni. Clutching it protectively, she’d agreed that its days as a kettle were finished, stoutly declaring she would use it as a planter instead.

There was also a miniature magnetic chess board she’d bought for him from which a bishop, a pawn, both knights and a castle had gone missing. Nevertheless, he’d refused to part with it, despite her teasing observations about “sentimental tosh.” There were assorted unmatched coffee mugs and spoons, one of them grotesquely bent from an attempt to pry open a stuck lid on a tin of cocoa; a plastic tray Draco had nicked from hall back in January (in cahoots with Mark and Tony, who’d done the same) in hopes of using it for sliding on snow; a game of Scrabble that Hermione had bought, along with Gemma and Mags, and had won final possession of in a coin toss; one iron, five pint glasses pinched from the Hertford bar, and a small, yellow rubber duck that had been a prize of sorts in a late-night game of poker on the third floor of Staircase 5. Rather a lot of beer had been consumed that night, as well as some rather choice weed, and the idea of the rubber ducky had seemed priceless.

Altogether, a rather motley collection of stuff assembled over the course of three terms.

Draco sat on top of one of the duffels, his long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle. Wiggling his bare toes in the soft leather sandals, he shaded his eyes against the strong, mid-afternoon sunshine. He could practically feel his skin turning an angry, sunburnt pink, despite the fact that they’d dragged everything into the partial shade of a tree. The sun had shifted since then, but he was feeling far too indolent at the moment to move it all again as he waited for Hermione to come out.

Of course, temperatures would soar through the roof today of all days.

Thinking about it once again, he was really glad they’d stuck to the original idea of hiring a minivan to transport all their stuff to the flat, instead of taking Richard up on his offer to hire the van himself and drive in from Hertfordshire to help them with the move. As generous as that suggestion had been, there was just something a bit…well, weird… about having one’s girlfriend’s father involved in such an enterprise. He could just hear it now. Excellent choice of flat. Wonderful location and the rent is decent as well. Oh, and by the way, I’m so pleased that you’re bonking my daughter. Hah.

He congratulated himself on sticking to his guns, even against Hermione’s best lobbying efforts to the contrary. But the rather pleasant smugness was transitory; he was still cranky and out of sorts.

Draco did not do well in extreme heat.

Fortunately for him—or perhaps not—Hermione did. She emerged from Staircase 2, looking impossibly chipper.

“Look!” She thrust out her hands, in which there was a clay pot with a rather droopy jade plant. “Good job I went back in to do a final check! I almost forgot Jasper!”

Draco peered up at her, a hand partly obscuring his eyes. Jasper. Right. Mustn’t leave him behind.

“I’m going to put him on the window sill in the kitchen,” she continued brightly. “I think he’ll do very well there, don’t you?”

She’d taken to talking about her plant as if it were her dearly departed cat. He knew she still missed
Crookshanks, but this was ridiculous.

“Don’t you?”

“What—oh, yeah, ‘course. He’ll love it…” He gave her a lopsided grin that far more closely resembled a grimace. Enough of Jasper. “We need to turn in our keys, y’ know.”

Hermione nodded. “Right. Look, why don’t you do that for both of us? I’ll wait here for Gemma and Danny.” She glanced around. “They’ll probably be here with the van any minute.”

“Right, okay.” He glanced at the collection of assorted belongings adjacent to theirs. “They don’t have all that much to store in the flat now, as they’re going home—”

“For a couple of months. I remember.” Hermione plopped herself down next to Draco on the duffel bag. She wore a clingy, little cotton tank top and a pair of rather brief shorts, and as she extended her legs out alongside his, he noticed all that and more. Her legs already had the glow of a light tan, and looked smooth, slim, and impossibly long for such a petite girl. He was busily studying them with a small grin of approval when she turned in his direction, and let out a horrified squeak. “Oh, no! _Malfy!_ Your nose is really red! You didn’t use the sunblock!”

Fucking great. A bright red nose that would be peeling by tonight, he was certain. How attractive.

“Forgot,” he said briefly. “It’s okay. I’ll live. Look, I’ll go and do the keys, yeah? You wait here for Gem and Danny. Be right back.” He stood and she dropped her key into his open palm. Running a hand through his hair, perspiration beading on his forehead, he turned and strode away in the direction of the porter’s lodge.

Hermione gazed after him appreciatively as he disappeared from view. Even now, after nearly nine months at Oxford, his transformation—physical and otherwise—seemed rather astonishing. The old chestnut “when in Rome” was one that apparently, he’d embraced fully from the time he’d arrived, shedding the old skin and ready to inhabit the new. And Muggle clothes definitely suited Draco. His sky-blue t-shirt, jeans and sandals were in striking contrast to the clothing she’d associated him with for so many years at Hogwarts. The closest she’d ever got to seeing his body back then was when he’d been dressed for Quidditch. Admittedly, that gear had shown him to very nice advantage, she recalled, a tiny blush heating her cheeks.

“Earth to Hermione!” It was Danny. He looked down at her, grinning widely. Gemma stood alongside him, her head cocked to one side and a hand on her hip.

“Oh, sorry! I was daydreaming!” Hermione muttered, slightly chagrined to be caught out.

“Too right you were,” Gemma agreed, laughing, “and from the look on your face, I can just guess about what.” She wagged her eyebrows suggestively, earning herself a poke in the arm. “Oi! I only speak the truth and you bloody well know it!”

The remains of a blush still pinking her cheeks, Hermione made a tactical reconnoitre. “Is this everything you want to move into the flat today?”

“Yep,” Danny sighed, gesturing. Two bikes, a sizeable carton of books, their own assorted oddments in another, smaller box, and Danny’s collection of weights sat next to the nearby bench. Like Draco,
he was lean and compactly muscled, but—Gemma confided to Hermione with a roll of the eyes— he fretted about things like size and definition. Hence the weights. “Not too much, really. Better get started moving all this shit though. Don’t much fancy getting a parking ticket. The van hire was expensive enough, thanks.”

Just then, Draco reappeared in the quad. He spotted Gemma and Danny, giving them a quick wave as he approached.

“’Bout time,” he drawled. “Wondered when you lot were going to show,” he said, and then turned to Danny. “Saw the van outside. Good job parking so close. We’ll have to take it in turn, though, three of us carrying stuff and one staying to watch the rest.” He paused, giving the others and all their collected stuff an appraising glance. “Right. Who wants to stay with the stuff first, then?”

“I will,” Gemma piped up. “I could do with a sit-down. Stayed up most of last night packing. I’m knackered!”

Before very long, with everyone taking turns hauling luggage and boxes, all their belongings had made the journey through the quads and out into Catte Street, piling up like an instant, ragtag jumble sale on the pavement.

Despite a brief skirmish over the best way to load the van— Gemma excepted, as she just didn’t have the energy to debate it—their things made it on intact, Draco shut the rear door with a resounding click, and they were off.

The house had a quiet air of expectancy about it, as if somehow it sensed that yet another part of its interior was about to be filled and brought to life once again. Hermione wondered, as Danny pulled the van into the car park in front, how many of the flats were still available to let. It was sad to imagine pockets of this lovely old house empty and silent.

It took six trips, but finally everything in the van had made its way up the stairs, winding up stockpiled in the centre of the sitting room floor.

“Right,” Danny said briskly, flipping the keys to the van up into the air and then deftly snagging them again. “Must get the van back before six or we’ll be charged for another day. Malfoy, fancy taking a ride?”

“Sure, yeah,” Draco replied agreeably, hoisting himself to his feet from where he’d been sprawled on the sofa. He looked back at the two girls with a sly grin. “Oh, and… don’t concern yourselves about the really heavy boxes, ladies. We shall attend to those when we get back.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “The implication of that being what? That we’re incapable of moving the bigger boxes because we females are just too weak?”

“Oh no, Merl- I mean, heaven forbid! You two are more than capable. I was just trying to be chivalrous.” The corners of Draco’s mouth twitched, and he winked at Danny. If they were really lucky, the girls might have the whole lot sorted by the time they got back.

“See you!” His voice floated cheerily back up the stairs as the boys clattered down them two at a time.

Hermione closed the front door, crossing her arms and leaning back against it with a smug grin.

“He said all that on purpose, you know. To get us to do all the work.”

“You think?” Gemma was taken aback.
“I know.” Hermione’s gaze swept the luggage and cartons amassed in the centre of the room. “He thought he was being so clever, but I’ve got him sussed.”

“But then… if you knew that, why’d you protest? Why not just smile sweetly and say thanks?” Gemma’s bewilderment was plain.

“Because that would have totally confused him. He’d have thought something was the matter with me. See, he expected me to protest. I couldn’t very well let him down. He thinks he knows me so well.” Hermione chuckled ruefully, running a hand through her hair, made all the more unruly, now, by the humidity. “Hmm… maybe he does, at that. I really can’t just leave this stuff here. I’ve have done it anyway.”

“You’re hopeless, you are,” Gemma laughed, and then heaved herself to her feet. “Right. Let’s get cracking, shall we? Can’t disappoint your boyfriend’s expectations!”

Organisation—that was the ticket. Had to be precise and orderly about it. They began by sorting everything into a Gemma/Danny pile and a Hermione/Draco pile.

“Shall we keep all our books in the spare room, or just some?” Hermione wanted to know. “Think there’s enough shelf space in there?”

Gemma poked her head into the small room that would function as a study or very small spare bedroom if extra space were needed for somebody to stay over. She was back in a flash.

“Plenty of space, I’d say. Enough for us to have three whole shelves each. Only thing is, we don’t want to mix our stuff up. Are your books labelled?”

Hermione nodded. “We both did that as we packed them.”

“Us too. So then, there’s no problem.”

The book boxes were heavy. But by this time, the bug to get everything unpacked and settled really had bitten both girls. One pushed and the other pulled, and between them, they managed to drag the three cartons from the sitting room to the small spare room.

“You know, it seems to me that as we’re doing all this unpacking, we should at least get our pick of the shelves.” Hermione straightened, kneading the small of her back with one hand.


The girls proceeded to unload their own books, filling the smaller bookcase completely and taking an additional two shelves of the larger one. The rest of the books remained in the cartons, pushed off to one side of the room.

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“Next!” Hermione was suddenly filled with the energy of new projects and the chance to impose order on chaos, a prospect she thoroughly relished.

They dragged the two miscellaneous cartons to the kitchen next. As soon as they set foot in the room, Gemma stopped short.

“What…?” she began. And then she raised an eyebrow, one corner of her mouth curling in a half-smile. “You sly thing,” she said softly.

The glass jar containing the bouquet of miniature roses stood in the middle of the kitchen table, where Hermione had moved it before leaving the morning before. By now, every bud had opened,
and the entire, lush bouquet was a riot of colour and rich perfume.

“You were just here, weren’t you! You and Draco, I’ll wager. When?”

Hermione couldn’t help grinning, her cheeks pink. “We came on Wednesday afternoon, after exams. Well, after…”

“I’m so relieved you two talked it all out. Things still looked pretty grim when we left you. Apparently, though” --she turned a teasing smile on Hermione-- “you both managed to work through that, I see!”

A small smile curved Hermione’s lips and she reached out, lightly resting her fingertips on the petals as she leaned in to breathe in their fragrance. “Yeah, I suppose we did, at that.”

Later, as the girls rolled the suitcases down the hall, Hermione stopped them at the first bedroom. “Here, this one. You don’t mind, do you? They’re both pretty much the same. It’s just that…”

Gemma snickered. “You came Wednesday afternoon and you left…when? Just tell me you didn’t do it in our bed too, yeah?”

By the time Draco and Danny returned, the mound of stuff in the sitting room had disappeared almost completely. The duffels and suitcases stood neatly in a corner in Draco and Hermione’s room, three of them already unpacked. The book cartons had been dispatched to the spare room, and half emptied. The working kettle was now perched on the countertop ready for use whilst the other, now the repository of some of the roses, graced the coffee table in the sitting room. The mismatched mugs, glasses, utensils and other miscellany had been squirrelled away into cupboards and shelves in the kitchen. Cosmetics and other toiletries filled the vanity and the mirrored cupboard above the sink. A hair dryer, a straightener, and a magnifying mirror sat in a basket on a shelf to the side of the sink. Towels hung on the racks. Shampoos, conditioners, bath gel, and soap stood sentinel in the corners of the bathtub. The bright yellow rubber duck sat in pride of place on the rim.

Outside, the bicycles had been chain-locked to the rack just inside the small alcove next to the outside entrance.

The two girls were stretched out, one on each sofa, when there was the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

Danny walked in first, carrying a large paper sack from which the most delightful aroma was wafting, filling the room. Both Gemma and Hermione perked up, sniffing appreciatively, but didn’t move. He stopped and surveyed the two of them, shaking his head. “Would you look at this, mate? Here we’ve been knocking ourselves out and they’re just lying about like they’ve nothing better to do.”

Gemma, eyes closed, muttered a cheerful “Get stuffed, Kirman.”

Draco was right behind him, a bag in his hand as well. “Tsk… Well, at least all that shit isn’t in the middle of the floor anymore. What did you lot do, just shove it into the hall and then decide to have a nice lie-down?” He glanced heavenward, sighing theatrically. “And after we brought dinner and a bit of bubbly, too!”
Hermione regarded Draco with satisfied calm. “See for yourself. And then,” she added, smiling sweetly, “you can bring us a drink and serve us our dinner, if you please. And tidy up afterwards.”

The two boys exchanged glances, barely containing their grins. Depositing the food and drink in the kitchen, they commenced a quick tour of the entire flat, one end to the other, and returned, the grins now full-out ones of delight, which—after another exchange of glances and winks-- they immediately tried to stifle as they re-entered the sitting room.

Draco doffed an imaginary hat with a long, low flourish.

“Brilliant! I commend you both. Everything looks great!” He eyed the clutch of roses sprouting from the tea kettle, one eyebrow lifting in amusement. “And so homey too. Come on, Kirman!” he said briskly. “These girls look famished.”

Well. Certainly could get used to this sort of treatment, and no mistake. The girls settled back with twin sighs, contentedly listening to the pleasant bustle and clink of plates and cutlery being gathered from cupboards and drawers, and the sounds of containers being opened, framed by the low buzz of occasional muffled conversation.

A good deal of noisy rummaging through cupboards at one point was a bit alarming, and a sudden “oh shit!” had them stuffing sofa cushions over their faces to stifle their giggles as they wondered what the disaster could have been, and which one of the guys had done it. A moment later, the distinctive pop of a champagne cork changed the mood from near-hysterics to pleasant anticipation.

Danny appeared suddenly with place mats, silverware, and napkins, and proceeded to set them down on the dining table at the other end of the room.

“Something smells incredible,” Gemma began. “Is it--”

“Patience, patience.” He grinned enigmatically. “Almost ready. Chef’s slaving away in there!”

Hermione let out a snort.

“I heard that!” came the indignant retort from inside the kitchen as Danny pushed open the door.

Danny poked his head out two minutes later, giving them the “okay” sign, and they sat down at the table, napkins spread politely on their laps. Almost immediately, the kitchen door swung open and both boys came through, laden with dishes. Draco was first, a large platter in his hands. Hermione wondered in passing where he’d managed to find it, and then her attention was arrested by what steamed so tantalisingly on it as he set it down in the centre of the table.

Laid alongside a bed of spinach sautéed in olive oil and garlic were tender chicken cutlets parmigiana, the rich red sauce sending up clouds of tomato, basil and garlic-scented perfume, all of it in a blanket of mozzarella cheese that bubbled invitingly.

Behind him, Danny came bearing a large bowl filled with spaghetti in a thick, fragrant Bolognese sauce.

Both girls sat open-mouthed for several seconds, until finally, Hermione managed to translate her surprise into words.

“Wow!” she breathed. “This looks—amazing! Malfoy—both of you, I mean—wherever did you get this? Because if it tastes anywhere near as incredible as it smells, we’ll definitely want to go back there!”
Draco’s smile was almost insufferably smug by now. “I believe that information shall remain the province of the male half of the household for the time being. Suffice it to say that we have endeavored to anticipate your every need and desire, imagining how hard you two must have been working on our behalf. And now…” He inched discreetly backwards towards the door, pushing it open just enough to peek through, just before Danny came through with a chilled bottle in one hand and a quartet of glass tumblers in the other. He grinned a bit sheepishly as he set them down on the table and poured out some champagne into each.

“Sorry,” he shrugged. “All I could find in there, guys.”

A sudden mental picture of the years of formal entertaining Draco had grown up with at the Manor flashed before him. His parents would shudder at the very idea of serving champagne in glassware that was squat and chunky-looking and obviously meant for juice or water or milk. He let out a quiet snicker at the thought.

Curious, Hermione’s eyes rose to meet his, but he bit his lip, shaking his head as he swallowed down his private mirth. “Yeah, it’s all we’ve got here, I’m afraid,” he sighed. “Think we can make do, though, yeah? All in a good cause.”

“Getting totally blind,” Danny muttered, raising his glass. “Hear, hear!”

“It’s fine, really,” Hermione reassured them, Gemma concurring avidly.

“Right then. First toast. To Draco,” Danny said, his glass still in the air. “For being outside Gemma’s door at the right time and for having the bollocks to eavesdrop, and then for coming up with the idea of asking us to share.”

Draco inclined his head with exaggerated modesty, gave Danny a small salute, and then they all touched glasses and took a swig.

“Me next,” Gemma enthused. “To Hermione, for agreeing, and to both of you for inviting us. Oh—and for stopping all that rubbish finally and coming to your senses, else we’d have been moving in here alone and we couldn’t have done, could we, so really, none of us would be here now! Sorry!” she laughed. “That didn’t come out quite right, but you know what I mean!”

“And somehow, this girl is studying at Oxford. I ask you,” Danny sighed, gesturing in his girlfriend’s direction.

“Oi! What about my toast?!” Gemma protested, pointedly ignoring him as she raised her glass. All four glasses clinked once again and were emptied. Draco hurried to refill them to the foaming brim.

“My turn now,” Hermione smiled. “To our good friends”—she gestured to Gemma and then Danny — “who, in accepting the invitation, really made this possible for us. And… I think… I really do think… it’s going to be great fun living together, the four of us!”

Draco caught her hand beneath the table and gave it a gentle squeeze. Her eyes darted to his, and there she saw warm, shining certainty. Sudden tears threatened and she wiped at them fiercely with the back of her other hand.

“Uh-oh, there she goes,” he drawled. “No need to get all weepy on us, Granger. You lot better be prepared. This girl is round the twist, blubs over everything. Oh, and did you know she chats to her plant? No joke. Real nutter, this one.” Lounging back, loose-limbed, in his seat, he hooked an arm around Hermione and pulled her close, giving her a fond wink even as she poked him in the chest.

“Thanks.” Her whisper tickled his ear.
By the time the main course was done, everyone was leaning back in their chairs, about ready to burst with the surfeit of wonderful food and drink.

“Tell me you didn’t buy anything else, Malfoy,” Hermione groaned, holding her stomach.

Draco looked at her with round, innocent eyes. “Didn’t I?”

“No, you didn’t… did you?” There was a certain desperation in her question.

Draco and Danny exchanged small, triumphant looks, and then Draco rose from the table, disappearing into the kitchen once again, whistling cheerfully. And again, there was the sound of dishes being pulled from cupboards.

Within a minute, he was back. And now, on the table, along with small plates and forks, was a plate of delectable-looking pastries: miniature éclairs, profiteroles, shortbread, fruit tarts, and more.

“Oh-h-h…” An explosive sigh issued from both girls, who looked dazed at the prospect.

“If you don’t fancy any sweets now, then later, perhaps…?” Smiling serenely, Draco reached into a pocket of his jeans, pulling out a fair-sized, expertly rolled joint. “Been saving this for tonight. Last of the Staircase 5 stash. Well, nearly. Give us a light, Kirman, will you?”

Genially, Danny reached over to flick his lighter, firing the tip, and Draco sucked in a first, long hit, clamping his lips shut and passing the joint to Hermione, whose eyes had widened for a fraction of a second before she accepted it, dragging deeply on it and then sucking it down.

“Good shit,” she croaked, and everybody laughed. Draco pressed a kiss to her head. That was his Granger. Game for just about anything, though up to now, this was something they’d done only occasionally together, at a party or when relaxing with some of their friends. Somehow, though, he suspected her experience with weed predated his, going back to summers at home between terms at Hogwarts. She could probably teach him a thing or two.

“C’mon, let’s adjourn to the sofas, troops,” Danny said, slightly woozy now. “More comfy.” Slipping an arm around Gemma, he half-dragged her up out of the chair. She made a quick grab for the pastry plate in passing as she stood.

“Hermione, the champagne!” she giggled, and then she and Danny flopped down on one of the sofas. The plate of pastries landed with a slight bounce next to the kettle of roses on the coffee table.

The bottle was drained gradually, and the joint made the rounds until it was down to just a tiny fragment.

Hermione couldn’t remember precisely when the music had been switched on, but Gemma’s CD player now sat on the coffee table as well, a disc spinning inside. A song she was familiar with
“Oh! I love this!” she exclaimed, sitting up. She’d been curled up against Draco, his arms and bent knees containing her in a loose embrace. Her sudden movement roused him from the light doze into which he’d slipped. He stretched, burrowing further down into the cushions and regarded her with a lazy grin.

“Me too,” Gemma nodded enthusiastically from her place on the other sofa, where Danny was stretched out, his head in her lap. She began to sing along. “Another turning point; a fork stuck in the road…”

Hermione immediately joined in, and the two girls sang quietly, the song evoking private memories of other places, other times, other parts of their lives.

“Time grabs you by the wrist; directs you where to go.
So make the best of this test and don’t ask why.
It’s not a question but a lesson learned in time.

It’s something unpredictable but in the end it’s right.
I hope you had the time of your life.

So take the photographs and still frames in your mind.
Hang it on a shelf in good health and good time.
Tattoos of memories and dead skin on trial.
For what it’s worth, it was worth all the while.

It’s something unpredictable but in the end it’s right.
I hope you had the time of your life…”

Sighing wistfully as the final, poignant guitar chords swelled and then faded, Hermione fell back against Draco, pulling his arm over her own and pressing a kiss to his palm.

“What brought that on?” he asked softly.

“Oh, I don’t know… memories…”

“Of what, love?”

“Tell you later,” she whispered. “Okay?”

He nodded. “There is something you can do for me right now, though.”

“Oh?” Hermione curious. “What’s that?”

“Well, you know, I rather fancy one of those pastries. Could you…?”

“Sure,” she said, leaning forward to snag a profiterole from the plate. She turned to hand it to him but he shook his head, smiling wickedly.

“Uh-uh. Feed me.” He waited a heartbeat, and his voice dropped to a hungry whisper, the tip of his tongue teasing first his upper and then his lower lip. “Please.”
A small thrill shot through Hermione at that last word, and a faint smile ghosted over her own lips. She leaned in, holding the profiterole right over Draco’s mouth, as she carefully separated the two halves, both filled with luscious whipped cream.

“Open up,” she told him.

“With pleasure,” he said, his voice low and silky, and then she watched, mesmerised, as his tongue snaked out to bury itself in the thick cream. He devoured it, taking slow dips deep into the cream and then curling small dollops of the confection back into his mouth, licking his lips with pleasure, and then tunnelling in once again. His eyes never left hers, a faint, wolfish smirk playing about his mouth the whole time.

“Oh,” he said softly, when virtually all the cream had been consumed. “How very rude of me. I neglected to share. I believe there might still be just a bit left. Please allow me make amends.” Lowering his head to the nearly empty shell, his tongue made one final swipe of its tender interior, and then he buried his hand in her hair, pulling her very close, and pressed his open mouth to hers. The offering was sweet and rich as his cool, agile tongue twined itself seductively around her own.

The moment was so intense and all-consuming that everything else dropped away into oblivion for several heart-stopping seconds. And then they broke apart, staring at each other, hardly breathing, as they came back to themselves and the world came rushing back all around them.

There was the faint sound of a throat being cleared.

“I’d say get a room, but… you’ve already got one. Down the hall.”

It was Danny. He and Gemma, comfortably entwined on the other sofa, were regarding them with twin expressions of amusement.

“Bugger off!” Draco chuckled, lobbing a small pillow in the direction of Danny’s head as Hermione buried her face in his shoulder, blushing madly.

“Get over it, Granger,” he whispered, laughing. “Reckon the jig’s up.”

“No shit!” she giggled into the fabric of his shirt, and then she looked up, her cheeks still pink. “Maybe we should go to bed.” She giggled again self-consciously. “I mean…”

“Yeah, definitely!” Danny and Gemma chorused, laughing, and then she added, “Do us a favour!”

“Excellent suggestion,” Draco agreed gravely. “Come on, then-- up you get, Hermione my love!”

Holding out both hands, he pulled her to her feet and slipped an arm about her waist. She swayed, slightly unsteady, and then allowed him to guide her down the hall and into their room.

Their room.

It was a lovely thought. So new, so strange, and yet… so pleasing.

The small, bedside lamp cast a yellow nimbus of warm light in the shadowy bedroom. Draco led Hermione to the bed, and together, they sat down quietly at the end, hands clasped.
“What was that song, anyway?” he asked abruptly, breaking the silence. “From before.”

“Oh… that. It’s by an American band called Green Day. It came out two years ago.” Her voice grew nearly inaudible now, and he leaned closer. “The summer after seventh year. Right after… well, you know.”

The closing days of the Voldemort war. He nodded, his fingers idly tracing tiny, soothing patterns on the back of her hand.

“Seventh year was… well, it was all about running, and being scared all the time.”

“For me too,” Draco whispered, gazing steadily at the blocks of fan-shaped light thrown by the small lamp onto the pale, painted wall above and below it.

“Yes.” She gave his hand a quick squeeze. “For everybody I knew… all my friends. Every one of them. And Harry… Harry and Ron… We weren’t children anymore. And some of us didn’t make it. Not long after I went home, finally, I heard that song on the radio. And right away, it made me think of how it was early on, when we could still just be kids and worry about silly things. Beastly homework from Snape, playing pranks, visits to Hogsmeade, who got a Howler that day at breakfast…”

“Quidditch, the House Cup, Peeves…” Draco remembered with a small grin.

“Right!” Hermione chuckled ruefully. “Even Peeves. The song has always reminded me, somehow, of all of that. When we were mostly still innocent. Memories and pictures I’ll always carry with me.”

They fell silent for a while, their breathing rhythmic and steady in the more voluminous quiet of the room. Through the large, open casement window, the back garden was a dark expanse lit by swaths of summer stars and by the silver face of the moon, glorious in her near-fullness.

And then she spoke again. “Thank you, Draco.”

“For what?”

His fingers had resumed playing a light, ticklish tune on her hands, slowly migrating towards her bare arms. Hermione sighed, her muscles feeling like butter as she relaxed into his touch. Lovely.

“You saw that I was feeling a bit overwhelmed during the toasts, and more important, why. And then you made a joke so that Danny and Gem wouldn’t realise why I’d--”

“Lost the plot?” Draco suggested, his eyes dancing impishly.

Hermione smacked his arm lightly. “Thanks! No, silly! You know.”

“Yeah, ‘course I do,” he murmured, his fingertips inscribing light circles and figure eights on the tender skin of her inner forearms now.

“You know, all of a sudden, I just looked round at everyone, and I thought… we’re all here. For real. We’re really doing this. And… and suddenly, I felt—I know it sounds like a silly cliché, but I felt like all was right with the world. I mean… suddenly, it all just seemed to click, you know? All of us hanging out together. We really do get on well. I felt… I don’t know… content. And like it’s going to work out fine. Not that it’s going to be perfect or anything, but that we can do this. Does that make any sense?”

Hermione gazed at Draco, her eyes large and liquid in the dimness, the lamplight like reflected stars.
His fingers had inched along until they’d reached the soft flesh at the insides of her elbows. Now they trailed higher, running pathways along her upper arms.

“It makes perfect sense, Granger,” he replied simply. “I felt it too. Comfortable. I don’t think we’re going to cock it all up.” He laughed lightly. “Reckon we’ll do fine.”

“I was thinking, though… we’ve really got to be careful now,” Hermione mused, dropping her voice again. “Don’t want to get too comfortable and … you know… forget. Where’s your wand?” She mouthed the question.

“Hidden. Locked case in my duffel,” he reassured her. “No worries.”

“But…” she persisted. “I mean we’ve got to watch what we say as well. We could be overheard. We can’t get careless!”

“Too right.” He nodded soberly, but his attention was on her shoulders and collarbone now, where his fingers were moving in gentle, meandering caresses. They rested for a moment in the hollow of her throat before continuing up that slender column to the line of her jaw, fanning out so that he cupped her face between his hands.

“No more talking now,” he told her firmly, and kissed her. And then, in a single, deft move, he lifted her tank top over her head, tossing it to the floor. Her bra went the way of the shirt a second later.

Reaching for him now, she tugged at his t-shirt until obligingly, he peeled it off. Then, smiling, she ran her hands from the flat of his abdomen up his chest to his shoulders, the downy, blond hair trailing below his navel and lightly dusting his upper chest like silk beneath her questing fingers.

Arms threaded around each other, they fell sideways onto the bed, their mouths eagerly seeking and claiming, hands searching, soothing, and igniting in turns.

They had managed to dispatch the scant remainder of their clothing, and now, a light sheen of sweat gleamed on their bare flesh. Draco lay on his back, drawing Hermione up over him like a second skin, pressing and moulding her to himself. They seemed fused at every point, each small movement supple and organic, as if they were truly one flesh.

Lifting her, he drew her forward just a bit more, and she sighed, bending her head to shower kisses on the damp skin of his neck, where the soft, fine hair clung now, and then down his throat and along his collarbone and back again to his sweet mouth. The velvet warmth of her sex teased his cock, as slowly, she rubbed against him in deliberate, tantalising circles. Just when he felt that the sweet torture of her touch would drive him mad, she rose up, driving back against him suddenly, impaling herself on him. Their fusion was complete, exquisite, the walls of her womb clenching around him.

They began to move together in earnest now, in a series of rippling undulations born of instinct and pleasure and desperate need all at once.

Suddenly, there was a noise. It was indistinct and almost unobtrusive at first, a sort of quiet, rhythmic knocking. They slowed, listening, wondering if they themselves were the cause, if perhaps the bed were hitting the wall with every thrust.

Gradually, the sound became louder, more frantic, and it was clearly not in synch with their own movements. And then they heard it. A moan. And then another, this one louder.

Draco clapped a hand over Hermione’s mouth just in time.
“Oh, Merlin!” She gulped back a titter beneath his palm, her eyes going wide with surprise.

“Don’t. Laugh,” he said sternly, biting his own lip. “If we can hear them, then…”

Hermione blanched. The end of that sentence was pretty obvious.

Just then, there was a shout coinciding with a high-pitched gasp and a small shriek.

“She’s a screamer,” Draco remarked with calm detachment, and then it was all over. Collapsing in laughter, they frantically buried their faces in the pillows, but it was no use. Draco rolled them over, pulling the entire duvet over them, hot as that was. Her face was pressed into his shoulder and his into the pillows. He was still inside her, but his erection was fading fast.

“I’ll murder him,” he gasped, helpless tears of mirth leaking out of his eyes. “I swear!”

Hermione snorted. “Come on, Malfoy, be fair! In the last two days, we’ve already shagged in every room in the flat—well, except theirs. That’s five—no, six—times. Twice in the bathroom.”

“Right. See? Told you a proper bathtub with a shower was a must.” Draco grinned happily at the recollection, propping himself on his elbows and gazing down at her.

“So—surely we can give them this one. We’re already five up!”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay.” Draco grew quiet for a moment, and then his face lit up. “Fancy a nice, cool bath? I’ll scrub your back!”

Hermione didn’t seem to have heard. She sat up, suddenly, her eyes huge. “Oh gods, we have to look at each other over breakfast tomorrow, don’t we! What do you suppose we sounded like?”

“That doesn’t bear thinking about. Which is why, Granger, we’re putting Silencing Spells on both bedrooms first chance we get! That was way too much information.” He shuddered. “Think I might just be scarred for life.”

She laughed, rolling her eyes, and pulled him into her arms. “Never mind them for now!” she whispered, giving his earlobe a nip. “I rather like that idea of a cool bath. Will you wash my hair for me?”

He nodded, his nose buried in the clouds of hair that already smelled so fresh. Apricots.

They slipped quickly into their clothes, and then Draco grabbed Hermione, playfully hoisting her up behind him, piggyback-style, for the quick trip down the hall.

The bathroom door shut behind them with a quiet click. There was the sound of a lock being jiggled.

She: (relieved sigh) "Seems okay."

He: (shaking his head) "Piece of crap. Not on."

She: "Right, then, I'll..."

He: "Allow me." (quietly) "Colloportus!"

Pause.
He: "Perfect. Now.... Come here, you..."

TBC

Disclaimer: Only the original plot and characters belong to me. I make no money from this story.
A/N: Thanks to my fantastic betas, kazfeist and mister_otter. You guys are the best!

Chapter End Notes

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A/N: Thanks to my fantastic betas, kazfeist and mister_otter. You guys are the best!

The chapter title and quoted lyrics are from "Our House," by Crosby, Stills, and Nash.
Saturday, 17 June

The morning dawned clear and bright, with the promise of much cooler, more typical English summer weather. Draco glanced balefully at the bedside clock, absently rubbing his belly. It was sticky with the dried residue of last night’s activities, which had got off to rather a shaky start, what with having to listen to the show in the next room. However, he and Hermione had more than made up for the temporary disruption of the mood, in an extended bath that had the singularly delightful effect of cooling them off whilst at the same time kindling a slow burn, and then with a lovely, long shag in their bed afterwards. And—on the desk, up against the wardrobe, and finally, flat out on the rug. Wincing slightly, he rolled onto his side, laying cautious fingers on the rug burn he now had on his left buttock.

Seven sodding thirty. It really was absurdly early. For a Saturday morning in general, and for this one in particular, after the very late night they’d had, coupled with the indulgences they’d enjoyed. Every songbird in Britain must be in the trees outside their windows, raising a ruckus, and there was
fuck-all he could do about it. They didn’t care that his head weighed about ten stone at the moment.

He looked at the small figure curled up next to him, her hair fanned out on the pillow in a tangle of curls and waves. He could see her chest rising and falling gently as she slept, and every once in a while, her mouth would move, her lips pursing. Twice, the tip of her tongue darted out and she licked her lips and swallowed. Once, she murmured something unintelligible very softly and then rolled over onto her other side, away from him.

He lay there, watching the patterns of sunlight and shadow that dappled the ceiling and thinking. Fucking amazing, that’s what it was. He’d actually pulled it off. What he’d been wanting, hoping for, for the past month—and unconsciously, for even longer, he had to admit—had become a reality. It was really rather startling that such a thing could have gone from abstraction to concrete reality in so short a time, but there it was. A cocky grin crept across his face. He always had been rather good at getting what he wanted when he put his mind to it. Then he shook his head, letting out a quiet snort. Don’t be an arse. The truth was that more than anything, he was relieved that she’d been willing to take a chance on him, despite her fears. He would make certain she never regretted her decision.

Next to him, Hermione stirred, her hair hanging in front of her eyes. She pushed it out of the way and looked at Draco blearily.

“What time is it?” she murmured, her voice hazy and indistinct, and then, “Oh-h-h…”

He reached out, gently moving a wayward tendril from her eyes, and grinned. “Feeling a bit manky, are we? Bit too much…”

“Of everything,” she groaned. “Really shouldn’t have had that last éclair…”

“At three in the morning!” he chuckled. “No, you probably shouldn’t have done. Not that I’m anyone to talk, considering I had some of the leftover spaghetti.”

She propped her head on her hand and promptly made a face. “And you ate it cold too! Straight from the fridge! Ugh! Now that was disgusting, Malfoy!”

“Well, darling,” he drawled, pulling her close. “I needed to build up my strength. You wore me out!”

“Prat!” she giggled. “I wore you out? Don’t you think it was rather the other way round?”

“Well, maybe so, but you definitely did your bit. I’ve got proof! See? Look!” He rolled over onto his stomach, grinning smugly at her sharp intake of breath at the sight of the angry red welt on his bum.

“Did I do that?” She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide, and then she began to giggle again.

He turned back to face her, one eyebrow raised in a hint of mock reproach. “You most certainly did, you insatiable little wanton. I’m practically crippled. I shall need help bathing and getting dressed every day for… for... well, indefinitely! It’s the very least you can do.”

Hermione nodded gravely, her lips twitching. “Oh yes, absolutely. What about a shower right now whilst everybody is still asleep? I’ve some really nice vanilla bath gel if you—”

“I said help me bathe, not make me smell like a bloody cake!” he snorted. “But that shower sounds like a very good idea. I’m actually sticking to the sheets! Come on, Granger, up you get!”

Laughing like a pair of little kids, Hermione shushing Draco and then breaking into uncontrollable
little giggles herself, they pulled on loose boxers and t-shirts, and carefully opened the door to the hall. The coast was clear, and they made their way silently down the hall to the bathroom, both wincing when the old floor boards creaked loudly under Draco’s foot at one point.

Disappearing inside the bathroom, scene of the previous night’s tryst in the tub, they shut the door, locking it the conventional way this time, stripped off, and hopped into the bathtub. Hermione reached for the taps and started the water running from the shower head. It came out ice cold at first, and they both jumped, goose bumps erupting on their skin.

She’d finally managed, after some fiddling with both the hot and cold knobs, to get the water to a comfortable temperature, and now both of them stood under the cascading water. It streamed down over them like a warm, delightfully relaxing waterfall.

Suddenly, there was a rattling and then a banging on the door.

“Oi! Need to have a pee! Open up!”

“Can’t it wait, Kirman? I’m in the shower!” Draco yelled back.

“You mean we’re in the shower!” Hermione hissed, and pointed to the transparent glass partition that was the only thing shielding them from view—or rather, not shielding them at all. “Look, I’m not going to stand here totally starkers whilst he--”

“No shy, are we, Granger? We’re all friends here! Hey!” he protested, laughing as he neatly dodged a smack to his arm. “Just joking!”

The banging recommenced, and Draco got a rather dramatic answer to his question.

“No! Can’t wait! It’s an emergency!”

Both Hermione and Draco rolled their eyes mutely, and she switched the water off as he handed her a towel in which to wrap herself. He did the same, and then stepped out of the tub to unlock the door.

Danny stepped in, his relief evident. Breaking into a mischievous grin, he gestured magnanimously at the two of them. “Carry on, you two! Don’t mind me!”

“Yeah, well, thanks anyway, but I think we’ll just wait. Want us to clear off?” Draco asked sardonically.

“Nah, I’m not bothered if Hermione isn’t,” Danny replied cheerfully.

Draco glanced quickly at Hermione, and she shook her head. “I’ll just close my eyes,” she said, and then she did, squeezing them shut.

“Right, then.” Danny turned to the toilet to do his business.

A very long moment passed.

“Fuck’s sake, Kirman, you out to break some sort of record or something?” Draco exclaimed, exasperated, as the stream that seemed never-ending continued.

Danny merely laughed, finishing off at last with a small shake and then washing his hands. The knock on the door that sounded just as he was drying them brought groans from the tub.

“Danny? You in there? Really have to pee!” Gemma sounded desperate.
Danny looked over at Hermione and Draco with a small grin. “Well?”

Draco groaned. “You might as well let her in, it’s Kings bloody Cross in here now anyway!”

The door opened to reveal a rather frantic Gemma hopping from one foot to the other. She took one look at the gathering, weighed her options, and then ordered everyone to “Just close your eyes!” before pulling down her pyjama bottoms and plonking herself down on the toilet.

“Well, well, isn’t this cozy,” Draco observed drily, one hand over his eyes and the other clutching his towel. “Right! Now will you lot get the fuck out and let us finish our shower?” He paused, and gave Danny and Gemma an ingratiating smile. “Please?”

Danny put a hand to his heart as he stepped aside to allow Gemma access to the sink. “I’m wounded, Malfoy,” he opined. “Whatever happened to share and share alike? Togetherness? All for one and--”

“Piss off,” Draco retorted amiably. “Now!”

Finally, they had the bathroom to themselves once again. By this time, both Hermione and Draco were shivering as they tossed the towels onto the closed toilet lid and turned on the water once again.

“Let’s make this quick,” he muttered. “I’m bloody freezing!”

“Reckon I can warm you up again,” she said softly, squirting some liquid soap into the nylon mesh puff sponge and squeezing a couple of times to lather it up, and then gently sponging his skin, beginning at his shoulders. She worked her way down his back, moving the sponge in gentle circles, until she reached his buttocks. Then her touch became even lighter as she neared the inflamed skin on the left cheek. Eventually, slipping her hand between his legs so that she could reach his balls and cock, she lathered them thoroughly, alternating the sponge with her hand, before moving to his inner thighs. She knelt, finally, as the sponge made a languorous trip around to the front of his thighs and over his knees, sliding over his calf muscles and down to his ankles, ending with a careful washing of every toe and the bottom of each foot. Then, from her position crouching at his feet, she smiled impishly up at him, and began wordlessly to work her way back up the fronts of his legs.

Knees, thighs, groin -- special attention to his penis, now fully erect and darkly flushed -- belly, chest, arms, neck… and then the puff sponge fell to the bottom of the tub, forgotten, drifting with the water that swirled towards the drain, caught in the eddying currents of bubbles.

* 

Apart from the leftovers from dinner the night before, there really was pathetically little in the fridge. Hermione wandered into the kitchen dressed in a pair of jeans and a cotton t-shirt, her hair damply curling about her face and her feet bare. Gemma was already there, her back to Hermione as she rooted round the fridge, hunting for anything vaguely breakfast-like that they could eat.

“Not a hell of a lot here, I’m afraid,” she sighed. “And I’m starved!”

“After last night? Really?” Hermione was slightly incredulous.

“Oh yeah, I’m always hungry. You’ll see!” Gemma laughed ruefully, shaking her head. “That’s why I can never stick to a diet! I always bollocks it up in the first week. Hey, I know…” She pulled a plate out of the fridge, holding it up triumphantly. “We can have the leftover pastries and some
coffee! I found some in the freezer. What d’you reckon?”

“Mmm.” Hermione nodded, picturing a custardy fruit tart, gleaming and succulent on a plate. “Okay. I’ll make the coffee. Oh! But we don’t have any milk! There’s a shop a few blocks up, isn’t there? I’ll just pop round and get some. Be right back!”

By the time Draco and Danny found their way into the kitchen, they were following their noses as the rich, seductive fragrance of freshly brewed coffee and something deliciously savoury wafted out into the rest of the flat.

The girls were busily setting out plates on the kitchen table and looked up brightly as the two boys drifted in, sniffing appreciatively.

“What’s all this then?” Danny asked. “Smells really good in here!”

“Sit,” Gemma instructed firmly. “It’s our turn this morning. We’ve cooked!”

Obediently, Draco and Danny sat down and were pleasantly surprised with plates of cheesy scrambled eggs, rashers, and buttered toast, and glasses of chilled orange juice. Mugs of steaming coffee waited by the plates, pots of marmalade and strawberry jam and a container of milk in the centre of the table. The combined aromas were heavenly.

For a few blissful minutes, the only sound was of cutlery clinking against dishes as the boys eagerly tucked in. Hermione and Gemma cast smugly pleased glances at each other and then began to eat as well.

At last, Draco sighed happily, patting his stomach. “Brilliant! Thanks!”

“Yeah, really great,” Danny chimed in. “Where’d all this food come from, anyway? It wasn’t here yesterday!”

“I just bought it. Across the street and up the road a bit— oh, you know, that little supermarket, the Swift Shop, at the corner of Howard Street.” Hermione paused, waiting for affirmation. “I went just for milk,” she continued, “and then I thought, whilst I’m here, why not just get some eggs and cheese and bread, all this stuff, and make a proper breakfast while we’re about it?”

“Excellent idea,” Draco pronounced, raising his mug in a sort of salute to her. “Good thinking, Granger.”

Gemma had a sudden thought. “Oh! Hermione, how much do we owe you? For all this food?”

Hermione waved her hand airily. “Nothing. Don’t worry about it. My treat. After all, we’ll still be using the food after you and Danny have left.”

“Well,” Gemma said slowly, “all right. Just this once. Thanks, Herm.”

Danny echoed the sentiment and they returned to what was still left of the meal. The last of the coffee was being enjoyed when Draco set his mug down, regarding Danny and Gemma with studied nonchalance.

“So…” he began. “Sleep well, did you?”

Hermione darted a quick glance at him. He gave her a covert wink, though his face remained serene.

“Yeah, we did,” Danny replied warily. “You?”
“Mostly. But there was this really weird banging noise. Couldn’t quite place it at first, you know? Think it might have been the pipes, but I’m not sure. Did you lot notice it at all?” There was a wicked glint in his eye now.

“Oh yeah, you know, we heard that too, now you mention it!” Danny nodded earnestly. “Bang bang bang. Must’ve been the pipes, yeah. House as old as this one, bound to be.” His eyes locked with Draco’s as he struggled to keep a straight face. Gemma, on the other hand, had gone quite rosy.

“Though I wonder,” Draco mused, his expression guileless and openly quizzical now, “whether this house might be haunted as well. There was a shriek. Really loud. I was sound asleep. Scared the living shit out of me!”

Hermione bit her lip and looked away, willing herself not to laugh.

“A shriek? Don’t believe we heard anything like that, did we, Gem?” Danny’s face was the picture of innocence. “Though you know, there was a point when I could have sworn I heard a voice in the wall saying, ‘Yeah, just like that! Oh, baby! Give it to me!’”

“Right. Male voice. Oddly familiar, too,” Gemma mused, now past her mortification.

“Yeah. Oh-h-h-h, baby! Give it to me!” Danny repeated, his voice theatrically ragged with desire. “Just like that.”


Gemma swallowed the last of her toast and scoffed. “Yes, well, the description of the flat should have said, ‘Very thin walls. Have sex at your peril.’”

“Too right!” Hermione agreed, and then flushed slightly. “We were… you know…”

“Shagging each other blind,” Draco filled in blithely. “Go on, Granger.”

She rolled her eyes, her blush deepening. “Thanks. Yes, well… we were… doing that, and then we heard you two through the wall, and of course, we realised you must have heard us as well!”

“We did.” Danny nodded, grinning. “Sod-all we can do about it, though. Unless celibacy is an option.” He quirked an eyebrow and looked around the table. “Didn’t think so,” he laughed.

“Reckon we’ll either have to be a bit more quiet or a bit less delicate,” Draco concluded. “Maybe move the beds away from the walls a bit.” *And cast that Silencing Spell.*

The male half of the household offered to do the washing-up, which was only fair in any case, the female half pointed out, as they hadn’t tidied up after dinner the night before and all those dishes had had to be done before breakfast could be made.

By ten, the kitchen was clean (well, clean-*ish*, the girls decided. They would definitely have to do something about the somewhat dodgy notion of “clean” the guys seemed to be content with.).
everyone was dressed, and they were ready to head back to the college, where Danny and Gemma’s parents would be collecting them at about noon. Time enough to say goodbye for the summer to whichever stragglers remained in the staircases.

Back in Holywell Quad, there was a flurry of activity as people hauled luggage out of their rooms and met their parents. Mark and Tony were just coming out of Staircase 5 as Draco approached, hoping they might still be about somewhere. Each of them had a large, unwieldy duffel bag in tow, the canvas fast becoming scuffed and dusty as the duffels bumped down the stairs and were dragged along the ground.

“Malfoy!” Mark said sunnily. “Thought you’d gone. How’s the new flat?”

“No complaints,” Draco answered mildly. “You off then?”

“Yeah, my dad’ll be here any minute. We’re giving Spencer a lift home. Next town over.”

Tony grinned. “My parents are just as happy not to have to come up. Hell, wish I could stay. Malfoy, you wanker! How’d you manage to worm the rent out of your parents for the summer?”

“Didn’t. I’m… well, I’ve got some inheritance money. Decided to use that. And besides, I’ll still be working at Blackwell’s. Hermione too. So we can swing it.”

“Lucky bastard,” Mark chuckled. “Can I come visit? One week at home and I’m ready to climb the walls!”

“Me too?” Tony asked hopefully.

“Yeah, sure. Bring Mags and Suze. There’s Danny and Gemma’s room—they won’t be back till sometime in August. And then there’s the spare room. It’s small but it’s got a futon. Two of you could crash in there. Ring us first, though. Don’t just turn up. Here, got some paper? I’ll write down the number.”

Both Tony and Mark pocketed the slips of paper on which Draco had scribbled the phone number. Just then, a man who looked very much like an older, balding version of Mark called out, waving as he headed in their direction.

“My dad,” Mark said, shrugging. “Reckon it’s time to go. Okay, well…don’t be a stranger, Malfoy. See you!”

“See you!” Tony echoed, giving Draco a final wave, and the two of them hoisted their duffels and moved off towards Mark’s father.

Meanwhile, Gemma was busy gathering all her remaining belongings. Hermione helped, the two girls pulling zips closed on suitcases and a pair of duffels. One duffel was especially stuffed, and Gemma straightened, wiping the sweat off her forehead. The sun shone full force through the window, making the small, stuffy room uncomfortably warm on this June morning.

“Bloody thing won’t close!” she huffed in frustration.

“Here, I’ll sit on it!” Hermione offered, and straddled the duffel as Gemma worked on the recalcitrant zip, tugging and pulling and cajoling until it finally closed.

“Phew! That’s it, then! Let’s get this lot downstairs. My parents will be here any minute!” She bent to get a grip on the strap at one end, whilst Hermione grabbed the one at the other end, and the two girls lifted it with twin grunts, moving awkwardly down the two flights of stairs to the ground level.
Danny met them on his way back up to the third floor, where his room was nearly empty.

“Hang on,” he said. “Look, my parents are just outside. Mum wants to meet you, Hermione. And Draco. Don’t think they’ve twigged to the fact that it’s me and Gemma together, and you two. They think it’s me and him sharing, and you two in the other room. So—don’t let on, right?”

Hermione grinned. “No worries.”

Once outside, Gemma’s belongings were stacked in a small mountain next to a bench where they sat, waiting for Danny to return. Draco waved from across the quad, where he was deep in conversation with Steve Holdstock and Chris Pullman. Danny burst out of Staircase 2 a couple of minutes later and headed towards the girls, simultaneously waving at a middle-aged couple waiting under a tree. The woman bore a striking resemblance to him, Hermione noticed. She was slender, fair-haired, and attractive, and as they approached, both she and Danny’s father seemed genuinely pleased to see their son.

“Oi! Malfoy!” Danny called, gesturing to Draco, who detached himself from the conversation and ambled over.

“Mum, Dad, you know Gemma of course,” Danny began. Gemma smiled as Danny’s mother gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “And… these are my other flatmates, Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy.”

“How do you do, Mr. and Mrs. Kirman?” Hermione said politely, holding out her hand. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

“How do you do, Hermione?” Phyllis Kirman said, smiling. “And… Draco, is it? What a very unusual name! How do you do?”

“How do you do?” Draco echoed, shaking her hand and then Mr. Kirman’s. “It’s Latin, actually. For ‘dragon.’ My… um… mother reads a lot of… Tolkien.”

“How fascinating! That’s something we have in common, then. Well, Roger,” she said to Danny’s father, “let’s get this show on the road, shall we? Where are your things, Daniel?”

Daniel. The other three grinned furtively at each other.

“I’ll help,” Draco offered, and he and Danny picked up two ends of a duffel.

“Where’s the car, Dad?” Danny asked, hefting his end a bit higher for a better grip.

“Just outside. Follow me,” Roger Kirman directed, and strode off, the other duffel over his shoulder. His wife followed, pulling the wheeled suitcase along behind her.

“Go with them. You’ll have a bit more time with him,” Hermione said quickly, giving Gemma a small push. “I’ll watch your stuff.”

Gemma smiled gratefully. “Thanks!”

She hurried off after the others, leaving Hermione to sit with all the remaining belongings, one small girl on an island of luggage in the midst of a sea of people and activity.

Alison and Polly from the first floor and Mags, who’d lived just above Hermione, emerged together from Staircase 2 then, and spotted her. They rushed over, and there were hugs and promises to get together over the long vacation.
“E-mail me. Or call. Here’s my number,” Hermione told them, writing the new phone number on Mags’ proffered hand, reciting it as Polly and Alison programmed it into their mobiles, and then taking theirs. “Anybody know if Suze has left already?”

“Yeah.” Maggie nodded. “Her dad came early this morning. She lives in Cornwall. Long drive. She said to say goodbye and to give you her number.” She rummaged in her pocket, finally extracting a scrap of paper. “Here. Oh, and Fee said to tell you she’d be in touch.”

“That’s great. Now look, you lot,” she instructed them all, “come visit, okay? There’s plenty of room.”

A final round of teary-eyed hugs, and the girls separated, just as Gemma and Draco reappeared, Gemma suspiciously bright-eyed.

“I’m all right.” She smiled tremulously, her voice husky. “Just being stupid. I’ll see him in two weeks. Call me, yeah? I’ll miss you!”

“I will,” Hermione said warmly, and the two girls hugged one last time as Gemma’s parents approached.

* *

Draco slung an arm around Hermione’s shoulders as they walked along the High towards Magdalen Bridge, casting a sidelong glance at her as she strolled alongside him. Her cheeks were flushed pink with the warmth of the early-afternoon sun; her hair, pulled back into a ponytail, was slightly frizzy with the humidity, loose tendrils curling about her face and the nape of her neck. Her skin, lightly tanned, had begun to freckle. There was already a delicate sprinkling across the bridge of her nose.

Sensing his gaze, she turned her head and smiled shyly at him.

“It’s just us now, isn’t it, Hermione,” he began quietly. “You… you don’t regret it… do you?”

Hermione stopped walking and looked him straight in the eye, one hand on her hip.

“Draco Malfoy,” she began sternly, and then her features softened, and she reached up to cup his face in her hands. “No. No, I don’t. I promise.”

Rising on tiptoe, she drew his face closer and kissed him. It was a tender, lingering caress, and he warmed to it immediately, wrapping both arms around her and kissing her back ardently, sheer relief mixed in equal measure with love.

They broke apart finally, wreathed in irrepressible grins, and resumed walking. Catching her hand, he wove his fingers through hers, and gave them a quick squeeze. “Let’s go home, yeah?”

Home. It was a lovely word. And in a way, so very new. Oxford had become home over time, and he’d thought he understood the meaning of it, finally, in a more grown-up sense, as a place where one chooses to put down roots. But its meaning had changed somehow, swelled and deepened, since moving in with Hermione had become a fact and not just a fantasy any longer. Home. Something told him that this step they’d taken together was going to lead them somewhere surprising, certainly, even scary at times -- but altogether right.
Sunday morning, 18 June

“Mum? Hi!” Hermione struggled out of the depths of sleep, blinking her eyes a couple of times and shaking herself awake as she pushed her hair away and pressed the phone receiver to her ear. Draco lay buried beneath the coverlet, only the very top of his blond head showing. At the sound of her voice, he stirred, wrapping himself around her with a small, contented sigh.

“Oh, I’m fine. We’re fine… No, they’re not. They left for home yesterday morning. Right… You… When? Tonight? Oh… No, don’t be silly, I’ll… I’ll make dinner! Yes, all right. It’ll be great. See you about seven then. Love you, Mum. Bye!”

Oh gods. This wasn’t happening. She wasn’t ready yet. There was still stuff that needed unpacking. Aside from breakfast food and a bit of leftover chicken parmigiana and spaghetti, there wasn’t even any real food in the fridge! They would have to…

“Malfoy! Wake up!” she wailed. “My parents want to see me—us—and the new flat! They’re coming for dinner tonight! They wanted to take us out, but like a complete idiot, I told Mum I’d cook!”

Draco peered up at her, sleep still fogging his brain. He rubbed his eyes and focused again. Hermione was sitting up, a look of utter panic on her face.

“I mean,” she continued, “we’re not ready for company! There’s almost nothing to eat, and there’s definitely nothing to drink! The flat will need to be cleaned! Circe’s tit, what is wrong with me? Why did I say I’d cook? The words just flew out of my mouth!” She smacked her forehead with the heel of her hand and groaned.

“Well, Granger, I’d say you… Hang on. Circe’s tit?” He snickered. “That’s a new one from you!”

“Oh!” She blushed. “Yeah, well, somebody came up with that one sixth year. Oh, but that’s neither here nor there! What’ve I done, and how do I get out of it?”

He yawned, stretching luxuriantly, and then fixed her with a cheeky grin. “You don’t, I’m afraid. Looks like we’re having company tonight. Chin up, love, it could be worse.”

Hermione looked miserably at him. “How?” she asked, her voice wooden.

“My parents could be coming as well.”

At Hermione’s somewhat panicked urging, they hurried through a quick breakfast of coffee and toast, threw on their clothes, and began tidying up the flat. Draco tried to calm her, reassuring her that it didn’t matter if the flat wasn’t perfectly spotless and they hadn’t quite finished unpacking yet
(“You mean you haven’t finished! I’m all done!” was her sharp retort)—that not everything had to be 
just so. His entreaties fell on deaf ears.

She was frantically hoovering the sitting room when he waved at her above the whinge of the 
machine.

“Going downstairs! Back in a minute!” he mouthed, pointing to the door.

When he reappeared three minutes later, he looked shell-shocked. Standing in the open doorway, an 
envelope in his hand, he wavered for the moment, apparently unable to decide what to do with 
himself.

When he didn’t move even as the hoover came near to running over his foot, she switched it off and 
looked closely at him.

“What is it?” she asked, now genuinely alarmed. “What’s wrong, Draco?”

Wordlessly, he handed her the envelope and then sank down on one of the sofas. Quickly, she pulled 
the letter out. The heavy, creamy stock was oddly familiar.

12 June

Dearest Draco, she read.

Your father and I are quite eager to hear how you are getting on, now that you-- and Miss Granger, 
we presume -- will shortly leave university accommodations and move into your own place. Perhaps 
by the time you read this, you will already have done so.

As it happens, we will be just outside Oxford on Sunday, the eighteenth, visiting old school friends 
who have lived there for quite some time. We would very much like to see you then. You indicated 
this past weekend that the others with whom you will be sharing the flat will have gone home by that 
time, so we plan to Apparate directly to you. Perhaps we could have dinner at that lovely restaurant 
at the Damselfly once again. I’ll leave it to you to choose.

If this is inconvenient for any reason, you may use an owl at the post office in Bellewether Crescent 
to contact us more quickly. I realise that you are busy with your exams now, so you need not write 
back if the idea of our visit is agreeable to you. If I don’t receive word from you, I shall assume that 
we may come as planned. Expect us at seven sharp on Sunday evening.

We look forward with great pleasure to seeing both you and your lovely Hermione.

Mother

“This letter is postmarked the thirteenth. I bet it’s been sitting in our box downstairs since 
Wednesday!” Hermione sat down next to Draco with the identical dazed expression on her face. 
“We never thought to look! And now,” she said slowly, “it’s too late to stop them. Oh gods. I can’t 
very well tell my parents not to come! And now there’s no way to prevent your parents coming 
either!”

Suddenly—the unsettling notion of either set of parents turning up for an impromptu visit aside-- the 
bizarre idea of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy and Richard and Claire Granger sitting down to dinner
together hit them both.

“We’re fucked.” Draco’s voice was calm and matter-of-fact.

“I know.”

Suddenly, there was a low snicker. Hermione turned her head to look at Draco. He was slowly going quite red in the face, biting his lip as he tried to hold back the laughter that would not be denied. Finally it burst out of him, and he lowered his head to his hands, resting his elbows on his knees, and laughed helplessly.

She stared at him for all of a minute before she lost it too, leaning back on the sofa cushions and laughing until she cried.

“Merlin!” he wheezed, wiping his eyes finally. “We are so totally fucked! This… this cannot be happening! We… we only just moved in two days ago, for fuck’s sake! And… and what the hell are we going to do with them?”

Hermione was lying back on the pillows, taking in great gulps of air as she fought to regain some control. Now she shook her head and shrugged, a small hiccup escaping her as she heaved herself up off the sofa and reached for his hands.

“I think we’re going to make dinner. And pray. Come on, Malfoy. We’re going shopping!”

“Right. Here’s the list,” Hermione announced briskly, fishing a long piece of lined paper from her shoulder bag.

They stood just inside the entrance to the local Tesco, a short walk away in the Cowley Road. It wasn’t a terribly large supermarket, but it was fairly close and convenient, with just a bit more of a selection than the Swift Shop, and Hermione hoped fervently that she’d find everything she needed. Within five minutes of finally accepting that this family gathering was absolutely unavoidable, she had resolved to take the proverbial bull by the horns. The most logical choice was to cook something she was fairly familiar with, at least—a meal she’d helped her mother prepare often, growing up. She knew the very one.

She’d made the shopping list from memory, confident she knew the ingredients by heart. In addition, there were the staple items they’d need anyway in order to stock the larder properly.

Now, the two of them set off, Draco pushing the trolley. The wheels protested with a constant squeak, the back set persisting in turning the wrong way as if to try and impede the forward motion of the trolley.

It wasn’t until they were partway down the fresh produce aisle that Hermione suddenly remembered something.

To the best of her knowledge, this was Draco’s very first time grocery shopping.

She gave him a quick sidelong glance. He seemed quite taken with the place, in fact, gazing raptly at the gleaming shelves stocked to the brim with every conceivable sort of product.
“Okay,” she said, half to herself. “Fruit and veg first. Malfoy, see if you can find some nice pears, yeah? I’ll look for some strawberries. Bilberries too, if they’ve got any.”

He nodded, starting off in the direction of the fruits, laid out in graduated tiers of glowing primary colours. Before long, he was back, clutching an armful of brown pears to his chest.

“They’re hard as rocks, you know,” he shrugged, dumping them straight into the trolley. A couple missed, bouncing as they fell and skittering down the aisle like stones. “Break a tooth on that lot.”

Hermione bit her lip to keep from laughing. “First off, we put them in plastic bags—see over there, you tear one off the roll and put the fruit in, so you don’t have to carry everything loose. And we don’t buy the really hard ones! They’ve got to be just a little soft. Firm but pliant, you know?”

Draco’s face took on a thoughtful expression as his eyes travelled down to Hermione’s chest and then back up to her face. “Yeah, think I know just what you mean,” he drawled with an impudent little smile.

She pulled a face, fighting her own grin. _Prat._ “As I was saying… you should be able to press and make a small indentation with your finger, but the flesh will spring right back. That’s how you know it’s nearly ripe.”

“Like the sound of that,” he murmured. “Can I try?”

For a moment, as he drew closer, she wasn’t sure if he meant the pear or her. To be safe, she held out a piece of the fruit she’d just chosen from the bin. “Here, give it a squeeze.”

Holding the pear in the palm of his hand, he pressed the pad of his thumb against its flesh, which gave slightly under the pressure and then resumed its shape. Stroking the spot idly, he looked at Hermione and nodded.

“Oh, and… the smell. I forgot to mention that.”

“It’s supposed to smell?” Draco was nonplussed for the moment.

“No, I mean there should be a hint of ripeness in the fragrance. It should smell nice and sweet. That’s how you tell. It’s like that with melons too. See?” She picked up a cantaloupe and stuck it under his nose. “Smell anything?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“That means it’s nowhere near ripe. You want to smell a bit of its perfume. And—” She grabbed his hand, pressing his finger to the navel of the melon. It was quite hard to the touch. “Did it give at all?”

Again, he shook his head.

“Smell the pear now.”

For one brief moment, their eyes met, and there was a wicked gleam in his as he brought the ripened pear up to his nose, closing them and smiling as he inhaled. Then his eyes opened, fixing on hers, and he took a slow, deliberate bite.

She couldn’t tear her eyes away, her feeble protest dying in her throat as he chewed, finally licking the juices from his lips with lazy flicks of his tongue.

“Delicious,” he said softly. “Thanks.”
She swallowed, flushing slightly, and began pushing the trolley again, feeling his grin at her back.

They moved slowly along the produce aisle, loading the trolley with a variety of colourful salad ingredients, bags of onions and small red potatoes (She: “No, they’re supposed to be hard. If they’re soft, they’ve gone rotten!”), three kinds of berries, a large head of cauliflower (He: “That’s what it looks like when it comes out of the ground? Bit dodgy, if you ask me!”), and pears that were just soft enough that they could be used by that evening.

Gradually, they made their way around the entire supermarket, aisle by aisle, the whole endeavour somewhat protracted because all along the way, Draco’s curiosity was piqued.

“Hang on! Let’s have one of those!” he said excitedly, reaching for an object that hung alongside other small cooking tools and utensils above the top shelf in the household section. “What the fuck is it, though?”

Hermione giggled. “It’s a garlic press, silly! You stick a clove of garlic inside and squeeze the handles together, see, and voila—the garlic is crushed and the juices and small pieces come out through those little holes. We don’t—”

“Oh yes we do,” he replied firmly, dropping it into the trolley. “We’re having it.”

They hadn’t gone very much further when something else caught his eye, and he reached up and snagged it. “Hey, what about this, then?” he asked brightly.

“Malfoy, we don’t really need a meat thermometer! Not unless we plan to roast a huge turkey or something!”

“Well, you never know. We could do. Eventually. What’s it for, anyway? Checking to see if the turkey’s got a fever?” He snickered at his own cleverness.

Hermione groaned. “To measure the temperature inside a big bird or joint of beef, to make sure it’s thoroughly cooked. So nobody dies of salmonella poisoning or something.”

“Right. Like I said. It could come in useful. Don’t want to be killing off our dinner guests, do we? Um… what’s salmonella, then?”

Hermione sighed, rolling her eyes, and pushed the trolley onward.

By the time they were ready to pay, a small hibachi grill, a bag of charcoal briquettes, a plunger (“Daft-looking thing! What the hell does it do?” And then a second later, “You put it where?”), a lever-style “rabbit” corkscrew, an “inside the shell” egg scrambler (“Save you loads of time, Hermione!” “What do you mean, me?” “Well, I’m total rubbish at scrambled eggs!”), a Dial-O-Matic Food Slicer (“Oh, now this really is bollocks, Malfoy!” “I beg to differ. It looks quite ingenious!”) and an electric tin opener had joined the meat thermometer and the garlic press in the parade of supermarket oddities that had captivated Draco.

“I’m telling you, Granger,” he said firmly, “all this stuff is indispensable. Or will be, at some point. You’ll see.”

Hermione could only shrug helplessly and nod. There was no shifting him. And anyway, it was really rather cute, she thought, this fascination with Muggle objects, though she’d never tell him that. Ironic too. Who would have imagined, years ago, that one day, Draco Malfoy would have something in common with Arthur Weasley, of all people?

Just before getting into the check-out queue, she suddenly clapped a hand to her forehead.
“Merlin! Nearly forgot the ladyfingers for the trifle! Stay here, yeah? I’ll be right back!”

She scurried off, leaving Draco with a very full trolley, standing off to one side in the household items aisle and surrounded by toilet paper, tissues, kitchen towels, and light bulbs. When she glanced back, he was curiously examining little plug-in air fresheners.

When she returned, he was nowhere in sight. Suppressing a groan, she set off to try and find him.

It was the old cat-and-mouse game, except that Hermione couldn’t tell for certain who was the cat and who the mouse. But it did seem as if Draco became more elusive with each aisle she turned down.

At last, she spotted him busily inspecting an array of pruning shears in the gardening section. When she approached, clearing her throat noisily, he looked up, flashing her a bright smile.

“Look at these, Granger! Beauties, aren’t they?”

She cocked a sceptical eyebrow at him. “Since when are you into gardening, Malfoy?” she snorted, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Well, I could! I did rather like watching the house-elves taking care of the grounds when I was little, you know! Always wanted to help, but they would never let me. Think I’ll get a pair of these and try them out in the back garden, what d’you reckon?”

He looked so pleased with himself that she hadn’t the heart to discourage him.

“Well, why ever not?” she said. “Great idea. So—what did you think of your first-ever grocery-shopping experience?”

Draco waved a hand blithely at her. “Piece of cake. Rather enjoyed myself, actually.”

Hermione looked away with a secret smile, and then looked back at him. “That’s great! Fancy having a go at making trifle? That’s next, after we get all this lot put away.”

The kitchen was a frenzy of activity from the moment they arrived back at the flat, laden with shopping bags. Each one of them was unpacked, its contents sorted and put away, with almost military precision. It was apparent to Draco that Hermione was a woman with a mission, and he was loath to obstruct that in any way.

Finally, only the ingredients for the trifle remained on the work surface.

Suddenly, Hermione turned to Draco with a look of abject horror.

“Gods,” she said in a strangled voice. “How could I have been so stupid? We bought all this stuff for trifle and I just assumed… I didn’t even check beforehand to see if we’ve a glass bowl to make it in! And oh-h-h,” she wailed, “why didn’t I think to buy wineglasses? They have them at Tesco!”

Draco studied her for a long moment, and then, without a word, took the bottle of Pinot Grigio they’d just bought back out of the fridge, opening it with their new corkscrew and filling a couple of tumblers.
“See? Told you it would come in useful,” he said lightly, and pointed to the chair next to him. “Sit!”

She hesitated, and then reluctantly sat down, looking perfectly miserable.

“You mean, why didn’t _we_ think to buy wineglasses, don’t you? Because it’s not just you having to deal with this, you know.” He sighed, a rueful grin on his face. “It’s just our parents, Hermione,” he began, and then paused. “Okay, yeah, I take that back. It’s not quite that simple, I know. But—don’t go getting your lacies in a twist over this. We’ll manage. And in the end, it doesn’t matter what happens, because we’re _here_, we’re _together_. It’s a fait accompli. If they don’t like something—”

“Or _each other_,” she muttered.

“Or that, yeah,” he conceded, “well, that’s just tough.” He leaned in, tipping her chin up with a finger. “Now you just sit for five minutes and drink your wine and relax! In a minute, I’ll check and see if there’s a proper bowl. If there isn’t, I’ll go back to Tesco and buy one. It doesn’t matter about the wine glasses. They’ll be fine using these. It’ll all come right in the end, you’ll see.” A quick kiss and then he lounged back in his chair, an easy smile on his face.

In that moment, she felt a surge of love mixed with gratitude and relief so profound, she could have cried. Instead, she swallowed very hard, took a sip of her wine, and tried to block out thoughts of the bowl and the trifle, and the hundred other things she knew were clamouring to be done.

Merlin be thanked, there was a bowl. A very generous one too, even if plain. It would be perfect for the trifle.

As Hermione was setting everything out and preparing to make the vanilla custard, Draco came up behind her, his voice a warm whisper on the back of her neck. “Be right back. Won’t be a minute.”

She nodded, distracted, feeling the brush of his lips on her neck, and then he was gone.

Right. Ladyfingers into the bowl. Half a cup of Grand Marnier poured over them to soak. Frozen raspberries, raspberry jam, and sliced strawberries and bilberries spread on top. Easy. Tin of Mandarin oranges, mixed liberally with the berries. Lovely. Next, a sprinkling of sliced, toasted almonds.

Now—the custard.

Pulling a saucepan out of a lower cupboard, Hermione carefully measured out nearly three cups of milk, setting it on the cooker to heat. The remaining milk was mixed with cornstarch, sugar and salt, the way Claire had always done it. When the milk in the saucepan began to bubble and frizz, she added the mixture in, and began to stir constantly. Before long, the custard began to thicken, bubbling merrily. Humming to herself, Hermione added a bit of vanilla extract, stirring well, and then poured the finished custard directly over the cake and fruit, watching as creamy fingers of it seeped down into the layers beneath. Now it would have to cool, and then she’d cover it and pop it into the fridge. The final layer, a frothy crown of whipped cream, would be done later.

She was just finishing the initial washing-up when there was the sound of a key turning in the front door.
Draco appeared in the kitchen within a minute, slightly sweaty from the warmth of the afternoon sun. In his arms was a large bag, in which there was a fair-sized cardboard box. This he put on the table with a satisfied grin.

Hermione looked at him, uncomprehending, her hands still soapy from the dishes.

“Go on, have a look,” he urged, still grinning. He really was looking absurdly pleased with himself.

Shaking her hands over the sink, she wiped them absently on the seat of her jeans and wandered over to the table, peering inside the bag. Then her eyes widened, and she looked up sharply at Draco, a delighted smile lighting her face. *Wineglasses.* True, they were just Tesco’s standard issue, but they were good, all-purpose wineglasses and nobody would expect a couple of students to have anything finer anyway. And most important of all, they *weren’t* ordinary water tumblers.

“You… Oh, *Draco!* You went back for them! I can’t believe it! Thank you!”

She launched herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him so tightly that he began to laugh.

“Steady on, Granger!” His grin was playful. “I’d like to live long enough to use these!”

Her face pressed tightly against his t-shirt, she breathed in his very distinctive scent, clean and masculine, mixed with a light lacing of sweat from his recent exertions in the afternoon sunshine. “I love you, you know,” she whispered.

“’Course you do.” His smile was cocky.

Laughing, she reached round to swat his bum.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“For being so sure of yourself!”

“Shouldn’t I be?” He tightened his arms around her waist, and his voice grew soft. “Aren’t you… now?”

“Yes,” she whispered, and truly, she was. Even now, it was something of a surprise.

The next couple of hours were taken up with a variety of tasks. Draco excused himself to finish his own unpacking so that he could get rid of the unsightly cartons that were still in the spare room, and hide the empty luggage in a closet. Hermione sat down at the kitchen table and made herself a list of what to do and when to do it, so she would stay on task with the dinner preparations.

The menu would include a whole roasted chicken with herbed new potatoes and onions, a big, tossed salad, and one of her mother’s specialties: a whole head of cauliflower slathered in a delectably rich cheese sauce. It was gorgeous when it turned out right, and she was excited to show Claire that she really could pull it all together by herself. There would be sliced pears with a nice Stilton and a tawny port for starters, the Pinot Grigio with dinner, and then the lovely trifle for afters, with coffee and a bit of that Grand Marnier.
Not hard to do, this meal, but impressive when it all turned out right. She crossed her fingers and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. It just had to turn out right.

The plan was to get the chicken and potatoes into the oven by half six, allowing an hour for them to fully roast. The cauliflower and its sauce wouldn’t need to be started until perhaps a quarter past seven. Draco could entertain everyone whilst she was busy in the kitchen with all that. Everyone would have plenty of time-- half an hour at least-- to relax over a glass of wine and the fruit and cheese, and hopefully, at least make a crack in the ice that she knew would be there.

Her parents and the Malfoys. Strange bedfellows indeed. Then again, any of her or Draco’s friends from Hogwarts would have said the very same of them, as well she knew. And just look where they were now.

Which reminded her: she hadn’t told Harry or Ron or Luna or anybody that she and Draco had moved in together. She was fairly sure he hadn’t said anything to Theo or Blaise or Pansy either. That was something they really needed to do, and she wondered briefly at the fact that they hadn’t yet, either one of them. In any case, it was yet another note to self added to her list.

A sudden hammering distracted her from her scattered thoughts, and she went to find the source of the noise.

She found Draco in the sitting room, hammering a nail into the wall above one of the sofas.

“Found a toolbox in the hall closet.” With a grin, he held up the hammer, and then resumed banging the nail into the wall.

“What are you--” she began. And then she saw.

It was the map that Lucius had bought in Oxford back in March and that he and Narcissa had had specially framed for Draco’s birthday present. The tiny silver dragons tossed their heads and spat fire, swishing their long tails excitedly in the polished green field that framed the antique reproduction map of Wiltshire, so beautifully detailed. Both Stonehenge and Malfoy Manor were prominently marked. The Malfoy family crest was outlined in silver as well, and gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight that shone through the tall windows. Draco’s delight at having such a treasure was evident. Hermione could only wonder at how he must feel, knowing that it had really been his father’s to give.

“What do you think, eh? Good spot for it?” He stood back, looking at his handiwork.

She moved to his side, slipping her arm about his waist, and they looked at the map together.

“Perfect,” she told him. “It looks wonderful.”

They stood together quietly for a moment, and then Draco looked down at Hermione and the teasing glint was in his eyes again.

“So—all ready then? Not about to have a nervous breakdown, are you?”

Hermione giggled. “No, I’m not! I’ve got almost everything ready to go. It’s just waiting in the fridge. But—would you do the salad, please? That’s the one thing I haven’t got to yet. Don’t worry, it’ll be easy—most of it’s in a bag all ready to use. You just need to wash everything and cut up some tomatoes and mushrooms and peppers. I’ll show you.”

“Yeah, ‘course. Reckon I can manage not to cock it up too badly. When d’you want me to start?”
“Oh, maybe round about half six, when I put the chicken in the oven. Then I’ll do the pears and cheese—oh, and the whipped cream for the trifle-- and you can get the drinks ready, yeah?” She blanched suddenly, glancing at her watch. “It’s nearly six! They’ll be here before we know it! I need to get into the shower right now!”

“Fancy some company?” Draco waggled his eyebrows suggestively, a wolfish leer playing faintly about his lips.

Hermione broke away, calling over her shoulder, “Nope!” Her playful laughter floated back to him as she disappeared down the hall.

He stood stock still for just a minute and then took off after her, his own exuberant laughter trailing in her wake.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: My heartfelt thanks go first and always to my marvelous betas, kazfeist and mister_otter, who are such a tremendous source of support, not to mention practical information if ever I have a question. Thanks to Kaz for some great menu ideas!

The title for this chapter comes from a track of the same name off Fleetwood Mac’s *Madison Blues* album.
“There!”

Hermione stood back from the cooker, arms folded in satisfaction. The chicken, potatoes and onions were in. Moderate oven, Gas Mark 4. One hour’s time and it should be all done—a savoury roast chicken, tender new potatoes flavoured with rosemary and sage, and sweet onions.

Now.

Her attention turned to something completely different: whipped cream.

She rummaged in a lower cupboard, looking for any sort of mixer, and found a hand model, which was perfect—and a huge relief. Muttering to herself, she realised this could easily have been yet another disaster in the making. She’d never known herself to be so flighty and scatterbrained. It simply wasn’t like her to plan something without making sure she had everything she needed to execute it properly. And yet, she’d gone off half-cocked with this trifle on two counts. Well, the gods must be smiling on her, that was all.
She was still bent over, the mixer in her hand, when suddenly she felt a pair of hands at her waist, tickling and pinching lightly. Straightening and twisting around, she found Draco, his grin playful.

“It’s half six. Time to do the salad, yeah?”

He looked so eager with that winsome, little smile on his face, that Hermione couldn’t help laughing. She pulled him into a hug, ruffling the silken fringe of hair that fell into his eyes.

“Your mum will tell you that you need a haircut, you know,” she murmured. “But I like it this way.”

He dipped his head down and nuzzled her neck, leaving a couple of soft, tickly kisses below her ear. “Then this way it shall stay. Now…” He left a soft kiss on her jaw and another on her chin, and then brushed his mouth against hers. “What…” -- a feathery kiss -- “do you…” --another, this one slightly more prolonged— “want me…” -- his lips pressed against hers with a bit more urgency and then they opened slightly, and she could feel just the tip of his tongue caressing her bottom lip-- “to do?”

_Rip my clothes off and take me right here on the kitchen table!_ “Um… uh…” Hermione shook her head involuntarily to clear it as he moved a step back, his roguish smile betraying a clear awareness of his effect on her. “Take the bags of salad out of the fridge… that’s it, yeah…” She nodded as he turned to her, holding up the plastic bags of mixed greens. “And those little containers of tomatoes and mushrooms…”

He held them up for her approval and she nodded. “Right, and the red and yellow peppers. I left the colander in the sink for you—the round, metal thing with the holes in it, yeah. Just put everything in and then rinse it with cold water.”

She took a deep breath, leaning back against the kitchen table as he got busy washing all the salad ingredients. She could hear him humming to himself amidst the splashing of the running water. The crisp t-shirt he was wearing showed the long line of his back and his fine shoulders. He’d rolled the sleeves even higher, and the compact, nicely defined muscles of his upper arms rippled as he moved, the pale-gold down on his forearms glinting in the light. And oh, he had those wonderful, faded jeans on again, her favourite pair. They hugged his perfect bum and clung to his thighs like a soft second skin. His feet were bare, and she noticed he was flexing and curling his toes unconsciously as he stood there.

As if he could sense her gaze-- as if her very thoughts were being transmitted directly from her head to his telepathically-- he turned his head, a lazy half-smile lifting a corner of his mouth. She blushed, turning back to the table where the bottle of double cream waited next to the bowl, a sack of castor sugar, and the mixer. _Get a grip, Hermione. You’ve got people coming in twenty minutes. This is not the time._

Resolutely, she poured the cream into the bowl, plugged in the mixer, and began the process of turning the rich, thick liquid into frothy, whipped clouds, adding a quarter cup of the sugar and a teaspoon of vanilla extract just before the bowl was filled with peaks of white. Meanwhile, Draco had finished washing all the vegetables, and now he turned from the sink, drying his hands on a small towel.

“Right, Granger, what now?”

She glanced at her watch. Ten minutes to seven. Suddenly, there was a clutching, fluttery sensation at the pit of her stomach. “Right,” she muttered, “see the knife rack and the cutting board? They’re at the end of the work surface, right next to the microwave. Okay, just slice the mushrooms and the peppers very thin—oh, forgot to tell you, you’ll have to cut the peppers in half first, and get rid of the stuff inside, the seeds—and then just throw everything into that big bowl I left you, and mix it with
Draco nodded wordlessly, moving his base of operations down to the other end of the kitchen near to
the windows, where the early evening’s mellow, golden light poured into the room.

_**Right. Finish the trifle and get it back into the fridge. Then the cheese sauce—must set that up, have it ready for later. Oh, and the cauliflower too. Silly cow, you’re forgetting.**_

The inviting aroma of roasting chicken filled the kitchen. Oblivious to it, Hermione worked quickly,
adding the whipped cream to the trifle and then assembling all the ingredients for the cheese sauce—
thank Merlin she’d thought to cube the cheese earlier!—and finally preparing the cauliflower itself,
leaving it in the sink for the time being. Suddenly she remembered something, and ran to the fridge,
pulling out the blue-veined wedge of Stilton and grabbing a plate to put it on.

“**Bugger!**” she swore softly, as she dumped the pears out of their ceramic bowl and into the colander,
running the water over them haphazardly and then shaking the excess away, sliding them back into
the bowl and running back to the table to begin slicing them up.

Swiftly arranging the fruit on the plate around the wedge of cheese, she stopped abruptly, yet another
nearly-forgotten detail coming alarmingly to mind.

“**Draco—the wine!** We’ve got to decant it and put it out on the coffee table with the glasses! Can you
do that, please?”

Draco had finished tossing the salad, covering the large bowl with cling film after a prolonged battle
with it. He’d ripped off several sheets of the stuff, only to have each one instantly fold in on itself and
become utterly stuck (“**Stuff’s bloody useless, Hermione! What the fuck…!**”) Finally, he stowed the
covered bowl with some difficulty in the fridge, jamming it into a space where it fit grudgingly next
to the trifle. Manoeuvring their positions just enough, he was able to close the fridge door on the third
try without it popping back open again. The stream of muttered imprecations coming from his end of
the kitchen made Hermione snicker quietly.

Unfortunately, the bottle of tawny port he’d picked up to serve with the cheese was in the back,
**behind** the trifle and the salad. Now he swore under his breath again, knowing he’d have to open the
fridge and shift everything round once again in order to get at the wine.

Everything came out and the two bowls went back in, protesting as he pushed the door shut on them,
giving it a swift kick for good measure and shutting his eyes for a second, hoping he hadn’t just
ruined the dessert that Hermione had worked so hard to get perfect. Then, making several trips back
and forth, he brought the decanted wine, a placemat, the napkins and small plates Hermione had left
for him, and three of the glasses out to the sitting room.

Hermione set the platter of cheese and sliced pears, glistening and succulent, beside the decanter, and
hurriedly arranged napkins, a knife, and the small plates to one side and the glasses on the other.

It was five minutes to seven. Draco had just reappeared, the remaining three wine glasses in hand,
when there was a loud buzzing sound. Hermione started, and then laughed at herself.

“It’s the intercom,” she sighed. “Must be Mum and Dad. I’ll let them in.”

Hurrying to a small box-like gadget on the wall, she pressed a button, holding it for several seconds
and then opening the door.

Claire was first as the Grangers neared the top of the stairs, with Richard not far behind.
“Good exercise,” she puffed, with a small laugh. “You’ll stay in great shape having to manage all these stairs every day!” She reached the top finally and drew Hermione into a tight hug and kiss. “Hello, darling!”

Hermione laid her head on her mother’s shoulder for a moment, closing her eyes and smiling.

Behind them, Richard cleared his throat dramatically, opening his arms. “All right, all right, my turn, I think!” he chuckled. “How are you, Kitten?”

“Daddy!” Hermione found, to her surprise, that her eyes were filling up, and she laughed a little as she wiped at them with her hand. “Oh, I’m so happy to see you both! Please-- come in!”

Claire stepped in first, looking around the cozy sitting room with a small smile of approval on her face. “Oh, but it’s lovely, Hermione!” And then she noticed Draco, who had put the glasses down and now stood by the table, shyly waiting. Instantly, she went to him and drew him into a hug.

“Draco dear,” she smiled, taking his hands in hers, then, and holding them firmly for a moment. He smiled back, surprised yet again at the rush of warmth her affection elicited inside him. There was still an edge of the new and strange about it. Such spontaneity of affection was simply not something he’d experienced, growing up, his own parents’ displays—or rather, his mother’s, his father’s being virtually nil—being somewhat more reserved and formal for most of his childhood. Certainly, it had never been a part of his experience that people outside his own family would respond to him with such unabashed warmth.

“Hello, Mrs. Granger,” he began, and then, at the teasingly reproachful glance she gave him, he grinned, flushing slightly. “Sorry, I keep forgetting. Claire. It’s good to see you again.”

“And you, darling. You’re looking well. Both of you.” Her gaze swept back over Hermione as well, and she gave him an approving nod.

“Thank you,” he answered quietly, suddenly tongue-tied. Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait long for something to say, because a moment later, Richard was shaking his hand.

“How are you, Draco? Things look to be going well. How was the move, then?”

Draco replied, grateful to have something concrete to talk about in the face of the sudden awkwardness that seemed to settle over all of them then, a natural by-product of the very situation that had brought them all together: the fact that at the tender age of twenty, he and Hermione were now living together. Nobody was deceived that this was being undertaken casually, either, despite their young age.

“Mum, Dad,” Hermione interjected. “Please… sit down.” She gestured towards the sofas and her parents made to sit, and then Richard stopped Claire with a sudden hand to her arm.

“Claire, would you look at that!” His attention was riveted by the framed map on the wall above the sofa on which they’d been about to sit. “It’s a map of Wiltshire! It looks quite old too!”

“Oh!” Claire breathed. It’s… it’s simply magnificent!” Then she moved closer, her eyes narrowing. “Richard, does it look to you as if--”

He peered at the map, his brow furrowed quizzically. “By God,” he began incredulously, “it looks as if those dragons are--”

“Moving! They are. They’re…oh, my word…they’re breathing fire, aren’t they!” Claire sank down on the adjacent sofa, from which she continued to stare at the map, thunderstruck.
“Where did the two of you get this?” Richard’s gaze swung around to Draco, dawning awareness in his eyes. “I suspect that I should really be asking you this question, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes, well… it was a birthday present, actually. From my parents. They came to visit in March, and my father bought the map in a shop in the High Street. He had it specially framed and they gave it to me last weekend when I was home. That’s our family crest at the bottom, you see. It’s…” Draco smiled awkwardly, a bit ill at ease all of a sudden. “The frame, I mean—it’s enchanted. Well,” he laughed slightly, “as you see. If it bothers you, I can make them stop.”


“Indeed,” Hermione’s father murmured, still staring as he sank down on the sofa beside his wife.

“Wine?” Hermione chirped brightly, her voice an abrupt distraction.

Both the Grangers nodded eagerly, casting furtive glances back at the little silver dragons, which writhed and lashed their long tails, belching tiny puffs of smoke and streams of flame.

Draco busied himself pouring out glasses of the port whilst Hermione prepared plates of fruit and cheese. There was evident relief for everyone in having the more mundane focus of eating and drinking with which to occupy themselves.

After a moment or two, though, Hermione stood up.

“Would you excuse us for a minute, please? I need Draco’s help in the kitchen.” She smiled, and then caught his eye, tilting her head, her look saying Now.

“Oh, of course, sweetheart,” Claire murmured, concern drawing her brows together in a mild frown. “Take your time.”

Hermione clutched at Draco’s t-shirt, pulling him close once they were inside the kitchen behind closed doors.

“Is this going to be a total disaster? Please tell me it isn’t!” she implored him.

“It isn’t.” He shook his head, at the same time willing himself to believe his own words.

At the same time, outside in the sitting room, hurried whispers were also being exchanged.

“Well, let’s face it. We’ve known for nine years that she’s a witch! I suppose it shouldn’t come as a surprise that she’d fall in love with somebody who has the same sorts of…”

“Talents?” Richard supplied with an ironic little laugh.

“Yes, that’ll do. We should have expected it, really. And given that, we shouldn’t be surprised, either, or put off, if she chooses to practice witchcraft here. I mean really, what did we expect—that once she’d left Hogwarts, all that business would be done with? She is who she is, and we’ve got to accept the implications of that once and for all.”

“True.” Richard sighed a bit wistfully, nodding. “And I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised that something like this would be in our daughter’s home, either.”

“Yes, exactly. It really is quite beautiful, isn’t it.” Claire looked at the map once again. The dragons curled their tails beguilingly, turning their heads to regard the strangers and sending small bursts of
flame their way.

"Yes, it is," her husband agreed. "Oh, and did you notice the depiction of his family’s estate? Look!"

He got up, setting his wine glass and plate down, beckoning Claire closer to the map.

"Right there. I expect it must be something really quite grand."

They exchanged looks that spoke volumes.

In the kitchen, meanwhile, Draco was holding Hermione in a final, reassuring hug. Suddenly, it seemed as if the sitting room had gone awfully quiet, the low hum of conversation between her parents dropping to silence. Pushing open the door, they were greeted by an unexpected tableau.

Richard had apparently been in the midst of pointing out a detail on the map. His arm was raised, his finger extended, and his head was turned in his wife’s general direction, his mouth open in a small “O.”

Claire stood beside him, but her gaze wasn’t directed towards the map. Instead, both her eyes and Richard’s were fixed on two people who stood in the centre of the room. They were wrapped in light travelling cloaks, both of them tall, blond and rather regal.

The man turned his head at the sound of the kitchen door opening, and a faint smile nudged the corners of his mouth upwards when he caught sight of his son.

"Draco," he said with cool cordiality, inclining his head. "Good evening."

Even before Draco had a chance to move, much less say a word, Hermione was already striding towards his parents with a welcoming smile.

"Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy," she said warmly, extending her hand to both of them. Lucius accepted it with a cool brush of the fingertips, and then Narcissa clasped it between her own, holding it for a fraction of a second, a smile in her eyes.

"How nice to see you. Let me take your cloaks." Folding them carefully over her arm, Hermione continued. "May I introduce my parents? Mum, Dad, meet Draco’s parents, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. My parents, Richard and Claire Granger."

The Grangers had by now collected themselves somewhat after their shock and stepped closer, their natural politeness and affability taking over.

"How do you do?" Richard smiled, Claire echoing his words just slightly behind him.

"It’s a pleasure to meet you at last," she added. "We’ve grown quite fond of Draco."

_Had_ they? Both Narcissa’s and Lucius’ eyebrows rose imperceptibly. The implications of that statement were many at this point.

"How do you do?" Narcissa responded first, a bit nonplussed, as well, by this warmth from two
complete strangers who clearly knew her son.

“How do you do?” Lucius echoed. He had already retreated behind the mask of cool impassivity that had always served him so well. From that vantage point, he could observe and assess without tipping his own hand. Now here were the parents of the Muggleborn witch with whom his son was smitten. She was highly intelligent, quite gifted magically, and—he had to concede once again—intrepid and brave. This was by no means the first time he’d observed her willingness to tackle a difficult situation head-on. Now he had the opportunity to discover what sort of people she’d come from, just who had produced a girl like this.

Meanwhile, Draco had finally found both his tongue and his motor skills, and went to his parents.

“Mother!” he grinned, reaching to take her hands in his. Her smile was warm, her affection for him lighting her eyes. “And… Father.” He extended one hand and Lucius clasped it even as the expression in his eyes remained veiled and cryptic.

“Please, everyone—make yourselves comfortable,” Hermione urged, and Draco thought he detected a tiny note of near-desperation in her voice. She glanced at him and then at the wine, and with a slight nod, he moved quickly to pour out two more glasses whilst she prepared plates of cheese and fruit to offer his parents. Busy pouring, he missed the look of surprised approval on Lucius’ face upon noticing the particular marriage of wine and cheese being served.

Once everyone was seated comfortably and sipping their drinks, that same awkward silence fell over the group, only now it seemed magnified. Finally, Claire voiced the question nobody had really wanted to broach.

“It’s rather an odd coincidence, isn’t it, that we are all here together this evening. Hermione, did you have prior plans that you were reluctant to tell us about when we rang this morning? Because if that was the case, we do apologise for intruding.”

Gracefully put. Narcissa eyed Claire thoughtfully.

“No, no, Mum!” Hermione hastened to explain, shaking her head. “It isn’t like that at all. When you rang up this morning, we didn’t have any other plans. But afterwards, we found a letter from Draco’s mother that said she and Mr. Malfoy would be here in Oxford today and hoped to have dinner with us. The letter,” she soldiered on bravely, “had been in the post box for days, probably, before we saw it. We didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings… and we did want to see all of you, of course,” she quickly added.

Good one, Granger. Draco grinned to himself.

“…So we thought… well… why not just cook dinner here for everyone? We reckoned now was as good a time as any for you all to meet. I hope that’s all right…” Her voice trailed off as she looked from her own parents to Draco’s and then at him.

“Yes, yes, of course, Kitten,” Richard answered quickly. “Well done, especially as it was all so very last-minute.”

“Hermione,” Narcissa added, “it was very gracious of you to prepare a meal for all of us at such short notice. Knowing what I do about you, I am sure you must have worked very hard.”

At that, Claire regarded Narcissa curiously.

“Draco helped,” Hermione grinned, giving his hand a quick squeeze.
“Did he now?” Lucius sat back, one eyebrow rising. It did not surprise him that the little Granger girl did menial work clearly the province of domestic staff, but somehow she’d persuaded his son to involve himself in such activities as well. True, under the circumstances, for students who would be sharing their lodgings with two more Muggles — regrettable, but it was a fait accompli, he supposed — house-elves would be a completely unfeasible proposition. But such an unfortunate precedent certainly boded ill for his son’s future, assuming this girl was to be a part of it.

Narcissa slanted an incredulous look at Draco, who had pulled a pair of chairs from the dining area and now sat alongside Hermione, wineglass in hand.

“You cooked?” she couldn’t help asking. “What did you prepare for us?”

“Salad,” he replied proudly. “Did it all on my own, start to finish. Oh, and shopped for the food too. With Hermione, of course. She taught me how to pick out fruit.” He grinned, catching her eye and throwing her a naughty wink.

“I’ve had that lesson myself,” Richard chuckled. “Firm but pliant, eh? Your mother taught both of us well, Hermione.”

“Yes, she did,” Hermione agreed, trying not to meet Draco’s eyes again for fear of laughing. Instead, she glanced at her watch, and then stood. “Would you all excuse me, please? I… um… have something I need to do in the kitchen.”

Everyone murmured their assent, and she slipped out of the room, silently cursing herself for very nearly losing track of the time. The chicken would be coming out of the oven in a mere twelve minutes, and she hadn’t yet prepared the cauliflower dish.

Bustling about the kitchen, she assembled the two pots and the necessary ingredients. Water into the large stock pot and then the cauliflower. Check. Lid on. Start it steaming.

Now, the cheese sauce, most important of all. A delicate admixture, it had to be done just right. She bit her lip absently as she measured a large chunk of butter into the saucepan, following it with the equivalent amount of flour, and set that to melt and blend over a low flame. When it became a smoothly rippling mass, she began to add the milk ever so gradually, blending it in so that the mixture was evenly textured. Alternating with the milk, she dropped in small cubes of rich red Leicester cheddar, stirring constantly. Eventually, the mixture was a rich, gently bubbling sea of cheese. Perfect.

The wooden spoon moving almost mechanically now, she allowed her thoughts to drift for just a moment back to the sitting room. Things between the two sets of parents seemed to be going well so far. She was glad, now, that she’d made the decision not to tell her parents what had transpired in the Malfoys’ home that day near the end of the war. At the time, there had been enough that was distressing and difficult to explain. She’d minimised everything in every way she possibly could, skimming broadly over certain details and leaving others out altogether. They didn’t need to know.

Her parents were not the only ones not fully aware of certain details of her life. The Malfoys—all of them, for she hadn’t even talked about this with Draco yet—were ignorant of certain things as well, namely her parents’ exile in Australia that last year of the war. She wondered what he would think—what he would feel—when she told him what she felt she’d had to do to protect them. She’d put off telling him this one thing precisely because she feared he’d manage to take it to heart somehow, believing himself responsible by proxy, in a sense, because vicious beliefs such as those he’d once held had resulted in a war targeting Muggles in the first place. He’d feel somehow responsible for her pain, and she’d simply not had the heart to do that to him.
It had been difficult at times for her, when certain memories had insinuated themselves into her thoughts. And they had done. She’d simply stuffed them as far down as she could manage, reminding herself of her determination to live in the here and now. She needed to do that every single day, in order to heal. And now, with Draco so central to her life, it was more critical than ever that she should succeed.

All at once, Hermione felt the burden of so much painful knowledge. It was a lonely thing.

The spoon had stopped moving as the thoughts had overtaken her, and suddenly, she was aware of two things simultaneously: a vile odour coming from the pot containing the cauliflower, and another, different burning smell coming from the sauce pot. Groaning, she quickly switched the flame off under the sauce, and turned to the cauliflower.

Without thinking, she grasped the lid of the large pot, plucking it off, and then intense, white heat seared her palm and fingers and it went crashing to the floor as she gasped in sudden, very naked pain.

Shaking, tears of pain and frustration starting in her eyes, she thrust her hand under a stream of cold water at the sink. The skin of her palm and the insides of her fingers had already begun turning a deep, angry red, and she knew it would blister badly.

“Hermione! Are you all-- Merlin, what happened?” Draco had poked his head around the door, taken one look, and was at her side in a moment.

“Oh!” she quavered. “I… I’m s-so bloody stupid! I b-burnt the cauliflower and the sauce! And then I w-wasn’t thinking and t-touched the lid h-handle with my b-bare hand!” She began crying in earnest now, turning to bury her face in his chest, her hand still under the running water.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly, stroking her hair and murmuring nonsense words of comfort. At last, he held her away, brushing her hair from her eyes. Her face was blotchy, her eyes red and swollen.

“Look, I’ll get your mum, yeah? She can probably help you with all this a lot better than I can. Okay?”

Hermione sniffled, wiping at her eyes with the heel of her unaffected hand, the hurt one stiff with the cold of the water still pouring over it. Her voice, when she spoke finally, was ragged. “Okay,” she whispered, swallowing hard. “Yeah. That would be good. Thanks.”

He was back in a matter of a minute with Claire right behind him. One look at Hermione’s face and she was right at the sink, examining the injured hand. A quick look around the kitchen told the rest of the story where the ruined food was concerned.

“What happened, sweetheart? How did you burn yourself so badly?”

Haltingly, Hermione explained, growing more distraught by the minute. Now, not only was the lovely vegetable dish ruined, the entire dinner was in danger of being ruined. She’d forgotten to take the chicken out of the oven in all the commotion after the accident with the pot lid. It was now nearly ten minutes past the time it ought to have come out. Finishing the whole, miserable story, she shut her eyes, the tears trickling woefully down her cheeks.

Claire sprang into action immediately, removing the chicken from the oven and setting the pan on the hob to cool. She inspected it thoroughly and turned to Hermione with a relieved smile.

“It looks lovely, darling. Not dried out at all. I’ll just cover it, shall I? Have you any foil? Good! Now
—let’s see what can be done about the cauliflower, hmm?”

She peered into the pot, now much cooler to the touch. “Well, now I see what happened here. There’s absolutely no water left in the pot at all! How much did you put in, to begin with? Do you remember?”

Hermione shook her head. “I think… I think maybe three quarters of an inch or so?”

“Oh, dear… not nearly enough! You need at least twice that much, if not even a bit more! It must have boiled out almost immediately and then the cauliflower stuck to the bottom and began to burn. That’s what you smelled. And…” Claire turned her attention to the pot of ruined cheese sauce and sighed. “You’d done such a good job of it too, I can tell. What a shame! Well, I can fix this! I’ll just cut the bottom bit off the cauliflower and steam it over again. It’ll take just a few minutes. And the cheese sauce—have you enough of everything for a new batch?”

Hermione nodded, feeling a bit shaky still, but much calmer already. “Yes, I think so, Mum.”

“Right, well… I’ll take care of this, never you fear. The only thing I’m concerned about is that hand of yours. Have you any first aid supplies?”

There was absolutely nothing, not even a sticking plaster. They hadn’t thought to buy anything of that nature when they were at Tesco earlier.

“All right, darling, don’t worry. I’ve an idea. Stay right there-- keep that hand under the water!”

With that, Claire disappeared into the sitting room, reappearing a moment later with Narcissa in tow.

Surprised, Hermione opened her mouth, not even sure what she was about to say, only feeling as if she should apologise to her mother, to Narcissa—to virtually everyone on the planet—for very likely making an utter mess of the evening.

“I--” she began anxiously.

But Narcissa was having none of it. She moved quickly to Hermione’s side as Claire set about redoing the vegetable.

“Let me see your hand, dear,” she said firmly, though her voice was kind.

Meekly, Hermione lifted her hand out of the stream of water and held it, palm up, under Narcissa’s quiet scrutiny. Her brow furrowed briefly, and then became clear again, the look in her eyes decisive.

“You have no healing potions or pastes here, have you?”

Hermione shook her head miserably. If only. Magical, Muggle, anything…

“That’s all right. I thought not.” Narcissa nodded to herself, and then turned towards the table, her face swiftly becoming a mask of deepest concentration.

“Remendium conjura!” she intoned, her voice low and imperious, her arm extended, a single finger pointing.

And there, suddenly, was a small phial, no bigger than a little pot of jam.

“Oh… of course…” Hermione breathed, momentarily taken aback. From her place by the cooker where she was nearly finished making a new batch of cheese sauce, Claire watched too, wide-eyed, a faint smile of relief tinged with awe on her face.
“It’s a burn-healing paste, Claire,” Narcissa explained. “She’ll feel much better immediately, and it will prevent her skin blistering and scarring as well. Here, take your hand out of the water now, and let me dry it for you, Hermione.” Murmuring a Drying Charm, Narcissa drew Hermione to the table, where she bade her sit whilst being treated. Then, very gently, Narcissa began to apply the paste.

The relief was almost instantaneous. The orange paste was a blessed balm, absorbing every last bit of the burning pain that tortured her skin. Miraculously, too, it melted right into her skin invisibly, leaving no residue. The healing began almost as quickly as the relief had done. She could see the redness beginning to fade, the blisters that had begun to form vanishing and her skin becoming unblemished once again.

With fresh tears of relief and gratitude, Hermione looked up at Narcissa, who still held her hand, palm up, between both of her own. The older woman smiled, gently shaking her head.

“You’ll be all right now, I expect,” she said. “Hush. Dry your eyes. You don’t want Draco to see you this way. He’ll worry so. You know how men are, so squeamish about everything!” Her brief laughter was light and musical. “How is that cauliflower coming along, Claire?”

“All done, Narcissa! Hermione, shall we help you serve?” Claire was already setting the whole head of cauliflower into a serving bowl that Hermione had taken out earlier.

Smiling tremulously, Hermione nodded and stood. “Yes, that would be wonderful. Thank you both so much! I don’t know what I’d have done if—”

“Well, no need to think about that now. It’s all over and done with. Shall we ask Draco to give us a hand?” Claire grinned. “I’m certain he’ll want to know that you’re all right now.”

She poked her head around the door and called to him, and true to expectations, he appeared instantly, more than a little anxious. The worry clouding his eyes cleared and he broke into a huge smile, though, when she held up her hand and he could see that the burn had nearly gone. Then he looked swiftly at his mother, recognition dawning. The look he gave her and then Claire spoke of far more than just mere thanks. The true depth of his feeling for Hermione shone nakedly in his eyes.

“Draco, dear,” Claire said briskly. “Dinner’s ready. Whilst we put everything into serving dishes, be a darling and just bring the plates and napkins and silverware to the table? Oh, and the Pinot Grigio too.”

He nodded, relieved to have something with which to occupy himself. His hands were shaking slightly as he picked up a stack of plates and returned to the sitting room.

As he moved back and forth between the two rooms, quickly setting everything on the table, Draco sensed his father’s expression falling once again into the faintly disapproving gaze he had seen when he’d mentioned having made the salad. Not that he cared. Sod that, anyway. He would do as he liked in his own home.

He was still ruminating about all of it when the kitchen door burst open and Hermione appeared, proudly holding a large platter. The golden, glistening roast chicken sat in the centre, surrounded by an artful arrangement of succulent new potatoes and onions, their combined aromas intoxicating.

Right behind her, Narcissa carried a large bowl of salad, and Claire brought up the rear with the rather spectacular cauliflower under its luscious crown of cheese sauce.

“Please… sit down, Dad, Mr. Malfoy… Draco.” Hermione smiled, suddenly shy. “Dinner!”
“I see that you have found a place for your birthday present, Draco,” Lucius remarked as he raised his glass to his lips. “I am pleased that you have chosen such a prominent spot for it.”

Draco looked up momentarily from the forkful of cheese-drenched cauliflower he’d been about to take, glancing first at Lucius, then at the map itself, and then, fleetingly, back at his father again. “Thank you, Father. It’s a very fine gift.”

“Quite extraordinary, really,” Claire interjected excitedly. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it!”

“Nor could you, I imagine.” Lucius’ reply was coolly matter-of-fact. “The map itself is a reproduction and therefore not difficult to come by, but the frame was made to my own specifications by an artisan in our community.” The corners of his mouth lifted slightly.

There was an uneasy silence. Surprised and then chagrined in turn, Draco stared at his father, whilst Narcissa shot her husband a look that was clearly dismayed and yet laced with a faint undercurrent of sadness. For his part, Lucius appeared oblivious to both reactions. Hermione looked quickly from Lucius to Draco and then, to her parents. Happily, neither Claire nor Richard seemed aware of the possibility of an inferred slight in the remark. Instead, Claire pressed on.

“It certainly is a remarkable community, from what we’ve seen of it over the past nine years,” she replied. “Sometimes it’s still a bit difficult to believe that such an amazing thing should have occurred in our family, but there it is. We’re really quite proud of our Hermione.”

“As well we should be,” Richard added firmly, giving his daughter a smile and a nod.

Colouring, Hermione studied the napkin in her lap.

“I’m curious, though…” Narcissa said suddenly.

All eyes turned to her.

“If I might ask—what was it like, discovering that your child had magical abilities?”

Here, both Richard and Claire chuckled.

“It was a shock!” she answered, rolling her eyes. “It certainly isn’t something one expects to hear about one’s eleven-year-old daughter. But you know, to be quite truthful…” Claire sighed wistfully. “We always sensed that there was something different about her, something extraordinary and… rare. There were these…”


“Least of all me,” Hermione murmured.

Listening quietly, Draco remembered the story she’d told him the first time he’d been to her house six months before. That little girl’s hair transforming into a bunch of writhing worms, and Hermione’s shock and dismay that yet again, something bizarre had happened when her emotions had got the better of her.

“But… you hadn’t any idea what it was you were witnessing,” Narcissa mused.
“No, we hadn’t. Not at all. Not until the letter arrived from Hogwarts. And even then, we thought at first that the whole thing was just a prank.” Richard smiled wryly at the recollection. “Until we had a visit from Professor Dumbledore, who simply turned up at our door one day and then explained everything. After that… well… quite naturally, we couldn’t hold her back.”

“I see.” Narcissa looked pensive.

Everyone busied themselves with their dinner once again, an awkward silence settling over them.

Determined to take the focus off herself, Hermione spoke up brightly. “You mentioned in your letter that you were visiting friends in the area, Mrs. Malfoy,” she began.

“Oh yes.” Narcissa nodded. “Dorcas and Geoffrey Kempthorne. They were in my year at school. Dorcas was one of my closest friends. She and Geoff married directly after seventh year, and moved to a village just outside of Oxford, near his family’s estate. I believe her people are from around here somewhere as well.” Narcissa’s smile grew wistful. “We’ve rather lost touch with each other over the years. I don’t see her nearly often enough anymore. Though they used to come to the Manor every so often when Draco was younger.”

“Odd. I don’t remember…” Draco began, and then stopped abruptly. “Wait… They’ve got a son my age, haven’t they? Eric. I remember now. Bit of a wanker, as I recall.”

“Draco…” Narcissa began, mildly reproachful.

“No, really! He never could remember my name, or so he said. So he’d make up all sorts of stupid versions of it just to brass me off. And he did.”

“Yes, because you allowed it. Remember that black eye you wound up with when you were… how old?” Narcissa shook her head at the memory of the small, blond boy stoically fighting back tears of rage as she examined the horrid bruise that was already purpling angrily.

“Eight. Okay, yeah, it was stupid, I admit-- but I wasn’t about to let him get away with calling me… well, what he said.”

“What did he call you?” Hermione was curious.

“Uh-uh, sorry, love.” Draco shook his head, his smile enigmatic. “That particular secret stays safe with me!”

Several moments passed quietly as everyone resumed eating.

“Well, I must say,” Claire said presently, “everything is simply delicious, Hermione.”

“Mmm.” Narcissa nodded. “Delightful.” She darted a meaningful sideways glance at Lucius, who added his own “indeed.”

“If we’re not careful,” Richard laughingly added, “you’ll be putting your mother and me out of business!”

“Oh, do you cook, Richard?” Narcissa asked, surprised. She sipped her wine and then forked up a dainty bite of roasted potato.

“It’s a hobby of mine—ours, I should say,” he replied. “We attended a weekend gourmet class some years ago, and the cooking bug bit us both.”
“Hermione’s dad cooked a fantastic meal when we visited last month,” Draco remarked lightly, leaning back in his chair with his glass of wine and casting a deliberate glance in his father’s direction. “Bouillabaisse. You’d have loved it, Mother. Just as good as what we used to have in France, remember?”

*So it’s true then. He has been spending time in their home.* She caught her husband’s eye for a moment and then looked away. “Oh yes, certainly I do. That’s quite a compliment, Richard.”

Richard grinned, miming his thanks to Draco.

“Gracious, Claire,” Narcissa continued. “You are very… fortunate, I must say. A husband who cooks! Is such a thing common in Muggle society?”

*No doubt it is. And apparently, Draco has decided it’s something to admire.* Lucius leaned back, one eyebrow arched slightly and the tips of his fingers tapping idly against each other as he scrutinised the Grangers and then his son. He wasn’t surprised. It was no more than he would have expected. There were simply some aspects of Muggle life that he would never understand or become used to, no matter how much time had passed or how many Ministry directives urged tolerance on the pure-blood community. He suppressed a slight shudder at the prospect of such a thing in his own home.

“Well, not what I’d call common exactly,” Claire was saying. “Most men leave it to their wives, I expect. No, now, Richard,” she remonstrated, laughing, as he began to protest. “You know it’s true. But I do think a growing number of men are taking it up. And certainly the most celebrated chefs in the world are men. Rather ironic, really, when you think about it.”

“Ironic?” Narcissa didn’t quite understand.

“Oh, well, you know, it’s just that women have traditionally had trouble breaking into the field professionally—it’s still very much a man’s world when money and power are involved—even though it remains our province in the home. Rather an unfortunate double standard, wouldn’t you say?” Claire smiled grimly, and Hermione fervently nodded her agreement.

Draco’s mouth twitched as memories of S.P.E.W. popped into his head.

“Indeed I would,” Narcissa agreed. “However, in our world—at least in the social stratum to which we belong-- such questions never even arise. Rather a shame, too, I’m beginning to believe. The truth is, traditional roles for men and women remain far more engrained for pure-blood society than for everyone else.”

Hermione looked at Draco’s mother with renewed interest. This was unexpected. And intriguing.

Just as thoughts of this nature were giving Hermione pause, so they were doing for the rest of the Malfoy family as well. Draco stared openly at his mother for the space of two seconds and then remembered his manners, which had always been impeccable in company, quickly closing his mouth. *Bloody hell.* His grin refused to be stifled.

Lucius’ reaction was one of equal surprise, though he couldn’t exactly profess admiration for such sentiments. This wasn’t the wife he thought he knew. Merlin’s sake, what next?

Shortly afterwards, Hermione stood to begin clearing the table, and Draco followed suit, both of them shushing Claire’s attempts to help. They disappeared into the kitchen and returned, making several trips to remove the contents of the table, and then Draco began to tidy up the table before the last course was brought out.

The sight of him clearing away fragments of food was the final nail in the coffin of Lucius’ hope that
his son hadn’t completely deserted the ways with which he’d been raised. On the other hand, Richard and Claire were noting Draco’s behaviour with approval, remembering the way he’d helped clear the table after that first dinner at their house. He’d been hesitant at first, awkward about it even, and then had actually seemed to rather enjoy himself. He’d certainly come a long way since then.

Narcissa watched her son move about the room as he cleared away crumbs from the table and then disappeared into the kitchen, reappearing with cups, saucers and bowls. He moved with purpose, as if he’d been doing this sort of thing all his life. And yet the very idea would have seemed ludicrous to him not three years earlier. Tremendous changes had been wrought in him, she knew. It was apparent to Narcissa, now, that these changes ran even more deeply than she’d realised, enabling him to approach this new phase of his life with very different expectations of himself and the sort of man he wanted to be with Hermione.

As he set down a cup and saucer in front of his mother, he felt cool fingertips on his bare arm. He looked down and their eyes met. There was a smile of understanding and approbation in hers that warmed him, and he covered her hand with his own for a moment.

Just then, the kitchen door swung open, and Hermione came out, bearing the large, glass bowl of trifle, so elegant and pretty with its layers of cake, fruits, custard and cream. She had decorated the top with a ring of fresh strawberries and a sprinkling of shaved, orange-laced chocolate, and beamed at the excited exclamations that greeted her as she carefully set it down in the centre of the table.

“Oh, my goodness, Hermione—that’s gorgeous!” Claire breathed.

“Trifle—your favourite, Lucius,” Narcissa remarked, looking as though she were enjoying herself immensely. “What a happy coincidence! Draco, did you tell Hermione?”

He shook his head. “Nope. Actually, I’d forgotten about that. It was all her idea.”

The portions were served out and then everybody tucked in, the look of enjoyment on every face very nearly transcendent.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a throat being cleared. All eyes swivelled in a single direction.

“Miss Granger, I must offer my compliments. This really is quite… good.”

Lucius inclined his head graciously towards Hermione. Startled, she laid down her spoon and looked at him, her eyes wide. And then she smiled, and it seemed to light her whole face.

“It’s Hermione. And… thank you, Mr. Malfoy,” she said, and with those few, simple words, a small door opened a crack wider.
Coffee and an after-dinner *digestif* of Grand Marnier were served, and everyone settled in comfortably on the sofas once again. They talked of the end of term, the moving-in day, the other flatmates, and Hermione and Draco’s summer jobs at Blackwell’s. When Draco casually mentioned that Hermione’s parents were dentists, the Grangers were asked to describe their work. Both Malfoys found the very concept of dentistry rather foreign and questioned them extensively about what they did. Narcissa was prevailed upon to describe her gardens and conservatory at the Manor, after learning that Claire loved gardening as well. There followed talk of varieties of perennials and which ones were hardest and produced flowers most reliably. Richard invited Lucius to describe the Manor itself. This he did with noticeable brevity, though it was clear that he spoke with no small degree of pride as well. The tone remained cordial, however, and that alone made breathing far easier for both Draco and Hermione as the evening wound down.

As everyone finished their coffee, Hermione invited them on a quick tour of the flat, something they hadn’t had a chance to do before, what with all the drama of the earlier part of the evening. Draco brought up the rear, content to listen as Hermione spoke a bit about each room and pointed out the large garden behind the house. It had been a long, eventful day, and he was ready to retreat inside himself a bit, now that it was finally coming to an end.

A quick walk-through elicited the expected “Lovely!” and “So airy and spacious!” from the Grangers. The Malfoys were decidedly more circumspect, though Narcissa really did think it was surprisingly liveable, all things considered.

Lucius kept his thoughts to himself, smiling politely when necessary. Sharing in this manner simply did not appeal under any circumstances, and he could not imagine how his son could become accustomed to doing so, particularly in such small quarters. Four shared rooms including the bath, two of them not much bigger than a broom cupboard, and a bedroom of their own. “Cramped” did not begin to describe it. Ah, well. He supposed this was to be the way of it. It was a whole new world, and he was being forced down the rabbit hole whether he wanted to jump or not.
At last, the time had come to say goodnight. The Grangers gathered their things and made their way to the door.

“Well, this was lovely, truly. You both did a wonderful job, and the flat is just perfect for you!” Claire took Hermione’s hands in her own, and gave them a fond squeeze.

Then she and Richard turned to the Malfoys.

“I’m very glad we had this chance to meet,” Claire told them. “In the circumstances, it was high time, don’t you think?”

“Indeed,” Narcissa agreed. “It was delightful to meet you both. I can see now where Hermione gets her lovely qualities. Your daughter is quite special.”

“We think so too,” Richard said, beaming. “And your son—well, as Claire said earlier, we really have grown very fond of him. More to the point, Hermione has.”

“Dad!” Hermione protested, but she was smiling even as she blushed.

“Okay, okay!” Richard laughed and then turned to Lucius, holding out his hand. “Goodbye.”

Lucius reciprocated, murmured his goodbyes to Richard and to Claire.

Then the Grangers turned to Draco, who waited quietly beside his parents.

“Good luck with the new flat,” Richard told him and then leaned in to whisper in Draco’s ear. “Don’t tell her I said this, but… take good care of her!”

Draco nodded, grinning.

“Goodbye, darling,” Claire smiled, slipping her arms round him for a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Hope to see you both soon.”

She held him away from her, and as their eyes met, a tacit understanding passed between them. Then Claire turned to leave.

“Thanks,” Draco said softly. She looked back with a small smile and nodded.

“I’ll see you out,” Hermione offered, and the three Grangers disappeared down the stairs. Draco watched them go, reminded once again of the reasons he liked Richard and Claire so much.

Once outside, Hermione and her parents stood in the spacious car park that fronted the property.

“Well, I suppose this is it, sweetheart,” Richard began, and then got straight to the point. “Are you happy?”

“Yes, Daddy. I am. Truly. Draco is… well… Draco. He makes me very happy.”

“Good. That’s what I needed to hear. Claire?” Richard turned to his wife. “Anything you want to add?”

Claire went to Hermione, wordlessly folding her in an embrace. “I love you, my sweet girl,” she
whispered. “And I am so very proud of you. You’ve really grown up. And I think you’ve made the right decision.”

Tears were pooling in Hermione’s eyes when she broke from her mother’s arms at last. Gulping convulsively, she laughed a little and dabbed at her eyes. Claire smiled, fishing a packet of tissues out of her handbag.

“Thanks, Mum. And thank you so much for all you did.” She sighed dramatically and then laughed. “What a disaster! I love you -- both of you. And… and I love him too. Very much. I’ll be fine. Honestly.”

“Of course you will,” Claire replied briskly. ‘Now let’s be off home, Richard, before the traffic gets much worse.”

Hermione was still waving as their car pulled away.

Coming back into the flat, she found the Malfoys with their travelling cloaks already on. Draco had been conversing quietly with them when she walked in.

“Hermione,” Narcissa said, and her voice was warm. “Thank you. It can’t have been easy for you, and yet you managed beautifully.”

“Hang on, I was here too, don’t forget!” Draco protested.

“Yes, of course, darling,” Narcissa tutted. “I know. You were wonderful, truly!”

“Hmm!” he huffed, mollified, unable to hide a small grin. “Okay. I suppose.”

“Mrs. Malfoy, thank you so much for all you did.” Hermione held out her hand, palm up. The skin there was pink and healthy-looking. “It’s so much better now. I couldn’t have done any of this if you hadn’t healed me.”

Narcissa took the proffered hand, and held it for just a moment. “I am happy I could help. I’m only sorry you were in such pain. And…” She smiled. “I do hope you and Draco will come to the Manor this summer for a visit. I believe I would like the opportunity to get to know you better.”

Hermione smiled shyly, flushing with pleasure and then glanced at Draco, who gave a “why not?” shrug and winked.

“Goodbye, my dear,” Narcissa said to her, finally, and then turned to Draco, drawing him close and whispering in his ear.

His eyes widened for a moment, and then he broke into a grin and hugged her back. Finally, he turned to his father, who stood tall and silent, waiting.

“Thank you for coming, Father. And for the birthday present. It… it means a great deal to me.”

Lucius moved a step closer. “I hoped it would,” he said stolidly, though his eyes told a different story. He held out his hand.

Tentatively, Draco extended his own and for just a moment, the contact was made.

“Thank you, Miss Gr—Hermione,” Lucius corrected himself once again. “The evening was quite pleasant.”

Hermione smiled graciously, murmuring her goodbyes, and the Malfoys vanished into the ether.
“Any of that wine left?” Draco sighed, collapsing on the sofa as soon as they’d gone. “Reckon I need a drink!”

Hermione appeared a moment later with two glasses of wine, and sat down beside him. He slung an arm around her shoulders, taking a grateful, satisfying gulp.

They sat that way, not speaking, for several minutes, and then Hermione turned to him.

“What did my dad say to you?”

“He said not to tell,” Draco teased.

“Come on! Out with it! Or no wine for you!” Hermione reached for his glass, but he swung his hand up just out of her reach.

“Yeah, okay, I’ll tell you,” he laughed, as she struggled to reach the glass. “He said I was to take good care of you.”

“He did, did he? I see!” Hermione huffed in mock annoyance, though she couldn’t help the little smile that crept over her face. That was her dad.

Then she remembered something else. “And what did your mum say?”

“Nah, you don’t want to hear that, do you? Load of rubbish, typical soppy mother stuff.”

“No, I do! Honestly! Tell me!”

“Don’t believe I will, actually.”

“Oh no? Don’t believe I will, then, either… later.” She waggled her eyebrows wickedly.

Draco sighed, stretching luxuriantly. “All right, all right… you win!” He turned to look at her sideways, a sly smile on his face.

“She said ‘good choice.’”
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you, Karen and Carol—kazfeist and mister_otter—for your superb beta help and friendship, as always! I wish I could truly express how I feel, but I think you know.

*Rememdium Conjura*: Latin for “Cure (or remedy), be conjured!”

Pears and Stilton painting by Matthew Bailey Seigel.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this story. Only the original plot and characters belong to me.
Traffic on the A40 out of the Headington Roundabout had bottlenecked badly.

At half past ten, Richard sat back, expelling a noisy sigh of frustration.

“Hour and a half. If we’re lucky.”

Claire nodded, looking out the window. The myriad brake lights ahead winked an insistent red as the cars inched forward haltingly.

“So-- what did you think?”

The abruptness of his wife’s question caught Richard by surprise.

“Of what, exactly? That’s rather a loaded question, Claire!” he chuckled, as the car slowed to yet another halt.

“Oh, you know… the evening as a whole, for starters. I thought it went off rather well, all things considered.” She laughed briefly. “Once the catastrophe in the kitchen was sorted, that is. You
“I’ll have to take your word for that. We really weren’t aware of what was happening in the kitchen, just that something was going on. Heard something fall and then Hermione cried out and then all of a sudden, it was a constant stream of traffic—first Draco, then Draco and you, then you and Narcissa. I have to admit, I was a bit alarmed. All we knew was what Draco told us when he came back out, that she’d had some sort of accident and burnt herself.” Richard chuckled wryly. “I think he downplayed it a bit so that I wouldn’t worry and charge in and get underfoot!”

“Quite right! You would have done, too!” Claire said fondly, patting his hand.

“Wise decision. Bringing Draco’s mother in, I mean,” he added, as an afterthought.

Claire shrugged. “It was the only thing to do at that point. There was no medicine in the flat, nothing at all. But Narcissa was incredible. Completely calm and self-assured. She had the situation well in hand from the off. And Richard, do you know—she made a jar of some sort of ointment appear out of thin air just by pointing her finger and saying a few words. Latin, it was. An ‘incantation,’ isn’t that what they call it? But I mean, she didn’t even need a wand to do it! She’s obviously a very powerful witch. I stood there gawking like an utter ninny!” She shook her head. “It was impressive, to say the least.”

“I’ll bet.” Richard let out a low whistle and then swore briefly under his breath, hitting the brakes as a car ahead and to the left swerved suddenly in front of them. “What did you think of her otherwise?”

“Charming. Perhaps just a bit… distant and formal, at first. But then, once we both went to help Hermione, she was far more… how shall I put it?... accessible. Very kind to Hermione, too. Seems quite fond of her, did you notice?”

Richard nodded, glancing quickly at his wife and then back at the road in front of them, where cars had begun to pick up a bit more speed. “I did, yes. Well, as we are of Draco now, too. They seemed very surprised by that, though. Do you suppose he failed to mention the time he’s spent at our house?”

“I suspect he did. They looked quite taken aback at first, didn’t they? Even a bit dismayed, Lucius anyway.” Claire smoothed her skirt down, splaying her fingers across her lap.

“Ah, you saw that too. What do you make of him, then?”

“Lucius? You know, quite honestly, I’m really not sure. He didn’t have terribly much to say, all told. Seemed rather stiff and… I don’t know… ill at ease for the better part of the evening, though I will say that once we sat down with our coffee, he did seem a bit more relaxed. But you remember, don’t you, what Hermione told us about them back when she was still at Hogwarts? When she was describing the various classmates and what she knew of their families? The Malfoys are a very old, aristocratic, pure-blooded family with a great fortune and a good deal of power and influence. And according to Hermione, they never had much love for anyone who wasn’t pure-blooded as well.”

Richard paused, a cryptic expression crossing his face suddenly, his eyes narrowing first and then widening as an unexpected memory surfaced. “We saw him once before, Claire, do you remember? It would have been… let me see… about eight years ago, I think. We were in Diagon Alley with Hermione and her friends, buying school supplies. He and Arthur Weasley got into a tussle in the bookshop.”
Claire nodded slowly, her own recollection of that day returning. “I remember. He made a remark, didn’t he. And then there was that terrible brawl. Arthur would never repeat what he’d said. But I still think it was probably something to do with us. My God, of course. I knew there was something familiar about him!”

Richard sighed, expelling a long breath. He remembered the brawl, how upsetting it had been for everyone, how shocked Hermione had been and then how incensed she’d become afterwards. It had tainted what had been only their second, fairly brief foray into wizarding London, and he and Claire had decided to put it behind them as thoroughly as they could, for their daughter’s sake. The wizarding world was to make up the fabric of her life now, and it was important that they accept that and accept her part in it. Nothing should spoil that for her. Not even the remarks, whatever they had been, of someone whose prejudices coloured his views of total strangers.

“Of course, things have changed now, haven’t they, in a lot of respects,” he replied at last. “I assume that even a powerful family like the Malfoys have had to make certain compromises and concessions. Lucius Malfoy doesn’t seem quite the same man we saw all those years ago.”

Claire darted a quick, appraising look at her husband. “True. He doesn’t. But there’s really no way we can imagine what he and Narcissa have experienced the last several years. Their lives are so different to ours in every possible respect.” She paused, her expression pensive. “You know, all things considered, it’s really quite remarkable that Draco has turned out as he has, especially given the way Hermione described him when they were younger. He is certainly a far cry from the arrogant brat who condescended to her at every opportunity. For years.”

The traffic had begun to pick up a bit more, and Richard muttered gratefully to himself before addressing Claire’s comment.

“Well, he really does seem to love Hermione. I think we can say that much with certainty. And he didn’t seem at all hampered by his privileged upbringing tonight. He was quite willing to help. In fact…” Richard paused, grinning. “Was it my imagination, or did he almost seem to relish doing it?”

“I noticed that too! Whilst his father scowled!” Claire laughed and Richard joined her. “Well, I thought he was grand. It was lovely, the way he was so eager. I do believe his mother approved, too, once she got over her surprise. I had the distinct impression she’s grown rather weary of certain aspects of all that privilege, didn’t you?”

“I daresay she has done,” Richard agreed. “I suspect all that might become rather confining after a while.”

“Well,” Claire responded thoughtfully, “I suspect it’s Narcissa wearing the trousers where Draco and Hermione are concerned, and that she approves of the relationship. It’s clear she’s devoted to Draco. You can see it in her face, can’t you. I think she knows how happy he is with our girl.”

There were several minutes of silence as they drove along beneath the vast night sky that blanketed the motorway, velvet-black and studded with stars.

“I wonder, though…” Richard said suddenly.

Claire had begun to doze off, and now she blinked a couple of times to clear her head. “What?”

“What was all that between Draco and his father? You could practically cut it with a knife.”

“We’ll find out eventually, no doubt,” she murmured, sighing as she reached to massage a crick out of the back of her neck. “Right now, I’m really ready to crawl into bed. How much further, do you
“Not much,” he replied absently, but even as his eyes scanned the road, his thoughts were a million miles away.

Half ten found Narcissa sitting at her vanity in the mirrored dressing room just off the master suite, distractedly brushing her hair. She gazed at her reflection almost unseeing, her thoughts returning to the earlier part of the evening.

Lucius came in and stopped directly behind her, taking up her hairbrush and moving it in long, sinuous strokes down her fall of pale hair. She closed her eyes blissfully for a moment, and then opened them again, watching his reflection in the mirror and waiting.

When he said nothing, she caught at his hand. “Lucius. You haven’t said a word about this evening yet.”

“Nor have you, my dear.” When Narcissa continued to look at him expectantly, he cleared his throat. “All right then. It was quite pleasant.”

“Pleasant,” she repeated. “I see. Lucius Valerian Malfoy, don’t imagine you’re going to escape the question quite so easily.”

He resumed his attentions to her hair, the brush moving in rhythmic strokes whilst he considered his reply.

At last he let out a sigh. “Cissa, I cannot pretend to be overjoyed at the prospect of a Muggleborn daughter-in-law and Muggle in-laws.”

Narcissa twisted halfway around to look her husband directly in the face. She laughed softly. “Moving just a bit ahead of ourselves, aren’t we?”

“No, I think not,” Lucius replied, his tone flatly pragmatic. “I believe we both know where this… entanglement… is headed.” He sat down heavily on a satin-covered chair adjacent to the vanity. “Let us not deceive ourselves that it is otherwise. As I said—I do not relish the prospect.”

Narcissa turned to regard him, reaching for a small jar as she did so. Dipping her fingers inside, she began to smooth the cream over the back of each hand in rounded strokes. “The prospect itself aside—what did you think of Hermione’s parents?”

Lucius gazed steadily back at her. His reply was brief. “Tolerable. For Muggles.”

Tolerable. Yes, she supposed that would be the sort of answer she could expect at this juncture. “They seem very fond of Draco, you know. Very fond indeed. And he of them.”

Lucius nodded. “Yes. I cannot deny that,” he replied dully, and then his tone turned angry and frustrated. “Damn it, Cissa, undeniable though it apparently is, I simply cannot understand it! And I probably never will do. Our son was not raised to live the way he is living now, nor to perform the sorts of demeaning tasks that are unquestionably the province of house-elves, and certainly not to accept as equals people who are clearly our inferiors, much less cultivate personal feelings for them!”
Narcissa screwed the jar lid back on and sat back patiently. “I am afraid it is far too late for that now. The simple fact is, our son is deeply in love with this girl, and she with him. I like her very much. Despite her Muggle background, she more than suits. You know it’s true.”

Lucius mumbled grudgingly, refusing to meet his wife’s eyes.

“And as it turns out,” she continued, her gaze never wavering, “her parents are refined, educated people. We really should not be the least bit surprised about that, either, given the child they raised. The fact is, blood ceased to matter when Voldemort fell, no matter how we were raised.”

“New world,” he muttered darkly, with a short, mirthless laugh.

“Indeed it is,” she declared. “We agreed we would move with the times when the new Ministry was formed two years ago, just like virtually every other pure-blooded family. We had no other option. Our son has presented us with a fait accompli as well. I for one embrace it. Resist all you like, but as you yourself said, their relationship is very likely going forward. It will be a very sad thing indeed if our only son winds up feeling closer to his girlfriend’s father than he does to his own.”

“Your presumption is that he will ever desire a relationship with me in any case,” Lucius said, with ill-concealed bitterness.

“And can you blame him, for Merlin’s sake?” Narcissa retorted. “After all that’s happened? After what we allowed the Dark Lord to put him through at such a young age?”

“No, you, Cissa. Not really. I always knew how you truly felt.” His voice was heavy with resignation.

She reached out to touch his hand briefly before resuming more gently. Nevertheless, it had to be said. “And what about all the rest, Lucius? You virtually disappeared from his life when he was little more than a baby, leaving him to feel utterly abandoned, that he’d somehow been at fault. That he’d driven you away.”

“You know why I did that!” Lucius’ reply was heated, but there was real anguish in his eyes.

“Yes. I do. Not that I think it was right. I do not. But he doesn’t understand in the least. It is up to you to break down those barriers, not Draco!” Her voice was kind. “His birthday gift was a good start. I could see it in his eyes. But I believe he’s afraid, Lucius—a afraid to trust, for fear of getting hurt again. And bitter. He’s not going to open up easily. You must be patient.”

A moment of silence passed.

Rising to his feet, Lucius sighed and ran a hand through his long, silver hair. “I’m tired, Cissa. I believe I shall retire. Goodnight.” He leaned down, dropping a kiss on the top of his wife’s head, and walked slowly into the bedroom.

Narcissa watched him go, his shoulders sagging slightly. Suddenly, her robust, vital husband seemed old. A flicker of pain veiled her eyes momentarily, and she closed them, pressing two fingers to her forehead.
Everyone had finally gone. The dishes were piled in the sink, waiting to be washed. Hermione had deferred to Draco’s utter refusal to deal with cling film any more in this lifetime, and was busily covering leftovers.

“Right, I’ll cover everything,” she’d said wickedly, “but you can have the job of arranging all this in the fridge!”

Passing behind her, Draco gave her bum a swat and she jumped, giggling.

“Hey! None of that now, mind!” she squeaked. “Be patient!”

He caught her about the waist and twirled her around to face him, hugging her very close and nuzzling her ear. “And what if I said that I don’t want to be patient?” His voice was a honeyed whisper.

Hermione could feel her toes begin to curl and a familiar, quite delicious warmth flushing her skin. She smiled as he pressed his lips to her neck. “Well, I expect I would remind you that patience is a virtue.”

His mouth had begun a slow descent down the soft, fragrant skin of her neck towards its juncture with her shoulder, a hand moving stealthily to open one button, then another, and then peeling open her blouse enough to expose her collarbone.

“Mmm,” he breathed against her skin, his mouth drawing small, feather-light patterns in kisses and tiny nips as he made his way lower. “I have never aspired to that particular virtue.”

“Haven’t you?” she whispered, swallowing hard and lifting her chin to allow him greater access. Swiftly the next three buttons were undone, and she felt his mouth ranging over the rounded tops of her breasts, still those same soft, maddening butterfly kisses that were so tantalising. Suddenly there seemed a scarcity of air to breathe. He had opened her bra now, a front-closing clasp this time, and begun to run his hands lightly over her bare breasts, flicking his fingertips over her small, furled nipples, coaxing them into even firmer little peaks.

“No,” he replied softly, smiling as he brought his mouth down to kiss one rosy peak. “Patience is boring. And besides, I’m far too greedy to wait.” He moved to kiss its twin, and then cupped them, raising them to his mouth. The tip of his tongue flicked delicately, snake-like, seeming to taste the air before finding its way to the objects of its desire.

She gasped, threading her fingers through his soft, moon-pale hair and clutching his head to her chest as he suckled deeply from one breast and then the other, his hands moving down her back to find her bum.

“Oh!” Yes. Just there. Hermione sucked in a ragged breath as his tongue, agile and relentless, curled itself around a nipple. “What… what about the d-dishes?” she sighed, trance-like.

Amused, he raised his head, releasing her breast with a pop. Twirling a lazy finger, he pointed in the direction of the sink. “Scourgify!” he murmured. “There. All done. Now… I do believe you are wearing far too many clothes!”

Hermione nodded, wriggling impatiently, her hands and his tangling as they both went to unbutton her jeans and draw down the zip. With a growl of impatience, he yanked it down finally, her jeans and knickers coming down on its heels, and Hermione stepped out of them, trembling.

“Now who’s wearing too many clothes?” Her voice, barely above a whisper, hitched in her throat.
“Indeed.” Draco smiled lazily as he unbuckled his belt. His fingers seemed to be moving in slow motion. Hermione’s eyes followed his every move as he opened the button and then drew down the zip of his own jeans, gracefully stepping out of them at last and then standing quietly in only his t-shirt and briefs. And then, very slowly, he drew down the briefs as well, kicking them aside.

He stood before her, his legs parted, thigh muscles tensed, his erect cock in its halo of dark gold curls jutting impudently from beneath the hem of the cotton t-shirt that hugged his chest.

In one swift movement, he peeled the shirt over his head. And then he opened his arms to her.

She slipped into the circle of their embrace, feeling his silken hardness pressing against her lower abdomen as he pulled her blouse and bra off, crushing her to his chest. Walking her backward until she bumped against the kitchen table, he lifted her, setting her in the space between the leftover trifle and the remains of the chicken.

His smile was slow and dazzling, and yet, somehow, curiously enigmatic. And then he kissed her. Kissed her until they were both breathless, gradually manoeuvring her back until she lay across the kitchen table and he covered her with his length, nestling in the heat between her legs, holding her wrists above her head with both hands as he moved sensuously against her, finally penetrating her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, holding him close, falling easily into the rhythm he’d set.

With each thrust, the dishes around them jiggled. Hermione caught Draco’s eye, and laughter, infectious and breathless, bubbled up in her throat and then his at the sounds. His final surge—deeper inside her and more powerful than the rest—pushed them over the edge in a shuddering paroxysm of pleasure, and then he collapsed against her.

They clung together for long moments afterwards, eyes closed, their flesh slick with sweat, both of them feeling utterly boneless. Finally, Draco raised himself up onto his elbows and looked down at Hermione. She lay there, seemingly asleep, her chest rising and falling gently, her hair fanned out, wild, beneath her.

“Granger,” he said softly.

She opened her eyes and smiled fuzzily up at him. “We’re on the table.”

He nodded, a wicked grin on his face. “We are.”

A tiny giggle slipped out. “Why?”

He bent his head, nudging her playfully with the tip of his nose. “I’ve just had you… for afters.”

“Was I good?”

“Oh, very good indeed. Delectable, in fact.” He pressed his lips to hers tenderly. “Even better than the trifle. Talking of which…”

Reaching to his right, he dipped a finger into the trifle bowl, drawing out a dollop of rich custard and cream.

“But fancy some? I’m feeling in need of some sustenance. You?”

She nodded, opening her mouth obediently as he brought his finger closer and carefully licking every last bit of the confection off. He helped himself again, this time popping his finger into his own mouth to savour the sweet, creamy pudding, and then offering her some more.
They’d just slid off the table, bending to retrieve her clothing, when sudden thoughts of their parents sent Hermione into a fit of the giggles.

“What’s so funny?” Draco wanted to know, bundling his clothing into a ball and cocking his head to one side.

“I was just thinking…” she gasped, trying to catch her breath. “Can you imagine… if our mums knew… what else besides food has been on this table tonight?” She straightened, holding her clothing in a haphazard pile in front of her, and wiped her eyes.

Draco smirked. “Reckon they’d think it was a very creative use of the space, darling. Oh!…” His brows drew down in a mock frown, his eyes crinkling mischievously. “Hmm. Seems to me there’s one more item that needs wrapping in cling film…”

Their eyes locked for a moment, and then Hermione gave a small shriek and began to run. Laughing, he snatched the box off the table, and gave chase.

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*And when the roses are half-buds, half flowers
And loveliest, the king of flies has come
It was a fleeting visit, all too brief
In three short minutes, he had been and gone

He rested there upon an apple leaf
A gorgeous opal crown set on his head
Although the garden is a lovely place
Was it worthy of so fine a guest?

--D. Kirwan, “Dragonfly”*
Wednesday, 21 June
Three days later

The afternoon had turned unpleasantly warm and sticky. Draco had spent the last several hours unpacking and shelving countless cartons of new arrivals in Blackwell’s huge basement section, and he’d managed to acquire a series of nasty, little cuts in the process, after several run-ins with one of those box-cutter things. What was that shit they used to seal the boxes? Ought to be outlawed. He looked down at his hands, sticking plasters dotting his skin at intervals. Bloody things still stung.

Now he walked along the Broad towards Catte Street, the heat shimmering up from the pavement, making him feel quite cross. By the time he got home, it would be nearly half five. His stomach rumbled demandingly, and he thought again about his rather paltry and wholly inadequate lunch hours earlier.

Hermione had encouraged him to make a chicken sandwich from the leftovers, take some fruit perhaps, something more substantive than two of the miniature Mr. Kipling Bramley Apple Pies that, once discovered during the second term, had become a guilty pleasure, hoarded in packages of six along with biscuits and other sweets in a box under his bed for late-night noshes. She’d wrinkled her nose at the thought of them as lunch, rolling her eyes as he slipped one small, wrapped pie into each pocket.

“Don’t worry, Mum. I’ll be fine,” he’d teased, giving her a quick kiss before disappearing out the door and down the stairs.

Now he wished he’d listened to her, clutching his mid-section as another volley of hunger pangs sounded.

This week, their schedules at Blackwell’s were set on alternating days until Friday and Saturday, when they both would be on. He wondered, as he crossed Magdalen Bridge, traversed the roundabout, and turned into the Iffley Road, what Hermione had been doing all afternoon.

“Granger!” he called, tossing his keys into a small ceramic bowl on the bookcase to the right of the door, kicking it shut behind him. The flat remained silent, bathed in late-afternoon sunshine.

He walked into the kitchen next, pulling open the fridge and revelling in the rush of cool air that met him as he poked about, settling for a well-chilled bottle of orange and pineapple fruit squash. Twisting the cap off, he tossed back a long, refreshing swallow, briefly wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and then wandered over to the set of windows at the far end of the room. They looked out over the back garden, as did both bedrooms.

Idly, he scanned the spacious garden below, with its fringe of trees in luxuriant leaf and the generous lawn with its paved, rectangular patio. Well beyond, he could see the clusters of houses that stood on the road behind.

And then he saw her.

She was on her knees on the grass near to one end of the patio, a trowel in her hand. Looking up, she spotted him and waved, a radiant smile lighting her face.

Grinning, he grabbed his keys, locking the door behind him, and clattered down the stairs two at a time, rounding the side of the house and entering the garden at its rear.

“Malfoy,” she said brightly, getting to her feet and throwing her arms around him. Then she giggled,
stepping back and holding up hands encased in grimy gardening gloves. Slipping them off, she reached to brush flecks of dried dirt off his shoulders and back. “Sorry! Just home?”

Draco nodded and then gestured at the flat of flowering plants in small, green, plastic pots, the mound of turned earth, and the small trowel she’d had her hands in moments before. “What’s all this, then?”

“Oh! Well, see, I was in the Covered Market today-- just to look round a bit, you know?-- and I stopped at The Garden. There were all these really pretty potted plants. I’d been thinking I’d love to start a small garden, so… well… I bought all this lot! I’ve been turning the soil, getting it ready. Fancy helping a bit?” She gave him a mischievous little smile, waving a clean pair of gardening gloves like a flag. “You did say you always wanted to garden, didn’t you? Bought you a pair too!”

“Ah… yeah, reckon so…” His own smile was a bit sheepish. Messing about in the dirt with a small spade when he was six and trying to imitate the house-elves as they worked in the Lady Garden was one thing. But buying those pruning shears had just been a silly indulgence. Now he was backed into a corner with no way to skive off. “Sure.” He dropped into a crouch. “What do I do first?”

“Well,” Hermione began thoughtfully, “you could unpot all these plants for me. That would be great. Then they’ll be ready to go. Just…” She reached for a small pot of salmon-coloured impatiens. “Just squeeze the sides of the pot, see? Like this. The plant will pop right out.” She demonstrated. “Hold it gently at the base of the stem as you pull it out, and oh—try not to damage the root ball. That’s…” She nodded as he extracted another impatiens from its pot. “Right, the bottom bit. I’ll start digging the holes, and then we can put them all in, yeah?”

She flashed him another brilliant smile and dropped happily back to her knees in the grass, beginning on the first row of holes.

Right. Unpot about two hundred of the little buggers. Okay, maybe not two hundred… but a lot, anyway. What the fuck had he been playing at, anyway, cacking on about wanting to garden? All he really wanted right now after a long day of unpacking and shelving a hideous number of books was a nice lie-down on the sofa, his fruit squash in hand, and something totally mindless on the telly. And he was injured, for Merlin’s sake! He really oughtn’t be getting his hands dirty.

“Draco… your gloves. Here.” Hermione held the unused gloves out like a talisman, her eyes bright with enthusiasm for this new project. “Though you really won’t need them just yet.”

He looked up. “What? Oh… right, yeah…”

Well, that was that. He grinned, mentally gritting his teeth, and took the gloves from her, his movements gingerly as he tried to avoid them coming into contact with the tender spots on his palms where the sticking plasters lay.

Forty-eight small plants later, Draco stood stiffly, pulling Hermione to her feet beside him.

“Come on, Granger,” he sighed, carefully pulling off the gloves and flexing his fingers. “We’re done, what d’you reckon?”

She slipped an arm about his waist and he draped his around her shoulders, and together, they viewed their handiwork: one generous flowerbed filled with a variety of colourful annuals and perennials. There were groupings of black-eyed susans, purple cones, coreopsis, daisies and daylilies that would eventually stand tall in the bright morning sun, encircled by impatiens in white, salmon, coral, and palest pink. In the coming months, the small, lush blossoms would overspill their borders, partly sheltered by a nearby tree in the heat of the afternoon.
Turning, she snuggled against him, rubbing her nose briefly against his t-shirt, damp with sweat. He had an earthy, sun-ripe scent that was rather pleasant. "So--" She turned her face up, regarding him with an impish grin. "How do you like gardening, Malfoy? Ready to break out those shiny, new pruning shears?"

"Ha ha." He rolled his eyes, a wry grin of his own quirking a corner of his mouth. "I must say, it was quite an edifying experience. I never knew our house-elves were having this much fun. Of course, it must have been loads easier for them, being so much closer to the ground. Can’t say for sure which I enjoyed more, really—unpacking cartons and putting away books for six hours straight or squatting in the heat, filling endless holes in the ground with a shitload of scrawny little plants!"

Hermione laughed, poking him playfully in the side. "Oh come on, it wasn’t that bad! It’s going to be gorgeous when everything grows. I’m so glad we did this together. I really feel like it’s ours now. Not just the garden. I mean this place. Everything.” She gave him a quick squeeze and then broke away, all business suddenly.

"Why don’t you go and have a lie-down on that chaise over there?" she suggested. "I’ll bring you a cold drink and you can relax for a bit."

"What about dinner? What do you want to do?" he wondered, as they walked in the direction of the comfy-looking lounge chair.

“Oh, well, I thought maybe we could walk over to the Cowley Road, would that be okay? I’ve been thinking about Pad Thai all afternoon!” She threaded her fingers through his. “I know we agreed to watch our expenses, but we could always share and keep the cost down. It’s just too warm in that kitchen to cook, and I’m knackered anyway!"

“You and me both,” Draco said. “Right, I’ll just stretch out here…” He lowered himself onto the chaise, extending his long legs luxuriantly. “And you can join me, yeah?”

He attempted to pull her down on top of him, but she resisted, giggling, finally managing to stand up again.

"Stay there!” she ordered. "Back in a tick!” And then she was gone, leaving Draco to wriggle contentedly down into the cushions. The air was soft and fragrant with the perfume of new-mown grass, and overhead, a pair of dragonflies hummed, making lazy, looping circles between two apple trees. He could hear the sounds of children playing in a neighbouring garden, and somewhere not too far away, there was the enticing scent of somebody’s barbeque. Before long, his eyes slid shut and he drifted gently off.

* 

There was an annoyingly persistent hand worrying at his shoulder. He didn’t want to be bothered. It wasn’t time to get up yet.

“Piss off, Zabini!” he muttered. Twat. Why couldn’t he respect a bloke’s need for proper rest?

“Malfoy!” The voice was a bit louder now, and becoming more insistent. “Wake up!”

Now this was odd. It was clearly not Zabini. It was a girl.
Struggling out of sleep, Draco opened one eye and then the other. Hermione stood over him, biting her lip to keep from laughing. In each hand she held a glass of wine.

“You just told me to piss off, you know,” she grinned.

“Did I?” Draco said vaguely, and then waved his hand. “That meant fuck-all.” He laughed lightly, a bit embarrassed. “Thought you were--”

Hermione smiled. “Zabini. So I gathered. Anyway,” she continued, setting down the glasses on a small, nearby table. She took his hands, pulling him up into a sitting position. “Have a look round.”

It was dusk, and the pale, blue canvas of sky overhead was shot through with ribbons of peach and mauve, the waning sun gilding the clouds. He must have been sleeping for more than an hour. Dark would be falling soon.

And then he saw what Hermione had been talking about.

A necklace of tiny tea lights lined the perimeter of the garden and flickered like giant, luminous fireflies from various points around the patio. In the centre, a cluster of them filled a small, black cauldron, the light breeze making their flames dance brightly. A pair of large cushions from the other lounge chair were strategically placed on either side.

He gave her a quizzical look.

“Granger, what is all this?”

“This,” she said, smiling with satisfaction and the look of one who has a delightful secret to share, “is our Solstice celebration. It’s our very own little bonfire. Well, sort of, anyway. Did you forget what today is?”

In fact, he had done. Surprised recollection filled him as he sat up straighter and had a better look around.

Hermione held out her hand to him. “Come on,” she urged. “Let’s sit by the fire and celebrate.” In her other hand were two pieces of paper. They looked as if they’d been hand-printed and decorated with designs drawn along the margins.

“Where’d you get the cauldron?” he began, and then stopped. Of course. “You have been a busy girl today, haven’t you… Bellewether Crescent as well…”

She nodded, dropping down on one of the cushions and crossing her legs, Indian-fashion. “Mmm. Stopped at Hixon and Grundleston.” Her chin came up. “It’s just a little cauldron, after all! Nobody else will see. And we’re not even--”

Lounging on the other cushion, Draco raised an amused eyebrow. “Steady on, Granger,” he drawled. “I’m okay with it. You were right in what you said that time before my parents came. We are who we are. If and when we do anything, we’ll just have to be extra careful.”

She smiled, relieved, and thrust one of the papers into his hands. “Right, then. This is something I thought maybe we could read out loud—you know, to mark the day and all. Found it in a book on rituals I bought today at Wickenden’s. It’s really lovely, and I thought… well… it’s our first flat, and our first garden… and gardens are so lovely, aren’t they, a way of putting down roots and celebrating life… and it is Midsummer, after all…”

He looked at her, startled into quiescence by her openhearted embrace of the simplest pleasures.
Once again, just being around her grounded him, reminded him of what was really important.

Nodding, he gave the words on the paper a quick scan. “Let’s do it.”

Hermione began: “‘Now is the time of balance, when the flowering plants are in their prime, and the fertility of the earth is at its strongest point. Life is now fully awake. The bees and butterflies move from flower to flower. In the meadow the sire and the dam now nurture growing fillies and colts. This is the Feast of Midsummer, the turning of the year.’” She nodded at Draco to continue.

“‘As the Sun now burns brightly, bringing warmth to Mother Earth,’” he read, “‘so its warmth begins to wane, and the fires of life begin to bank even as the days grow warmer. Now the Wheel of the Year begins to turn from the light. Let us celebrate the balance, rejoice in the light, and welcome the coming dark!’ Read the rest with me, yeah?”

And so, in unison they concluded:

“‘I bind unto myself today the virtues of the starlit heaven, the glorious sun’s life-giving ray, the whiteness of the moon at ev’n; the flashing of the lightning free, the whirling wind’s tempestuous shocks, the stable earth, the deep salt sea around the old, eternal rocks.’”

The first stars had appeared by the time they finished. A small sprinkling of them dotted the clear sky, now a brilliant, lingering violet at the horizon and ranging into infinite bands of deepening, midnight blue above. The moon had risen as well, gently rounded and lucent against the velvet darkness.

They sipped their wine in companionable silence for a while, enjoying the quiet, the pleasure of the night sky, and the beauty of the garden lit by the flickering tea lights.

Eventually, Draco turned to Hermione.

“Don’t know about you, Granger, but I’m starved.”

“Aha, see? You should have listened to me! Those silly pies!” she tutted. “Though you know, I’m pretty hungry too now, actually. Fancy some Thai, then?” She waggled her eyebrows hopefully.

“Reckon I could eat a hippogriff right about now!” He scrambled to his feet and offered her his hand. They got as far as the end of the patio and then Hermione stopped.

“The candles! We can’t just leave them here lit, can we?”

“S’pose not,” he conceded, and began to raise his hand. “Allow me.”

“Careful,” Hermione warned, her voice a low hiss as she cast furtive glances all around them. “Okay, now. Quick!”

Draco grinned in pleasurable anticipation. He hadn’t done too much magic in the last months, especially not the wandless variety. He hoped he wasn’t too rusty. Raising his hand again, he swiftly inscribed a sweeping arc that covered the garden from one end to the other.

“Luminarium absentis!” he said softly. Instantly, every tiny candle was extinguished and the patio was plunged into near-darkness.

“Brilliant!” Hermione gave him a quick, delighted hug.

“Naturally.” He shrugged with deliberate nonchalance, and she shoved against him playfully.
“Watch it, darling, that’s my wand arm!”

Laughing, they left the garden.

In the next road, the four-year-old boy who insisted he’d just seen lots of little lights “go pouf” all at once in that big garden behind their house was promptly admonished for telling fibs and then put to bed. The iced biscuits were to blame, his mum was certain. He’d practically finished off the entire tin in one go.

TBC

The Covered Market, Oxford:
Oh, and Draco’s beloved little apple pies:

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks, hugs, and a lifetime supply of Mr. Kipling Bramley Apple Pies to my wonderful and hardworking betas, mister_otter and kazfeist.
The song “Dragonfly” is by the brilliant guitarist/singer/songwriter Danny Kirwan of Fleetwood Mac, with lyrics adapted from the poem by W.H. Davies.


*Luminarium absentis!*-- "Light, be gone!"


Disclaimer: Not mine, except for the plot and original characters and settings. I make no money from this story.
I feel fine anytime she’s around me now.
She’s around me now almost all the time.
And if I’m well, you can tell she’s been with me now.
She’s been with me now quite a long, long time, and I feel fine.

Every now and then, the things I lean on, they lose their meaning.
And I find myself careening into places where I should not let me go... no.
She has the power to go where no one else can find me,
And to silently remind me of the happiness and good times that I know.

---James Taylor, “Something in the Way She Moves”

Saturday morning,
22 July
JRR Tolkien, Architect of Middle Earth, smiled benevolently from the fridge magnet under which a “to-do” list fluttered in the light breeze from the windows at the far end of the kitchen. Beside it was a grocery list that was even longer, stuck to the fridge with a magnet that had made both Hermione and Draco snicker as they’d browsed a shop in the Covered Market selling all sorts of very touristy stuff. This particular one had a photo of the Radcliffe Camera, under which were the words “BA (Hons) Oxon. Please speak slowly.”

“We’re definitely having that one, Hermione,” Draco had insisted, with a snort of laughter. “It’s perfect!”

And then almost immediately, they’d found another with the same photo but an even more jaded message: “I went to Oxford & all I got was a lousy BA (Hons), well-paid job, great social networks, gratuitous MA & taste for fine wines and cuisine.”

Hermione had held it up with a half-smile. By way of reply, Draco had cocked an eyebrow, smirking, and she’d flipped it into the shopping basket that was slowly filling with all sorts of little oddments.

In the end, they had walked out with a pair of mugs, two mouse pads, and a collection of fridge magnets, six in all, including “I Heart Oxford” and Hermione’s two personal favourites upon which she’d absolutely insisted: one featured a photo of a snow-white ferret and the other a patchwork of nine ferret photos, above which were the words “Oxford Ferret Rescue.”

“Oh, come on, Granger!” Draco had objected. “You cannot be serious! That’s just plain embarrassing!”

“Nobody here knows anything about that! And of course, they won’t, not ever! Besides,” she’d insisted, hugging the two small magnets to her chest protectively whilst he tried to pluck them away, “I think they’re really cute! They remind me of you!”

Giggling, she’d danced lightly out of his reach, clutching the two offending magnets even more tightly as he strained to grab them once again, and he sighed finally, shrugging, and threw his hands up in defeat.

Sidling back up to him once his back was half-turned, she rose on tiptoe to plant a playful kiss on his cheek, her mouth close to his ear. “Ferret.”

He turned his head slightly, his mouth curling in a sly smile, his eyes grown suddenly hooded. His voice dropped to a naughty whisper. “I can be. Later. If you like.”

And then he’d given her a slow, suggestive wink.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione laughed, looping her arm through his and giving him a little tug. “Come on, Malfoy, let’s finish our shopping whilst you’re still on two legs!”

On this fine Saturday morning, Hermione was feeling very energetic and filled with purpose. It was early still, relatively speaking-- only just past nine. Draco had stirred briefly when Hermione began to carefully extricate herself from under the arm he’d thrown over her sometime in the night, reaching to pull her back into his sleepy embrace. She had slipped away and he’d rolled over, sleep overtaking him again almost immediately.

One thing she had learned about Draco Malfoy in the past five weeks was that he was a night person, far more completely than she had ever suspected from weekends spent together during term. Confirmed, inveterate, and hide-bound. She, on the other hand, was inclined in precisely the opposite
direction. Those first several weeks had been a tango back and forth, each one trying to persuade the other to a habit that was neither comfortable nor natural. Somewhere in that time, they’d agreed to disagree, and meet in the middle instead: he’d wake her late at night when irresistible need and desire struck, and she would do the same to him in the early mornings. Otherwise, barring true emergencies, the sleep habits of both would be held sacrosanct and absolutely respected.

“Trust me, Granger,” Draco had said, by way of explanation one Sunday at noon over a plate of those cheesy scrambled eggs of hers that he loved so much, plus cranberry scones and coffee. “You do not want to be around me very early in the morning if you can help it. I’m virtually incoherent. Stroppy, too. Consider yourself warned.”

He had not been exaggerating.

A week later, the sun shining for the first time in what had seemed like ages, Hermione had awakened to a chorus of birds singing lustily in the trees outside. Bounding out of bed and over to the window, she took a deep breath of the fresh morning air. Although the sun was shining, the air was still cool, the grass in the back garden below glistening with dew. The flowers they’d planted were flourishing, and had already grown taller and more profuse. They, too, were speckled with tiny, prism-like dew drops.

“Oh, Draco!” she’d enthused, gazing out upon the beauty of this perfect, new summer day.

Dead silence.

“Malfoy?” Her back was still to the bed. “Come see how lovely the--”

There was a muffled, rather primitive sound, half-grunt, half-growl.

Hermione was undeterred. The day was just too glorious. “Oh come on, you--”

“Sleeping.”

“But--”

Draco’s head had popped out abruptly from under the duvet. Bleary-eyed, his hair sticking out in dishevelled spikes, he’d looked incredibly aggravated, nearly murderous. One long moment’s baleful squint in her general direction and then he’d yanked the covers back up over his head, burrowing down as far away from daylight, birdsong, and irritatingly chipper conversation as he could get.

Conversely, Draco discovered that late-night activities generally eluded Hermione, chiefly because she tended to pass out after midnight.

“Granger’s Cinderella Complex,” he called it, only half teasing, when plans he’d had were once again thwarted the night she’d begun to snore gently halfway through a DVD they’d rented, following a meal of Chicken Tikka Masala and Naan bread at a local Indian restaurant.

“Oh, I won’t fall asleep, I promise!” she’d sworn the next time they passed Videosyncratic. “Really, Malfoy, let’s rent something! I’m definitely up for it!”

He’d actually believed her that time. She’d seemed so completely alert until two thirds of the way through it. And then, predictably, by 12.15 am, her head had fallen back on the sofa, her mouth open slightly, out for the count.

“Ah, Granger, not again,” he’d sighed. He couldn’t help feeling a tad disheartened. This was the third film climax she’d been unconscious for. On principle, he’d refused to tell her the ending the
next morning. This had only made her peevish, until she realised that for any rental, she could always watch whatever she’d missed early the next day whilst he slept.

Today was not one such day, however. She was off work and there was just too much to do on this precious free day. Sipping from her new favourite coffee mug featuring a rather evocative black and white sketch of Tolkien, she gazed thoughtfully at the lists on the fridge, considering which she wanted to tackle first.

Food shopping. Laundry. Tidying the flat. Organising her books properly once and for all, something she’d put off far too long already. Let’s see… best way to go about all this was a division of labour, surely. She considered for a moment and then shook her head. No. Sending Malfoy to Tesco on his own was a recipe for disaster. He’d buy a trolleyful of stuff that was completely unnecessary and probably miss out half the items on the list that they really did need. Safer for her to do the food shopping at this point.

However, he certainly could handle the laundry on his own, she felt certain. He’d done it for himself all three terms without ruining too much, and in the past month in the flat, he’d worked alongside her each time. Surely by now he was familiar enough with the process to cope on his own.

Right, then. Laundry: Malfoy. Food shopping: herself. Tidying up—well, there was the first small rub. Up to now, she’d been doing virtually all of it herself. A bit of dusting and hoovering here and there, cleaning the bathroom of course, mopping the kitchen floor – nothing too difficult, really. She realised she’d made a mistake there, though. Stupidly, she’d set a bad precedent. Now she was determined to fix it. They would simply have to agree a plan for a fair division of labour, no way around it.

An image of Draco Malfoy scrubbing the toilet bowl came to mind, and she nearly choked on her coffee, trying to hold back a giggle. She sighed, and then another, very different thought popped into her head, unbidden. “Down on your hands and knees, Draco Malfoy, you arrogant, smarmy, toffee-nosed little git, and clean my toilet!” For a brief moment she pictured herself, aged twelve or thirteen, standing with her foot on a squirming, adolescent Malfoy’s neck and forcing him to clean the toilets in one of the girls’ bathrooms.

And then, instantly, she felt a profound rush of regret for the thought, even though it hadn’t been remotely serious. Because he wasn’t that smarmy little git anymore, and the desire to get her own back over all those childhood slights and insults had been outgrown and left behind long ago. The very idea seemed absurd and alien to her now. They both were worlds away from the children they had been only a few years earlier—in his case, almost unrecognisably so in some ways. She knew that she couldn’t hurt him deliberately if she tried. Her throat closed at the thought, and she felt her eyes beginning to water.

“She laughed shakily and buried her face in his t-shirt, breathing deeply. The soft cotton smelled so wonderfully like him. “Nothing at all, just being stupid.”

He rested his cheek on the top of her head for a moment and suddenly the amusement vanished, replaced by a tiny thrill of fear. “You are hardly stupid, Hermione. Are you sure it’s nothing? You’re not still…”

“All right, Miss Waterworks, what is it this time?”

She turned to see Draco standing there in his t-shirt and cotton flannel pyjama bottoms, arms folded over his chest and his head cocked to one side. His amusement was evident.

She laughed shakily and buried her face in his t-shirt, breathing deeply. The soft cotton smelled so wonderfully like him. “Nothing at all, just being stupid.”
“No! Oh, Merlin, no. It wasn’t like that at all, I swear.”

He drew her to the kitchen table and sat down in one of the chairs, pull

She threaded a couple of fingers idly through his hair, still mused from sleep. “Well, all right. Sort of a long story. I was thinking about chores we need to do here—you know, tidying-up sorts of things. And how to divide everything fairly. And then suddenly, I pictured you scrubbing the toilet, and… well…” Her voice came out in a rush. “It was funny, imagining you that way, and then suddenly I pictured us much younger back at Hogwarts and me getting my revenge on you for everything you ever said to me by making you clean toilets!” She ducked her head, grinning sheepishly. “With a toothbrush.”

Draco let out a snort. “I’d have deserved it as well.” He paused and then looked at Hermione quizzically. “But… what made you cry, love?”

Now she found her eyes puddling once again. “Well, it was just… suddenly, I felt really awful because… because you’re so different now and… well, suddenly… I hated thinking that way about you, even as a joke!”

He laughed softly, hugging her close and expelling a sigh of relief tinged with amazement. It really hadn’t been what he’d feared at all—just the opposite in fact, sensitive and tender-hearted girl that she was— and the knowledge left a small kernel of warmth burning in his chest.

Blinking a couple of times to clear his own eyes, grateful for the anonymity that holding her so close provided him, he gave her a quick squeeze and then leaned back to see her face.

“So, Granger—what are we doing today?”

Dusting the furniture and hoovering the rugs would be one job, mopping the kitchen floor and cleaning the bathroom the other. A very neat, fair division of labour. It had all seemed so logical when Granger had proposed the plan, as they sat over mugs of fresh coffee and bowls of porridge. But—he hadn’t known what he’d agreed to! He’d been in an overtired stupor, that was it. Half nine. Pffft! He shouldn’t even have been out of bed at that ridiculously early hour. And bollocks, what was all that shite he’d agreed to, the alleged superiority of cleaning the “real”—i.e. Muggle—way? The garden was one thing. This…

And there was definitely something a bit dodgy about that paper-scissors-stone thing she’d drawn him into as a way to decide who did which jobs this first time. He would have to pay more attention next time. For now, all that amiability of his had landed him in the middle of the small bathroom, lumbered with a sponge and a bucket filled with plastic bottles: Mr. Muscle Shower Shine, Mr. Muscle Multi-Task Bathroom Cleaner, Mr. Muscle glass cleaner, and—Merlin’s balls!— a special, extra-strength, anti-bacterial Mr. Muscle foam just for the toilet. He reckoned he was about to become far more intimately acquainted with this Mr. Muscle than he would ever have desired in this lifetime.

He sat down on the closed toilet lid, surveying the army of cleaning supplies that seemed to be pointing their spray mechanisms directly at him, waiting in silent reproach. What first? Logic told him he ought to begin at the top and work his way down, finishing with the dreaded toilet.
He sighed, stood up, and stretched briefly, yawning. Then, pulling the bottle of shower cleaner out of the bucket, he stepped into the tub, tugged perplexedly at the cap until he realised it was meant to be twisted open, and aimed.

Fifteen minutes later, the door opened and Hermione poked her head inside.

“Hey, love...” she began, smiling. “How’s it g--”

Draco turned his head, peering at her over his shoulder from behind the glass partition on the side of the tub. He'd stripped down to his boxers and a pair of flip-flops, and was busily squirting squiggles and looping arcs of white foam onto the inner shower wall.

She bit her lip to stifle the laughter that bubbled up. “Having fun then?”

“Oh yeah, loads,” he retorted, letting go with another meandering, elongated figure eight that hung, suspended, on the tiled wall for a moment before beginning its inexorable slide down to the tub.

She moved further into the room, surveying him up and down appreciatively, her mouth twitching. “I would ask if you make a habit of cleaning practically starkers, but then, this is your first time, isn’t it.”

Turning around all the way now, he pulled a face at her and then tossed the bottle back into the bucket, snagging the all-purpose cleaner. “From now on, we do it my way,” he informed her. “At least until Danny and Gemma come back. No more of this ‘it’s so uplifting doing it the Muggle way’ shite. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve a tub and toilet to attend to!”

He dropped into a crouch, squirting a long, worm-like line of the foam along the border of the tiled wall and the tub, and set about scrubbing at it with the sodden sponge he held in his other hand. Mid-scrub, he looked back over his shoulder.

“Dusting and hoovering all done then, Granger?” he asked innocently.

Her eyebrows rose but she said nothing, her mouth curling up at one end as she slipped out the door.

There was definitely something to be said for sitting and doing absolutely nothing. Preferably in a comfy armchair or sofa, feet up. Draco eyed the twin sofas in the sitting room from where he stood in the kitchen, sponge mop in hand. Then he looked down at the pail, brimming with sudsy water, and the large expanse of floor that needed mopping, and made a sudden decision. Two minutes later, he had returned with his wand. A sudden feeling of comfort and nostalgia swept over him as he held the smooth wood in his hand again.

“Lava!”

Instantly, the mop wrenched itself out of his grasp and stood upright in the pail, and then very
slowly, it rose up higher and higher, until it hovered above the pail, water dripping down.

Grinning smugly, Draco pointed his wand at the mechanism that would squeeze the excess water out of the sponge. The handle pushed down and streams of water poured into the pail. And then the mop floated at a slight angle down to the floor, where it began a vigorous back-and-forth movement.

“No, no, the back first,” Draco muttered, and raised his arm once again, flicking the tip of his wand towards the far right corner of the room. Obediently, the mop bobbed along in that direction on an invisible current of air.

Back and forth the mop moved in ever-lengthening strokes, Draco directing it much as a conductor does a symphony orchestra. Before very long, he found he was quite enjoying it, his arm movements gradually becoming more elaborate, full of grandiose flourishes. Finally, the last small section of floor had been thoroughly scrubbed. Almost disappointed to be finished so soon, he guided the mop back to the pail one last time, where it dropped docilely into the water with a small *plunk*, standing upright.

“*Evanesco!*” he finished, and just like that, the pail was empty of dirty water. No sense in spoiling the excellent job he’d already done on the toilet.

Slipping his wand into a back pocket, he gripped both the pail handle and the mop, hoisted them up and carried them to the bathroom. Hermione looked up from where she sat, cross-legged, on the floor of their bedroom, a pile of books surrounding her, and waved. He nodded, grinning, as he passed, raising the mop and pail in salute.

“Done?” she called after him.

“Yup,” he replied cheerfully. She could hear him whistling under his breath as he went down the hall.

Ah, magic. It was truly a *wonderful* thing.

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“Malfoy.”

The early-afternoon sunshine flooded the sitting room, and he’d sunk into the soft cushions, feeling his muscles melting into butter. He hadn’t even remembered closing his eyes, but now he was being rudely awakened out of such a pleasurable dream. There was a white-sand beach that met impossibly blue water and the heady, intoxicating fragrance of tropical flowers filled his senses. The warm sand baked into the muscles of his back and legs, and very close by there was another scent, too, that brought to mind vanilla and almonds and honey…

“Draco!”

He opened his eyes and peered up at Hermione. She stood over him, the sunlight creating a backlit halo around her hair.

“You were talking in your sleep, you know!” she informed him, laughing, as he pulled her down on top of him, wrapping his arms around her to hold her steady.
“Was I, now?” he murmured lazily, threading a finger through one of her curls. “What did I say?”

“Oh…” she shrugged, her chin resting on his chest. “Not much, really. Just a lot of moaning, that sort of thing.”

“Right, s’pose I must have been dreaming about Pansy…” His eyes glinted slyly.

“Must have been, yeah,” Hermione nodded, poker-faced. “You said ‘no’ three or four times!’ Quite adamantly too.”

“Now we both know that isn’t true, you little wench!” He laughed softly. “Because I remember precisely what I was dreaming about. Come here.”

She wriggled higher on his chest, and he brought his nose to her hair and sniffed deeply, his eyes closing in an expression of bliss. That was it. That was the scent, as he knew it would be.

“It was you, and well you know it. What did I really say?”

They were virtually nose to nose now, and gently, she rubbed hers against his and smiled. Her voice was quiet, tinged with awe.

“You said my name. It was… it was beautiful, Draco. Like music. I didn’t know…”

_That a name could hold so much more than just the sound of its letters. That there could be hope and fear and tenderness and so much love. That anyone would ever say my name that way._

He drew her head down onto his chest, tightening his arms around her, and exhaled, his breath ruffling the wispy curls that framed her face.

“It was a very good dream,” he whispered.

* All told, it had been a very productive day indeed. All the chores had eventually been ticked off the list on the fridge. Draco had been quite happy to take care of the laundry, as all it required once the washer was going was to transfer the wet stuff to the dryer at the appropriate time.

Fortunately, that came just as there was an interval in the rugby match he was watching on the telly in the sitting room, rugby being a new interest sparked by Richard’s references to it in conversation. He now sported a “Watford Hornets” t-shirt of his very own to match the oversized one Hermione had nicked from her father years before. She’d made a small present of it to him more as a joke than anything else, but he’d taken to actually wearing it—around the flat, at least—and had begun investigating the sport itself when he could catch a broadcast match. Live matches in the June tours and the Super League competitions were currently being shown, much to his satisfaction.

Whilst he was contentedly engaged with the laundry, the telly and a very good glass of Guinness-- a pleasure cultivated during the many visits to pubs over the course of the three terms-- Hermione was out at Tesco doing the grocery shopping. Not one of her favourite activities as a rule, this time she was happy to get away from the seemingly endless pile of books awaiting their proper classification by genre and then author before being put in their permanent places on the bookshelves. At times like this, she longed to be a little less driven to organise so thoroughly.
She’d bought a metal, fold-up trolley in which to cart the bags of groceries back from the supermarket, and this was kept behind the several bicycles in the small, sheltered alcove near the front entrance.

Arriving back home, Hermione struggled up the stairs carrying two heavy bags, enlisting Draco’s help in bringing up the rest as she began to unpack all of the food and put it away. A full fridge, everything in its place, was her cue to sit down and relax finally herself. Sod the books for now.

Helping herself to a glass of lemonade, she joined Draco in the sitting room, curling up on the adjacent sofa with a book. Precisely five minutes later, she gave up reading as a bad job. Draco sat leaning forward, elbows on his knees, his eyes riveted to the screen, following every move the players made. It was obvious that he was digesting as much as he could possibly cram into his brain about the sport, making automatic comparisons to Quidditch, and filing away pertinent facts. Every once in a while, he would grunt or exclaim excitedly, or flop back in his seat, rolling his eyes and groaning.

“Exciting match?” Hermione inquired mildly, amused.

“What?... oh… yeah…” Draco muttered, not really listening.

She’d seen that look before—it was classic. The rapt expression, a form of passionate tunnel vision she’d grown up seeing on her father’s face whenever he watched rugby, cricket, or football, was identical to what she’d observed on the faces of the most fanatical Quidditch followers, and that same expression was blossoming on Draco’s face now. It was a good thing she’d always been self-reliant and quite happy with her own company for stretches of time. She had the distinct feeling she was going to be falling back on her own resources from time to time in the days ahead. With a small sigh and a wry, backward glance in Draco’s direction, she disappeared into the bedroom, book in hand.

By dinnertime, both of them were ready to get out for a bit. Dinner and a film sounded very good indeed, and Hermione had finally discovered the source of that wonderful take-away Italian meal they’d had with Gemma and Danny their first night in the flat. Now Mario’s Trattoria was their destination of choice for a spaghetti dinner. A modest walk from their flat up the Iffley Road, across James Street and a quick left into Cowley Road, and there it was—modest and unassuming, but the most amazing pizza in the area and wonderful pasta dishes as well.

“Spaghetti Lucifero?” Incredulous, Hermione pointed to one of the items on the pasta list. “Seriously, Malfoy, you have to try that!”

“And what, might I inquire, are you insinuating?” There was just a hint of a smile as Draco leaned back in his seat, arms folded expectantly, one eyebrow raised.

“Me? Oh, absolutely nothing,” Hermione replied innocently, her eyes round. “It’s just that I know how much you like anchovies and olives!”

“Hmm! And here I was hoping it was because of my devilishly sexy good looks and charm.”

“You?” Hermione deadpanned. “Never! Oh, don’t pout!” She began to giggle. “Actually, do—you look so cute when you’re pouting!”

“Ugh, what are you trying to do, Granger, put me off my food?” Draco made a gagging noise.

“Here, have some wine,” she soothed, pouring out a bit more of the house red for both of them. “You’ll feel much better.”
The Ultimate Picture Palace, conveniently near to Mario’s on Jeune Street, had become another favourite haunt. A single-screen cinema showing independent films, it was enjoyably atmospheric and the price was right. “Smells like a library.” Hermione had remarked, to which Draco had rolled his eyes with a snort of laughter, muttering, “Figures!”

Later that night, the moon cut swaths of bright, silver light across their bed and the floor. Hermione stirred, threading her arm more securely around Draco from behind, drawing him closer. She curled herself around his still form, snuggling into his comforting warmth.

“S’nice,” he murmured sleepily.

“Mmm.” She pressed a kiss to his bare shoulder. “That was lovely. Before, I mean. Really.”

By way of reply, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her palm softly. “Can’t sleep?”

“I was just thinking about the film again. It was really very disturbing. Imagine being condemned to a horrifying place like that just because of words you’d written? Because some authority decided they were indecent? The idea makes me sick! And the ending… I mean, the poor priest—he was such a good man! And still, that disgusting slime of an asylum director got away with accusing him of insanity and then locking him away in that awful place!”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t a surprise. He did what he had to, to protect himself. The priest was about to expose him.”

“Malfoy! Surely you’re not justifying what he did! It was monstrous!”

“It was. I agree.” Draco was fully awake now. “I’m just saying that what the asylum director did was totally predictable. The man was a corrupt, self-serving, hypocritical piece of shit. People like that behave very consistently.” He gave a short, bitter laugh. “I should know.”

He fell silent then, the implications of his words uncomfortably ambiguous.

Hermione lay back on her pillow, her expression pensive as she watched Draco. He was very still, his fair hair bright in the soft light from the window. Finally, she laid her cheek against the smooth skin of his back and closed her eyes.

The sound, when it came sometime later, was sharp, a strangled cry rising from deep in his throat to a desperately high pitch fuelled by terror.

Hermione awoke to the sensation of her heart leaping madly in her chest. And then he screamed again.

“Oh, Merlin! Draco! Wake up!” She threw her arms around him and held on. He lay on his back now, eyes wide open, but still somehow blinded by the nightmare’s power. A light sheen of sweat beaded his face, so pale and pinched in the shadows.

“It’s okay, Hermione. I’m okay.” His voice was hardly more than a whisper and sounded so very tired. He swallowed hard a couple of times.

“You’re sure you’re all right?” Hermione quavered. “What—what was it? What were you dreaming about? Can you tell me?”
Draco sighed, closing his eyes for a moment and then folded one arm behind his head, still staring up at the ceiling. His words were quiet and measured in a visible effort to calm himself.

“I’ve had this dream before, you know, just not… not for a really long time,” he began. “I’m… I’m in a room, see… Very small, very closed in. It’s pitch-dark and silent. So dead quiet, I can hear my own heart beating. It’s scary, how loud it sounds. And then I hear something else.”

He paused, and Hermione moved closer, resting her head on her elbow and gazing at him steadily.

“Go on,” she said quietly.

“It sounds like a thumping. Very regular, very steady, and getting louder. And then… then I start to hear groans after each one, and they get louder and louder as well, until then turn into shrieks, and oh gods, they’re agonising, Hermione! And they won’t stop. They just…” He swallowed convulsively, his voice cracking. “Won’t. Stop.”

The implications of these words weren’t ambiguous at all, merely terrifying.

“Is this… is this something that really happened? I’m sorry for asking, it’s just—”

“No, no,” he said tiredly, raising a hand to his eyes for a moment. “It’s all right. I—I want to tell you. The answer is yes—and no. Because it did happen, many times actually, just not in precisely that setting.”

She laid a hand on his chest, feeling his heart beating beneath her palm. “Tell me.”

“They used to do that to me—make me listen. S’pose they were trying to toughen me up. Or scare the fucking shit out of me because they reckoned I’d never be tough enough no matter what. Or punish me for not going through with killing Dumbledore. Whatever, it was torture for me, you know? Having to listen. Knowing I could do nothing to stop it. Sadistic bastards wanted me to understand exactly what I was hearing. They made sure to tell me beforehand just who it was. Some pathetic old man they’d caught, or a small child. One time, I remember, it was a pregnant woman. Almost always, somebody helpless.”

“I used to throw up, you know,” he went on grimly. “Whenever they made me listen. The screaming would start and then I’d puke. Like clockwork. I tried not eating beforehand, when I suspected I might be Summoned. Started skipping meals a lot. It didn’t matter. I still retched my guts out.”

Hermione’s heart had seized in her chest, and she felt as if her very breath were being sucked out of her.

“How long did this go on?” she finally managed to whisper.

“All of seventh year. Snape noticed eventually when I missed several meals fairly close together. And I suppose I looked like hell too, by that time. That’s when he talked to me, offered to help.”

“Did… did your parents know? Your father?”

“Yeah. Well, not my mother, I don’t suppose. They would’ve kept her in the dark about specifics. But he did, I’m sure of it.” The words were like bile in his mouth. “He had to have known. He was there. The bastard let them. He let them, Hermione. My own father. How… how could he?”

“Maybe there was nothing he could do. Maybe…” Hermione faltered, willing to say anything, anything at all, to ease his pain and yet knowing that her words were pathetically inadequate and untrue.
“Stop it, Hermione! That’s bollocks and you know it. He could have tried to protect me, at least. He should have done. And even if he couldn’t stop it, he could’ve found a way to let me know he was there. That he gave a fuck. Anything.” Draco’s voice was heavy with bitterness. “I didn’t see him once in all the times I was Summoned and then made to listen to all that shit.” His laughter was cynical. “For all I know, he was part of it.”

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but there was more, the words rushing out of him in a vitriolic flood. “I was so angry! By the time Snape offered me a way out, I didn’t give a fuck if I compromised my father in any way. I only worried about my mother, prayed she wouldn’t come to any harm. But he could have died for all I cared.”

All the words seemed to have exhausted him finally, and he lay quiet, but Hermione could feel his body trembling against hers. Instinctively, she tightened her arms around him, cradling his head between her breasts. Tears had started in her eyes and slid, unnoticed, down her cheeks.

‘I’m so sorry,” she repeated over and over. “I didn’t know.”

“It could have been your parents.” He looked up at her, his gaze remarkably clear-eyed and steady. “I think about that every damn time I’m with them.”

Hermione glanced away, but only for a moment before turning back again, resolved. She had wanted to tell him for ages. Maybe it would ease his pain just a little.

“No.” She shook her head slowly, and then put her hand over his. “No, it couldn’t have been my parents.”

He looked at her, mystified. “What do you mean?”

“They—I—I sent them away the summer after sixth year, Draco. To Australia.”

He sat up in bed now, his eyes wide. “Australia? They knew what was happening, what was about to happen? You told them everything and still, they went willingly?” He let out an explosive sigh, flopping back on the pillows, still staring at her.

Hermione pulled the covers up around her and sat curled in a ball, rocking back and forth as she spoke.

“I… well, yes, I told them, but not quite everything. I didn’t tell them I’d be leaving school with Harry and Ron. Just that they were in danger, because of me especially, and that I had to make them just sort of ‘disappear’ for a while, until it was all over. That they’d have new identities, live far away for a while, just till it was safe for them to come back.”

“Merlin.” He shook his head in amazement. “Were they okay with all that? How did they react?”

“Shock, at first. They were stunned. But I had to tell them that much at least, to give them a chance to take care of certain things with the house and the family and their friends, and their dental practice. It would have been really suspicious if they’d simply disappeared.

“They were not happy at the idea of leaving me behind. They begged me to go with them. It was …” Hermione hands fluttered up to her face and she covered her eyes. Tears had begun to pool there, and she felt them slipping between her fingers and dropping down to the coverlet.

Strong arms encircled her and now it was her turn to be cradled, as Draco stroked her hair and held her close.
At last, she took a shuddering breath and went on, her cheek against his chest. “The worst part of all,” she whispered, “was Obliviating them so they’d have no recollection of ever having a daughter or even who they were. We all knew that when the spell took hold, they would believe they were the people whose names were on all their new documents, and that they had decided to move to Australia. And they wouldn’t know me. That last moment… when we said goodbye before I cast the spell… oh, Draco… it was horrible! The pain in their faces… I couldn’t bear it! So I… I just *did it* and then… and then I had to go! I just… I just closed my eyes and Disapparated and didn’t look back…”

She squeezed her eyes shut, the tears coming harder now, sliding down his skin and dropping into the coverlet.

A heaviness had settled over Draco’s heart as he listened, ponderous and inescapable. He clutched her to him fiercely, as if in doing so, he could absorb her pain.

“I didn’t see them again for nearly a year. That was a kind of torture too, for me. I worried about them every single day. And I missed them so much! And the worst thing is, I realise now that it was such a flawed idea to begin with! I wasn’t protecting *them* at all. Not really. It didn’t go far enough.”

“You’d have had to alter their appearances too, wouldn’t you,” Draco said quietly. “Really change their identities completely.”

“Yes! What the hell did I think I was playing at, only erasing their memories! They could have been tracked down anyway! It was pure luck that they weren’t! But I was so sure I could handle it all by myself.”

“And you did, love.” Draco gently smoothed a damp tendril of hair away from her forehead. He didn’t want to add that she’d been quite right about the luck. The sheer viciousness and cruelty of the Death Eaters had been rivalled only by a singular, murderous tenacity once they’d been given a task to complete. Somehow, very good fortune had left that particular stone unturned, and for that, he could only be grateful. A brief shudder raised the hairs on the back of his neck as the alternative flashed through his mind.

“Tell me the rest,” he said, shaking his head briefly to cast off the ominous shadows fluttering over him like bats’ wings.

“Well, after it was all over… after the final battle… I went to find them so I could reverse the spell. It was such a strange thing, having my parents look *right at me* and not have the faintest notion who I was. I… I made up some pretext or other for being there, and then I just… you know… undid the spell. Draco…” She looked at him beseeingly, her eyes large and red-rimmed, slipping her hand into his and clutching it tightly. “I was so scared that I’d make a mistake and they’d be stuck like that forever! I suppose I got lucky twice, really.”

“It wasn’t luck. It was skill. You were scared, yes, but you did know what you were doing. I think you were incredibly brave, Hermione.” He bent to press a fervent kiss to her forehead, as if in that single gesture he could restore the missing time, take away the pain of the memory, actually erase the whole experience as thoroughly as she had erased Richard and Claire’s memories.

He hadn’t known… hadn’t even suspected. Even now, he felt dumbstruck with the shock of it. And yet, perversely, he felt almost glad—because now, *now* at last he could give to her in the way that she’d done for him from the very beginning. He could help her heal, as she’d been helping him all this time—by listening with compassion and by strengthening the net beneath her with his love.

He could do this for her. It would give him a chance he found he desperately wanted. And in a very
small way, he could make up for the ones whose cries still haunted his dreams.

“Come on, Granger,” he said briskly, holding both her hands in his, the light of resolve in his eyes as she gave him a shaky smile. “I’m going to make us some tea.”

TBC

Fridge Magnets and Tolkien Mug
And...

Mario's Trattoria, 103 Cowley Road

The Ultimate Picture Palace, Jeune Street

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Huge thanks and a three-course dinner at Mario’s for my marvellous betas, mister_otter and kazfeist, whose skills and-- more important-- whose friendship I value more than I can express.

The magnets and mug are actual products currently for sale at CafePress.com. (I should note that not all the “magnets” are actually magnets though—some of them are mouse pads or tiles.)
The film that Draco and Hermione go to see is “Quills,” starring Geoffrey Rush, Kate Winslet, and Joaquin Phoenix. It’s the fictitious story of the Marquis de Sade’s time spent imprisoned for publishing a pornographic novel, *Justine*.

Spaghetti Lucifero is an actual item on the menu at Mario’s. It is pasta with garlic, anchovies, olives, chilli and tomato sauce.

*Lava!*—Latin, imperative, for "wash!"
Thursday evening, 3 August

A cloud of acrid, black smoke billowed from the microwave.

Horrified, Draco slammed the door shut, trapping the rest of it inside. He turned, his back to the wretched contraption, hoping it hadn’t been noticed.

Too late, however. Busy at the sink washing vegetables for salad, Hermione turned sharply, her nose wrinkling.

“What on earth, Malfoy…” she began, shutting the water off and waving her hand before her face to disperse the vile smell.

“I think I may have murdered the potatoes.” He grinned sheepishly. Then, turning back to the microwave, he cautiously popped the door again, stuck a tentative hand in to retrieve its contents, and then shut it fast as more smoke escaped. He carried the two potatoes over to her, holding them
up like the sorry specimens they were, and dropped them onto a plate sitting on the black work surface.

Hermione eyed them dubiously, and then picked one of them up, shaking it. It weighed practically nothing, its skin now resembling an elephant’s. “Bloody hell, Malfoy. You…” she began incredulously, beginning to giggle. “You’ve incinerated them!”

“Have I?” he replied carelessly. “Told you teaching me to cook was a daft idea. I’m absolute rubbish at this sort of stuff.” He scooped up both potatoes and lobbed them, one at a time, into the bin in the corner of the room. Both landed inside with a resounding thud. He grinned, dusting his hands off with nonchalant grace. “Could have been a damn good Beater too, you know!”

She plucked a wooden butter paddle from the ceramic crock that held a variety of utensils, and waved it at him. “Here, what about this for a bat, then?”

“Not bad, actually… although…” he paused, a wicked smile overtaking him as he began to slowly advance on her. “I can think of other uses for it that would be much more entertaining…”

Letting out a small squeak, Hermione stepped back until she bumped up against the cupboards. She held the paddle high in the air as he caught her about the waist and began to wrestle her for it, bending her back and tickling her until she was breathless and he’d succeeded in forcing it out of her hand.

Hooking one arm around the back of her neck, then, and pulling her very close, he tapped her nose lightly with the tip of it, and gave her a no-nonsense kiss. “This we shall save for later, my love. Certain enjoyable activities suggest themselves.”

“Do they?” she murmured, a sly little smile beginning. “You are very naughty, Mr. Malfoy!”

“Oh, I do hope so,” he murmured, chuckling, and moved in for another kiss.

*

Dinner that night, sans baked potatoes, was a simple affair: a green salad with, in Draco’s considered opinion, all sorts of rather dodgy stuff in it now that Hermione was letting loose her creative side in the kitchen—bits of artichoke, croutons, sultanas, raw cashews, sunflower seeds—and a salmon mousse loaf she’d made from her memory of her gran’s recipe. Tinned salmon, a bit of plain yoghurt to bind it together, some savoury breadcrumbs, and some raw, sweet onion chopped fine, all mixed together (“What have you got your hands stuck into, Granger? That looks bloody disgusting!”) and shaped into a loaf for baking.

They hadn’t dared open the microwave again, resorting to the oven instead. The odour had remained, clinging to the air in the kitchen like a particularly noxious cloud. Hermione remarked placidly that it reminded her of the vapours that frequently rose from various cauldrons in Professor Snape’s Potions class.

“Longbottom’s, most of the time, as I recall! Never could get it right,” Draco snorted, rolling his eyes. “Pathetic.”

“Oh, don’t pick on poor Neville. He was scared to death of Snape! That’s why he got it wrong so often, I’m sure.” Hermione speared an especially juicy cherry tomato and juice squirted out around
the tines of the fork before she popped it into her mouth. ‘Least he’s doing well now, isn’t he, at college.’

Neville had been another to take advantage of the eighth-year university prep program at Hogwarts, intending to augment his Herbology studies with a program of advanced Muggle horticulture. Now, he studied at the London School of Horticulture and Landscaping, Capel Manor College, and was apparently succeeding admirably there.

An image of Neville surrounded by a roomful of others as geeky about plants as he was nearly made Draco choke on a bite of salmon, but he contained himself, swallowing both the food and the rather snarky comeback that was on the tip of his tongue. At the very least, he knew that an effort had to be made to really accept her friends beyond the surface niceties. Even Longbottom.

He was brought abruptly out of this meandering train of thought by Hermione’s voice.

“Don’t you, Malfoy?”

“Sorry, love. ‘Fraid I wasn’t listening. Don’t I what?” He turned to her, a sweetly ingratiating smile on his face.

Hermione huffed, slightly exasperated. “I was saying that I think we ought to have our friends in. For dinner or something. Don’t you think so? I mean, it’s about time, really. They’ve never been here. To Oxford, I mean. They have no idea what our life here is like.”

“Which… you mean…” Draco was still trying to wrap his resistant mind around what she was suggesting.

She nodded. “Yes. Harry, Ron, Ginny… Luna and Neville and… well, you know… Blaise of course, and Theo Nott and Greg Goyle, and Pansy. The lot. My friends and yours. We could have all of them over, have a party, you know? It would be fun.” Her eyes lit up with the light of sudden inspiration. “Ooh, I know! We could put that silly hibachi you insisted on buying at Tesco to good use, finally, and do a barbeque!”

*About which I know fuck-all.* Draco continued smiling, rather thinly now. Once Granger got an idea into her head, it was all over.

She’d read his thoughts, apparently, for she reached out and patted his hand reassuringly. “Oh, it’ll be easy, you’ll see, and fun! We could do sausages and chicken, and oh—we could do grilled corn on the cob and vegetables. We’ll skewer them!”


“No,” Hermione laughed, shaking her head. “Really! Plates made of cardboard and then coated with this stuff so nothing leaks. Or we could get heavy plastic ones. And plastic forks and spoons and… We can have wine and beer and ooh! I know a fantastic recipe for Sangria and…”

She went on, her words spinning excited circles round Draco’s head, but he’d stopped listening after the mention of paper cups. Dishes made of paper; Sangria, whatever that was, though hmm…
“sangre” must refer to blood, he knew, from the Latin *sanguis*; vegetables that got stabbed through with some sort of weapon… These rather primitive-sounding Muggle outdoor dining rituals were seriously bizarre. He thought once again of the guest list. This sort of thing would seem pretty damn strange to his friends as well, though no doubt Potter would be familiar with it, and quite possibly Weasel and his sister as well, in some form anyway, given the sort of upbringing he supposed they’d had.

Draco sighed and glanced at Hermione. Her cheeks were pink with excitement, her eyes bright. She sat with a pad, dinner momentarily forgotten, making her inevitable lists, her pencil tapping idly against her cheek as she thought. He had to smile. Granger’s lists were something he’d come to expect—it was the way she approached almost everything that needed sorting. There was a pad on the fridge, by the phones in both the kitchen and their room, and on their desk as well as the one in the spare room. He half expected to see one in the bathroom one of these days. Lists regularly sprouted up in all these locations. And even when she wasn’t actively writing items down, she was mentally cataloguing them, he could tell. She had done it all the time during the past three terms at college: parts of essays that needed revising, the research materials she needed, questions she wanted to ask a tutor, how she’d order her day, allotting time to write and read and study in the library, even when to eat.

Well. This plan of hers was going forward, and there wasn’t much he could do about it now her mind was made up. He reckoned he might as well reconcile himself to playing back-garden host and chef, even though he didn’t have a fucking clue as to how to go about it and would very likely look a complete arse in the process. Suddenly a slow procession of beer and wine bottles paraded through the forefront of his thoughts, and a smirk spread over his face. That was it. Get properly shit-faced, and the whole thing would pass fairly painlessly. He hoped.

*#

For the duration of time that they would have the flat all to themselves, Hermione and Draco had decided, after some brief discussion two weeks earlier, that magic would again be a part of their lives. She’d strongly suspected he’d used a spell to facilitate mopping the kitchen floor that first time, but hadn’t said anything, waiting to see if he’d admit to it. Which he had done before very long, though with no small degree of proud defiance. He’d been surprised to see her laugh in response.

“I’m surprised you didn’t do it sooner! I mean, *Morgana*, Draco—the toilet and the tub? Why ever didn’t you Spell them clean? I know we said we wouldn’t use magic, but I didn’t seriously expect that you’d really do all that the Muggle way! I must say, though…” She’d moved closer, twining her arms around his waist and pulling him close. “I was impressed that you did, and very proud of you too!”

“I really did work very hard, you know,,” he’d pouted, looking down at her through the fringe of his dark lashes.

“Oh, I know,” she’d murmured, hugging him to her tightly. “Such dedication deserves a reward, don’t you agree?”

Said reward had been an afternoon he wouldn’t soon forget.
So—magic was now back in their lives on a regular basis, at least within the confines of the flat, and, with great caution, in the back garden. To that end, Draco had written to his mother nearly two weeks earlier, asking that she send his eagle owl Paladin to them. This she had gladly done, pleased to be able to dispense— for a time, anyway --with the bothersome practice of writing and posting letters Muggle-fashion. There was no fireplace in the flat, so Floo-ing would be impossible. Paladin would be the next best way to communicate.

The next day, Friday, Draco had a shift at Blackwell’s, and he was up and out of the flat by nine. Hermione was off work, though she’d be doing a stint the following day, working on the main floor behind one of the cash registers.

The sound of the tumblers inside the door lock re-aligning themselves caused Hermione to look up momentarily from the cookbook in which she’d been so absorbed. It was just past four. Draco walked in, warm and a bit sticky. Dropping his keys into the ceramic bowl on the bookcase near the door, he ran a hand through his hair and gratefully plopped down beside her, feet up on the coffee table.

“You walked, didn’t you! Why ever didn’t you take the bus? You look so hot!” she exclaimed, pushing the damp fringe of blond hair away from his forehead and leaning in to give him a quick kiss.

“Hang on,” he protested. “Call that a kiss, do you? Get over here, woman!”

Hermione laughed, moving just out of his reach. “You’re all sweaty! First a shower!”

“Take one with me, then, “ he cajoled. “My back’s killing me. Lewis had me unloading cartons of books all day. Rather fancy a massage, if you’d care to oblige… “ He gave her his most charming, boyish smile.

“Oh, all right,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “The things I have to do sometimes…”

* *

“Ah, fuck…” Draco sighed blissfully, the words expelled in a long, contented breath. He leaned forward, bracing himself so that his weight was on his two hands pressed flat against the tiled shower wall. Hermione stood behind him, soapy hands alternately smoothing lather over his skin and then kneading the knotted muscles in his neck, shoulders and down the length of his back to his buttocks. “That feels bloody marvellous.”

She paused, resting her cheek against his back, and then resumed, fingertips diligently attacking the muscles in his lower back nearer to his hips.

“I sent Paladin out today with some invitations, you know,” she said conversationally. “I hope that’s all right.”

“Yeah… sure, why not?” he replied, and then winced when she hit a particularly sore spot. “Who to?”

“Oh, well, you know… Harry, Ron and Ginny… Neville and Luna… I didn’t send to your friends yet, though. I thought you’d probably prefer to do that yourself.” She gave his bum a playful swat. “There you go, all done. My turn.”
Facing the other way, she waited expectantly as he poured some shower gel into his palms, rubbing them together to work up a good lather and then commencing the soapy massage at her shoulders and the base of her neck. She’d put her hair up into a high ponytail and the curls brushed against his chin as he worked the muscles at the tops of her shoulders, gradually progressing down her spine.

“Thanks,” he murmured. “You’re right, I would do. Bit weird if they heard from you rather than me, I suppose.”

“Mmm… that does feel good!” She smiled happily. “That’s what I thought too. So-- maybe you could send Paladin out with the rest when we’re done, yeah? I’d really like to get all the invitations out today, and there are just four more. Sunday, the thirteenth, all right? For dinner. Six o’clock.”

She flashed a disarming smile at him over her shoulder.

*Oh, not fair, Granger!*

That smile of hers was a killer.

The RSVPs all came back enthusiastically in the affirmative, some of them surprisingly entertaining as well. The invitations themselves had been a sort of confirmation of the news that both Draco and Hermione had chosen to share with select friends earlier in the summer, that they’d decided to move in together. They’d counted on word of mouth to carry this information to everyone else, and for the most part, this had happened. Apparently, though, not quite everyone had heard. Hence, the response from Luna (“Oh, Hermione! I always knew you two would get together! How very exciting!”), and Theo (“Well, Malfoy, this is certainly an interesting development. Whose idea was it, then-- hers or yours? You can tell me.”).

Others who had heard prior to receiving their invitations had sage comments of their own in response (Blaise: “She sounds like the real thing, mate. Don’t cock it up!” Pansy: “You’re really doing this... wow! I think I hate her. Not really. Just joking,” Goyle: “Holy shit, Draco.” Ron: “You’re really doing this, aren’t you... Bloody hell! What’s next?” Harry: Congratulations, Hermione. Be happy. Really. Just don’t forget who your friends are, if you ever need us.” Ginny: “This is amazing, Hermione! Details! I want details!”)

Sunday the thirteenth came around before they knew it. The weather gods had smiled on their plans for the evening, sending them a gloriously sunny, dry day. Huge, white, cotton-ball clouds danced in the blue sky overhead. True to form—and for Draco, it was rather a relief, if he were going to be honest—Hermione had orchestrated the several days leading up to Sunday with nearly military precision, making the shopping list and then setting aside time for the two of them to make a trip to Tesco for the food and drink, finding a shop that sold paper goods and then selecting the paper plates, cups, napkins, and plastic cutlery they’d need, locating several spare blankets and airing them out in the back garden Sunday morning, buying a new supply of tea lights with which to create enchantment in the garden once dusk fell.

And now, at five o’clock, it was time to begin putting all of the plans into action. Everyone would begin arriving at six.

As she brushed the chicken pieces with olive oil, sprinkling them with garlic powder and pepper as
she’d seen her mother do countless times, Hermione breathed an inward sigh of relief that not all the other flats in the house had been rented yet. The fewer people she would have to worry about bothering with possible noise, the better. Besides which, these were not just ordinary friends who were coming to visit. Although both she and Draco had specifically asked in the invitations that nobody show up in robes and no magic be done once they’d got there, still—there was that small, niggling worry that maybe this whole idea had been a mistake, that it was just too risky. Somebody could slip up. It wouldn’t take much. And it could happen in plain view of their neighbours in the house, as well as people who lived in the surrounding homes.

There. The chicken was ready to go. The sausages needed no special preparation for grilling. She’d done a big salad earlier in the day, and it was keeping cold in the fridge, along with some of the drinks. Ears of sweet corn were already buttered and wrapped in foil. Long skewers were loaded with chunks and wedges of sweet peppers in different hues, tomatoes, onions, pineapple chunks, and mushrooms, brushed with a piquant balsamic vinaigrette marinade. Draco had helped with those, munching as he worked.

“Stop that!” she’d giggled, lightly slapping his hand as he’d made to pop yet another bit of pineapple into his mouth. He’d merely grinned, blown her an impudent little kiss, and tossed the pineapple chunk into the air, catching it deftly in his mouth.

“Draco!” she called now. He popped his head round the kitchen door frame.

“Hmm?”

“Could you do the grill now, please? The coals need to be really hot when we start to cook the food.”

Draco nodded. He knew this was to be his domain, and he rather liked the idea. Keeper of the Flame.

He’d brought the hibachi grill outside and now it waited atop a metal cart that had once held gardening supplies in one of the alcoves. The sack of charcoal briquets sat alongside it. He eyed both doubtfully for a moment. What had he been thinking, anyway? Completely barmy idea, cooking and then eating outdoors. They’d attract every voracious little insect in a ten-mile radius, and besides that, who in his right mind would want to stand over a hot fire on a warm summer evening, whilst essentially charring his dinner to a crisp? Keeper of the Flame indeed. Bollocks.

Still. For now, at least, he was stuck with the job. And Granger was depending on him.

Slitting open the sack, he began to pour the briquets into the basin of the hibachi. How much? Enough to fill it most of the way, he reckoned. Right. That should do nicely. Fitting the grill itself back on, he stood back for a moment, grumbling as he dusted the black powder residue off his hands.

Now—how to start it burning was the question. He supposed he should do it the conventional way, given that he was outdoors and in plain sight of the neighbours. Taking out the large box of kitchen matches Hermione had given him, he plucked one out and did as she’d shown him, striking it against the side. Instantly a small flame bloomed.

Fascinated, he stood there watching as it burned its way down the match, until suddenly, it reached his fingers and he dropped it, popping his injured fingers into his mouth. Fucking hell! Well, that was fairly moronic. What was he, some little kid who’d never seen fire close up?

Right. Let’s try that again, shall we? He struck another match, and this time, tossed it directly onto
the coals, where it sputtered for a second and then went out. A third match met the identical fate.

Fuck’s sake, what was he doing wrong? Okay, yes, he’d be the first to admit it, he knew bugger-all about making a fire this way. But surely if the average Muggle could figure this barbequing thing out, he should be able to as well. He tried once again, this time holding the match directly to the coals until it threatened to burn him once again, but with the same dismal result.

It occurred to him, then, to look at the bag of briquets, and then he realised what he’d done wrong. Lighter fluid. Shit. He hadn’t known.

Draco glanced furtively to his left and then to his right. Nobody about, not that he could see, anyway. He looked across to the houses that stood well behind the garden, in the next road. There were a few people scattered throughout the back gardens that met his and those of his neighbours, but they were far away and not paying him the slightest bit of attention in any case.

It was in moments like this that he was thankful he’d become fairly proficient at wandless magic.

“Incendium flagra!”

His voice was hardly more than a whisper as he directed a finger towards the grill, but instantly, a ring of blue flames blossomed around the charcoals. Smiling complacently, he brushed off his hands once again and stepped back, watching as the flames surrounded the coals, igniting them one by one and gradually turning them a pulsing red-hot.

Stepping back a few paces so that he stood directly beneath their kitchen window, he looked up with a smug grin. “Granger! Fire’s lit!”

Hermione poked her head out the window and looked down, her eyes widening. “Wow, that’s great! Sometimes it takes a while to get a good fire going, even when you’ve had experience doing it. I’m really impressed, Malfoy!”

“Piece of cake, darling.” Draco shrugged, flashing her a cocky little smile. “Right—what else do you want me to do?”

Hermione laughed delightedly, beckoning for him to come upstairs. There were blankets and the tea lights to set up, drinks and the covered foods from the fridge to set out. Everybody would be here soon. It really looked as if they were going to pull it all together in time after all.

Half an hour later, the fire burned steadily in the grill, and the blankets were spread. Covered bowls, drinks, and paper goods waited on a table covered in a pretty paper tablecloth, and a ring of tea lights lined the perimeters of the patio and flickered in clusters on the table. Their company would be arriving any minute.

Hermione stayed upstairs in the flat, waiting. It had been agreed that everyone would Apparate into their sitting room as the Malfoys had done.

“Anybody here yet?” Draco had come up for a moment to wash his hands and toss some cool water on his face. Bloody hot by that grill. His t-shirt had begun to stick to him in spots. He was already feeling a good deal less than his best, generally so cool and effortless.

“Nope.” She shook her head, holding her hair up in an effort to cool off. A cool breeze suddenly lifted the fine hairs at the nape of her neck, followed by a pair of soft lips nuzzling the sensitive skin there.

“Lovely,” she murmured, leaning her head back on Draco’s chest.
“My pleasure,” he whispered. “Anytime.” He leaned around to catch her mouth in a soft kiss, slowly turning her to face him, and soon, one led to two and then to more.

“Ahem.”

The suddenness of the sound was startling, and they broke apart.

It was Blaise. Grinning, he raised a hand in greeting. “I’d say get a room, but you already have done, haven’t you! Several, in fact!” He glanced appreciatively at the map just behind him, where the tiny, silver dragons blew flames of greeting in small, explosive bursts, arching their backs and lashing their long tails. “Very cool, man. I like it!”

“Zabini!” Draco strode over to his friend. It was very good to see Blaise again. It had been… what? Seven months since they’d all celebrated New Year’s together. And then, in a series of sudden pops that resounded like tiny firecrackers, the room was full of people.

Pansy stood in one corner, a small pastry box in one hand, patting down her bobbed hair and looking around curiously, whilst Ron, Ginny, and Harry shook themselves off by the windows, glancing around and then out at the street below. Ginny held a large bunch of very colourful flowers. Suddenly, the sitting room was full of the happy clamour of friends reunited. Amidst all the hugs and greetings, Theo Nott and Greg Goyle materialised, Greg clutching a bottle with a rather inexactly tied ribbon around the neck.

There was a sense of friendly chaos, conversations buzzing throughout the room, when two last, quite pronounced pops announced the arrivals, precisely two seconds apart, of Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood. They stood, nonplussed at having just materialised in the middle of a small crowd, until Luna caught sight of Hermione and then Ron’s voice rang out over the din.

“Oi! Nev!”

Neville turned his head sharply and spotted Ron waving from one end of the tall windows. He broke into a big smile and began moving in Ron and Harry’s direction, Luna breaking off to greet Hermione.

From behind the sofa at the far end of the sitting room, Draco stood chatting to his four former house mates. His attention drifted momentarily from the conversation, his eyes roaming over the room, lighting on all the small knots of people reconnecting. Hermione moved amongst them all, weaving a trail that reminded him of a butterfly touching down on clusters of flowers.

A tiny, unconscious smile turned his mouth upwards as he watched her. He could tell how really pleased she was to see her close friends again, how excited she felt to have them here, and how happy she was that the differences between her friends and his seemed truly to be dissolving. And he knew how she felt, knew just how to read her expression, because suddenly he also recognised that it must be a precise mirror of his own, and for the very same reasons. Because for him and for her, too, this place was more than just walls and floors and a place to live that wasn’t official student housing any longer. It was so much more. He knew in his bones that she wouldn’t explain it to them in quite that way, but that this sea change was happening, and to both of them. Intangibles, amorphous and fleeting and so fragile at times, were delicately shifting the balances between them. He could feel it. He knew she could, too. And it was this that she wanted to show and to share with their old friends, who’d come from their other world, their older reality, into this new pocket of their lives.

Turning back to his friends again, he gave them a quick grin and then said loudly, “Who’s thirsty, then?”
“I’m about as dry as McGonagall’s t--” Blaise began, ducking as several Gryffindors rounded on him in mock menace.

“Watch it, Zabini!,” Ron warned, biting back a laugh. “No insulting our head of house, even if she is about a thousand years old, with--”

“Ron Weasley!” Ginny’s voice rang out.

“Well, she is, and yeah, I could do with something, thanks.”

A chorus of affirmative echoes followed, and then Draco held his hand up for quiet.

“Look, just one thing. We’re going to be eating out in the back garden, but before we go… just have to remind you lot… no magic outdoors, yeah? I mean none. In case you haven’t realised it, we live in a totally Muggle neighbourhood. If anybody else living round here is a wizard or witch, they’re keeping it well hidden. There is a wizarding sector of Oxford, but this definitely isn’t it.”

“Ah, he’s taking the piss with us, isn’t he…,” somebody muttered.

“No,” someone else replied. It was Harry. “I don’t believe he is, actually.”

“He’s not,” Hermione piped up. “We have to be really, really careful, you know. We only do magic inside, and really not all that often. Only did a spell out in the garden once.”

Well, twice. Draco coloured ever so slightly. “Come on, you lot,” he said, gesturing to the guys. “Let’s go out and murder a few beers.”

The male contingent of the party followed him eagerly down the stairs and around to the back, where they happily fell upon the bottles of ale that waited, neatly lined up on the table like soldiers in formation. The female contingent, far more interested in having a tour of the flat, traile after Hermione. Both groups had a single, common goal.

“Well?” Predictably, it was Ginny who practically pushed Hermione to the wall in the hallway in her eagerness to ferret out all the juicy details. “What’s it like, then? Living with Malfoy?”

“Yes, I’d like to know that myself,” Pansy remarked matter-of-factly. “Especially as I used to flatter myself, when I was fourteen and very silly, that it would be me living with him someday.”

In the awkward silence that followed, all eyes swivelled in her direction, as the other three girls tried to gauge the true nature of her comment.

Suddenly, Pansy herself seemed aware that her words might easily be misconstrued. “Not that I have any interest now, of course! We were over long ago—not that we ever really had anything to begin with.” She laughed slightly as Hermione, Ginny and Luna exchanged glances. “I’m just curious. Honestly!”

Hermione let out a breath she hadn’t even realised she’d been holding. “Well,” she smiled, gesturing for the others to follow her into the bedroom for a quick look round. “It’s been… an adventure.”

“Well?” Luna wondered. “Explain!”

“In lots of ways, he’s exactly the person I’ve come to know the past ten months. But in other ways, he’s so much more. He’s… funny and clever. Bit of a wanker if I wake him up too early in the morning.”
There was a snort, and Hermione giggled. “I didn’t mean that! Merlin, don’t be so literal! Besides…” There was a playfully suggestive glint in her eyes. “He doesn’t need to.”

The girls dissolved into hoots of laughter as they made their way back to the sitting room.

“What else?” Ginny persisted, as they sat down on the sofas together. “Great flat, by the way!”

The other two girls concurred, but it was obvious that wasn’t what they wanted to talk about.

“Thanks,” Hermione grinned, tucking her legs under her and relaxing against the cushions. “Well… he’s passionate. I don’t just mean that way, either, though he’s that too,” she laughed, her cheeks pinking as she spotted the looks the others were giving each other. “I mean, he has strong opinions about things when you get past the blasé exterior. He feels things deeply, you know? He’s pushed a lot of it down, made himself come across like things can’t touch him. But they do. I’ve seen it. And he cares about me that way, too. I mean, I really think he’ll be there if I need him. He already has been. In a very quiet way. But I like that.”

There was a momentary, contemplative silence, broken when Ginny, her eyes dancing mischievously, gave Hermione a small poke. “Right, right, but… does he leave the toilet seat up? Is he a right slob? These are the really important things!”

Everyone fell back, laughing. Hermione rolled her eyes. “Sometimes, when he forgets, and yes! Satisfied, Miss Nosey-Parker?”

“That’s all I wanted to know, thank you!” Ginny said primly, and everyone fell into giggles once more, as the girls followed Hermione down the stairs and out to the back garden.

Whilst they’d been busy touring the flat, the male faction of the group had found a pleasing quantity of beer to keep them busy. Draco had poked perfunctorily at the burning coals a couple of times and then, satisfied that they were coming along nicely, twisted the top off a bottle of Guinness and stretched out on one of the blankets spread on the ground, lounging back on one elbow. Everybody else followed suit, and before long, the seven of them were ranged around the blankets taking swigs of beer and just enjoying the chance to kick back a bit.

“Ah, this is great. I envy you, Malfoy,” Harry murmured, looking around at the peaceful garden and taking a long, satisfying pull from his bottle.

“Yeah…” Theo echoed. “Lucky bastard. How’d you find this place anyway?”

“Estate agent that works with students.” Blank looks from nearly everyone caught Draco up short before he remembered to whom he was talking. Ironic, he thought with an inward smirk. Apparently, he’d grown so comfortable operating within the confines of the Muggle world that he was now approaching his wizarding friends (the obvious exception being Harry) with the wrong set of basic assumptions.

“Sorry,” he amended sheepishly. “Forgot. Well, there are these people, see, and their job is to find flats and houses for people who are looking, and to help others who are selling their houses find buyers. They get an indecent chunk of money for every sale they broker, and they also make quite a bit on every flat they let.”

“Sounds a posh job,” Blaise observed. “All they really have to do is be charming and persuasive, yeah? Fuck, I could do that!”

The idea of Blaise Zabini as an estate agent nearly made Draco choke on his beer. Swallowing convulsively to recover himself, he laughed. “Reckon you could and all, Zabini! Anyway, to answer
your question”—he looked at Theo now—“we, Granger and I, saw an advert posted on a notice board outside the JCR. Junior Common Room,” he added. “It was for a bunch of flats being listed by this particular estate agent. So we went over there and got taken round to several of ‘em. We liked this one best.”

“That was it?” Ron heaved himself to his feet, walking over to the table to grab a second bottle.

“Well, not exactly, no,” Draco admitted. “We really couldn’t afford this place by ourselves…”

He was met by a chorus of incredulous hoots.

Greg Goyle snorted. “You’re joking, Malfoy! You really expect us to believe that shit?”

“No, I mean it. ‘Course I could, yeah. I’ve come into my money. But Granger—Hermione—doesn’t want me paying for it on my own. We agreed to split it. She’s pretty stubborn when she wants to be…” He trailed off and smiled to himself, missing the knowing glance that passed between Harry and Ron.

“Yeah,” he continued after a moment, “sometimes I do pay a bit more, but mostly it’s pretty even. And anyway, we’ve got two other flatmates.”

At that disclosure, everyone’s head came up.

“Who?” Neville’s curiosity had got the better of his residual reserve around Draco.

“Couple of our friends from uni. They’re at home with their families now. Won’t be back at the flat till next month sometime.” Draco stretched with the luxuriant grace of a cat, winking broadly. “Till then, we’ve got the place all to ourselves.”

“Bloody hell…” somebody breathed.

“This is the dog’s bollocks, Malfoy,” Blaise muttered, shaking his head in admiration. “How the fuck did you get so lucky? Never mind, don’t answer that!”

Grinning smugly, Draco took a long swig of his beer instead.

A few minutes passed, during which everyone contented himself with simply relaxing. Then Ron cleared his throat, a teasing glint in his eye. “So, Malfoy—how do you find our Hermione, then? To live with, I mean.” That same knowing look passed between him and Harry once again, only this time, Draco caught it.

“Well,” he began with deliberation, “she’s insanely well-organised. It’s fucking scary sometimes. Lists for everything. And she gets up so bloody early, even at the weekends. I can’t even think straight, much less put two words together, but she’s up and nattering on about what a lovely day it is and what do I want for breakfast and could I come and look at the bird nesting in the tree. Nobody should be that cheerful so early in the morning! It’s inhuman!”

Harry and Ron burst out laughing, unable to contain themselves any longer.

“Could have told you that, mate!” Harry sputtered finally.

“Yeah, thanks,” Draco muttered darkly, but he grinned as he knocked back the remains of his beer.

“That’s it?” Theo asked, still curious. Idly, he pulled at a blade of grass and then flipped it away in a neat little arc.
“Well… she can be a bit bossy at times, but I’m not fussed. I do what I want anyway. Or I talk her round. She’s good that way; she does listen once I get her to stop for a sec. She’s a really good listener, actually. Sometimes, I even feel like she hears what I’m not saying. Eerie, but at the same time, I like it. Because she gets it, you know? She really does.” He paused, looking away, a tiny, secret smile quirkling his lips. “She’s funny, too, and very sharp. She’s… well… she’s great. That’s all.”

Just then, the four girls appeared, carrying the platter of meats and vegetables to be grilled, and the wrapped ears of corn. These Hermione carefully stuck in amongst the coals, and then forked several pieces of chicken onto the grill. They sizzled as small fragments of fat and olive oil dripped down into the coals below.

“It’s all yours, Malfoy,” she told him airily, gesturing towards the grill. “I’m definitely ready for a drink!”

Everything was delicious and, despite Draco’s prior inexperience with the Muggle phenomenon known as the summer barbeque, everything came off the grill fairly unscathed, with the exception of a sausage and a chicken leg that slipped from the fork when Draco was serving them, winding up abandoned on a bed of white-hot coals and slowly turning completely black and shrivelled. Of course, it helped that Hermione was keeping a fairly watchful eye on the proceedings, stepping in when something was in imminent danger of being burnt or dangerously undercooked. Most of the various spirits had been appreciatively remarked upon and then consumed as well. By the time nine o’clock rolled around, everyone was sprawled in a somnolent haze on the blankets, lazily sipping the remains of their drinks or despatching the dregs of the bottles into their cups. The scattering of tea lights winked and flared in the light evening breeze.

Draco lay on his back, his head in Hermione’s lap. Absently, she played with the soft strands of his hair, twirling them around her fingers and then gently tracing lines and circles on his scalp. Sighing pleasurably, he shifted, settling in once again.

“But Draco,” Pansy said suddenly. Somehow she’d wound up on a blanket next to Harry, Ginny, and Ron. “What’s it like, really, living as a Muggle?”

“Yeah, I’ve been wondering that as well,” Greg chimed in. “I mean, you always said--”

“I know what I always said,” Draco cut in quietly. “It was utter bollocks, all of it. I let my father do the thinking and talking for me for far too long. We all did, didn’t we, acting like obedient little mouthpieces for their preposterous shit.”

Blaise, Theo, Pansy and Greg exchanged covert glances of surprise at Draco’s vehemence. He’d grown distant and eventually quite seriously upset that last year at school, but he’d always kept his own counsel for the most part. They’d never heard him openly reject the beliefs they’d all been brought up to accept, and with such clear-eyed, unequivocal fervour-- and bitterness.

“All kids believe and accept what their parents tell them,” Hermione began gently.

“Yeah, well… we did a bit more than just accept. You know that better than anyone.” About to say more, he thought better of it and closed his mouth. This really wasn’t the time, though he knew there
were still things he wanted—no, needed—to say to her.

“So what is it like, anyway?” Blaise persisted. “You still haven’t said.”

“Right, yeah. Well … surprising, really. Yeah, that’s it.” Draco laughed softly, shaking his head. “So much of what I had believed was just wrong. They do what we do—they just go about it differently, that’s all. I was on my own a lot at first, didn’t really know anybody—except for Granger, of course. Can’t tell you what a shock it was the first time I spotted her! Never told you this, did I, love?” he said fondly, twisting around to look up at her from his position in her lap.

“No, you didn’t!” she replied, startled. “When was that?”

“I was walking between the quads one day, and suddenly, there you were sitting on a bench. I’d had no idea you were going to be studying here as well. I really thought I was seeing things for a second! Your eyes were closed and you had this little smile on your face, like you were having a nice dream or something. I just sort of froze, you know? Stared at you for a few seconds, and then—”

“Then you left. I know! So I was right, it was you!” She thought back, a very clear memory suddenly surfacing. “I remember that day. It was lovely. I was just enjoying the sunshine, and then suddenly, I could feel somebody looking at me. It was actually a bit creepy! And then I opened my eyes and I saw you—well, from the back. I didn’t know it was you. Your hood was up. And you were sprinting away down the path.” She gave him a soft smile. “So that was the first time. But—why’d you run away?”

“Dunno, really. It was daft. I suddenly felt embarrassed. Never expected to see anyone I knew, least of all you, and suddenly… well… I wasn’t sure what to say.” Shrugging, he laughed at himself briefly, and then continued.

“Anyway, yeah, I was on my own a lot in the beginning, didn’t think I even wanted to have any friends. I just thought I’d study, do my work, keep to myself. Didn’t think I needed anybody else. All I wanted was to… well… get away, not be me for a bit. Didn’t want to think about… you know… seventh year… all that… Just wanted to disappear for a while. But I got friendly with several blokes despite myself. Reckon between them and Granger here, I had a real lesson in how wrong I’d been about Muggles. And that was just the beginning.”

“What about doing without magic?” Luna wondered. “What’s that been like, then?”

“I really missed it at first. A lot. Felt strange, not doing a quick spell when I needed to. I really wished I could Spell my dirty laundry clean!” He chuckled briefly, knowing Hermione was biting back her own laughter, remembering that first time they’d done his laundry together. He wondered if she’d ever figured out the reason he’d been so secretive about the contents of his laundry bag.

“For me, of course, it was lots easier than for Malfoy, for obvious reasons,” Hermione added. “I spent summers at home all through Hogwarts without any magic, really. Though I did feel odd at first here, not having any contact with it at all. But then I got so busy with work and friends—”

“And each other, from the sounds of it,” Ginny murmured slyly, raising her glass in a small salute.

“Right, yes…” Hermione blushed becomingly. “Well, after that, I just didn’t think much about it anymore.”

“It hasn’t been bad at all, really,” Draco added. “Rather liberating, in fact, finding out I can do things on my own without relying on my powers. And eventually, I don’t know… I stopped thinking about it as well. Too much studying, too many essays to write, eh, Granger?” He gave her a wink, sitting
up and then hooking his arm about her shoulders to pull her close.

“Merlin, yes!” she groaned. “Non-stop! Often, two really demanding ones at once. If you lot think Snape’s essays were bad…” She trailed off, sighing. “It’s lovely having a break from all that writing!”

“Blimey, that has to be a first! Never thought I’d hear you complain about homework!” Ron was frankly amazed.

“It’s hardly ‘homework,’ Ron!” Hermione huffed, drawing herself up straight. “I’ve never worked as hard in my entire life as I’ve done here!” She looked around at everybody, grinning a bit sheepishly then. “Oh, all right, I can’t deny it. I do love it. But I’m human! It does get to me sometimes, it’s just…”

“She’s got a much higher threshold for punishment than the rest of us!” Draco teased, earning himself a poke in the ribs.

“Bet she did brilliantly, though,” Harry smiled, affection in his eyes.

Draco nodded. “She did. No great surprise.” His pride was evident.

Ron and Harry glanced at each other, taken aback by Draco’s tone, and then at Ginny, whose pleased expression plainly said, “Told you.” Ron gave his sister a slight nod and leaned back, his hand brushing Pansy’s.

“Oh! Sorry,” he murmured awkwardly, recoiling a bit.

“I don’t mind.” She raised her large blue eyes to his, a ghost of a smile on her lips.

An entirely different sort of surprise raised both his eyebrows now, and Ron smiled faintly, his mouth curiously dry. Pansy had turned her head once again, but he caught her slanting a sideways glance at him once when she thought he hadn’t noticed, her mouth curling up at the corners.

“I don’t think I would be terribly happy doing what they do here,” she said under her breath as the conversation splintered into several smaller clusters. “What about you?”

“Nah,” Ron agreed quickly. “Don’t fancy all that constant work and pressure. I’d rather be doing other things.”

“Oh, I dunno,” he replied, warming to the subject as he noticed her animated smile. “Flying. Yeah, and Quidditch. Reckon that’s about my most favourite thing ever.”

“You weren’t half bad at school, you know, once you got over your nerves,” she told him. “Sorry about all that ‘Weasley is our King’ stuff. That was pretty rotten of us.”

Just then, she might have been apologising for having three heads. All he could see were those eyes of hers, and that smile. “Oh, yeah, it’s okay, no worries. Old news, that. What…” he began, venturing further into unknown territory. “What do you like to do, then?” He swallowed hard, his mouth impossibly parched now, and reached for his bottle of beer.

Pansy, in the meanwhile, had sat back comfortably, raising her wine glass gracefully to her lips and taking a delicate sip.
“Oh, well, you know… things. I love to travel, see new places, try new foods. I love music too, and the theatre. You?”

“Um… do like travelling a lot, yeah. We went to visit my brother Charlie in Romania once, when he was there working with dragons. And I’ve been to Italy as well. Just for a few days, mind. Very cool, Rome. The Coliseum, all those underground crypts. Amazing. Never been to the theatre, though, not properly anyway.” Ron ducked his head in embarrassment, the flush creeping up his face nearly matching his hair.

“Oh, then we must go! You must come with me sometime!” Pansy clapped her hands together delightedly. This couldn’t be more perfect—the chance to shine in her own domain and introduce something she adored to somebody who might just turn out to be rather interesting.

“Uh… yeah, sure, love to.” Ron’s blush had flamed the roots of his hair by this time, but he was also smiling broadly. He wondered how he’d missed noticing just how cute she was when they were at school.

A few feet away, Draco and Hermione grinned at each other.

“Parkinson’s made a conquest,” he whispered, his head close to hers.

Hermione shook her head slightly. “Nope. It was Ron,” she whispered back. “I know him very well, Malfoy. He lets the girls do all the work. Behind that dopey exterior is a mind like a steel trap.”

Draco stared at her in frank disbelief for a few seconds, and then rolled his eyes, snorting derisively.

“Okay, I was having you on just a bit, I confess,” she laughed. “But honestly, that puppy-dog thing he does gets ‘em every time. He’s been interested in Pansy for months, I think. Ever since New Year’s.”

He nodded, smirking. “Reckon the interest has been mutual. I saw how she was looking at him that night as well.”

Hermione rested her chin on her drawn-up knees, looking over at their friends thoughtfully, but she said nothing. Draco had buried his hand in her hair and was giving her the most marvellous massage of her scalp and the back of her neck, and it was pure bliss. Not even Ron and his love life could top that.

The evening had wound down gracefully, until at last it was time to call it a night. Whilst it was still true that former Gryffindors and Slytherins did not exactly gravitate towards each other, neither did they shy away. One more step towards old associations and knee-jerk responses being discarded in favour of taking everybody as he or she came, no baggage. And if the behaviour of one red-headed Gryffindor and one black-haired Slytherin in particular were anything to go by, the détente that Hermione and Draco were hoping for was progressing even more speedily than they could have hoped. As everyone gathered in the sitting room to say their goodbyes before Disapparating, Ron and Pansy sequestered themselves in a corner, their heads bent together. Hermione noticed the fleeting squeeze he gave her hand at one point.

Suddenly, the sound of a key turning in the door lock surprised everyone into an abrupt silence.
The door opened and Danny burst in, tossing his keys into the bowl. Trailing behind him were Gemma, Mark and Maggie. Suddenly he realised he’d just walked into a roomful of strangers. He stopped short and the others all piled into him rather gracelessly.

“Bugger!” he muttered. “S’pose we should’ve rung you. Gemma did say…”

By this time, the three behind him had arranged themselves in a sort of ragged line near the doorway. Embarrassed, Gemma reached over and gave Danny a small, sharp poke in the back. “See? Told you, didn’t I!”

Draco was the first to recover from his surprise, Hermione still frozen in place on the sofa where she’d been talking to Luna. Now he moved swiftly to the door to greet the new arrivals.

“Hey,” he said conversationally, and then half-turned, an enigmatic smile on his face. Looking at him, Hermione couldn’t tell if it were the product of genuine calm or utter panic.

“Everybody,” he began, “meet our friends: Danny and Gemma, Mark and Maggie.”

TBC
Disclaimer: Only the original plot and characters are mine. I make no money from this story.

A/N: To the two best betas in fandom, kazfeist and mister_otter, huge thanks and hugs! So glad you guys are around! a86; This chapter is dedicated to you!

The title of the chapter comes from a song I remember learning when I was a Brownie, years ago, about the value of friendship: “Make new friends, but keep the old. One is silver and the other’s gold.”

*Incendium flagra!:* Latin for “Fire, burn!” The command “flagra!” is the imperative of the verb “flagrare.”
Sunday, 13 August

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him, Hermione couldn’t tell if it were the product of genuine calm or utter panic.

“Everybody,” he began, “meet our friends: Danny and Gemma, Mark and Maggie.”

Suddenly, the witches and wizards in the room seemed to have fallen into an impromptu tableau, each one rooted in his or her spot by sheer surprise. Nobody had even considered the possibility that The Flatmates might turn up. And The Flatmates had brought Others.

In the sixty seconds that followed Draco’s brief introduction, Hermione had risen from the sofa and made her way to his side.

“Hi!” she began, a bit too brightly. She cleared her throat. “We had no idea--”

“No, ’course you didn’t, Hermione. Sorry, we really ought to have let you know.” Gemma’s tone was reproachful and she frowned briefly at Danny. “See, Mags and I were chatting the other day, and it turned out we were all off work now, so… well… one thing led to another, and we decided to come up and hang out here for a few days. They’ve never seen the flat, you know, and we thought it would be fun, the six of us having a bit of down time together, no studying. I’m just so--”

“It’s okay, really,” Hermione reassured her, giving her arm a quick squeeze. “We… um…” She looked to Draco, suddenly unsure of where to go from there. Suddenly, it became clear that certain well-hidden skeletons were in danger of being dragged out of the proverbial closet. Kicking and screaming.

Draco gave her a quick, surreptitious nod and a reassuring wink. Good. This was good. He could deal with this. She hadn’t a clue what to say at the moment anyway.

“These are friends of ours from school,” he started, and then waited for that small bombshell to burst. Ten seconds of silence and then Danny looked as if he’d had an abrupt epiphany.

“All of them?” he asked, startled. “And… what do you mean, ‘from school’? Yours or…”

Time to bite the bullet. “Ours, in fact. Hermione and I… we’ve, um… known each other for years, actually. Met at boarding school.” He frowned for a moment, looking convincingly perplexed. “Positive I must have mentioned it at some point…”

The two couples shook their heads, amazed. No, he had not mentioned it. Danny felt compelled to point that out.

“Oh, well…” Draco shrugged carelessly. “ Doesn’t matter anyway. Truth is…” He moved a bit closer, dropping his voice with a conspiratorial smirk. “We didn’t like each other much back then, did we, love?” He gave Hermione a slight nudge and she shook her head silently, words having failed her completely for once.

“Anyway,” he sighed, “we were talking the other day, and… well… you know how it is. We hadn’t seen them in ages, so we thought, why not have ‘em over? Too bad you lot didn’t show up a bit sooner. Still have some drink left though. Fancy anything?”

Draco’s relaxed stance and the sheer bravado of his words were stunning, and Hermione silently released a pent-up breath. He tilted his head towards the kitchen, silently mouthing the words “drinks” and she hurried off, grateful for just a moment to get away and clear her head. Thoughts that needed sorting were still spinning haphazardly around.
Gemma and Maggie followed her in.

“You’ve known Draco for years? Is that really true, or was he having us on?” Maggie hissed.

“No, it’s true. Since we were kids. Nine years, actually,” Hermione admitted, and decided to follow Draco’s lead. “I… I thought I’d told you.”

Both Gemma and Maggie shook their heads vehemently.

Gemma’s voice dropped, her mouth twitching. “Just out of curiosity, what was he like back then? At eleven?”

A tiny bit more truth wouldn’t hurt at this point, Hermione supposed. She grinned. “He was an arrogant, egotistical little prat, if you must know. Totally obnoxious.”

“Aren’t they all,” Maggie sighed, nodding in commiseration as Hermione handed her a pair of glasses, passing a couple of bottles of beer to Gemma and taking a wine bottle and two more glasses herself. The three girls returned to the sitting room, Maggie and Gemma exchanging glances that mirrored the residual amazement they both still felt.

“So…” Draco smiled broadly as the four new arrivals, now seated in chairs dragged over from the dining table, were set up with their drinks. “I reckon introductions are in order, yeah?”

In the several minutes that followed the arrival of the two couples, everyone else had found seats on the sofas or the floor. It appeared that nobody was leaving just yet, after all. All nine of them waited, the identical expectant expression on every face. Now, too quickly for anyone’s name to register, much less be remembered, Draco went round the room, making the introductions.

Danny tipped his head in a slight salute, raising his bottle. “Cheers, everyone!” He tossed back a healthy swig and then he caught Draco’s eye with a sly smile.

“It just so happens, Malfoy,” he began smoothly, “that I have in my possession the very last bit of our stash. What d’you reckon? My contribution to the party.”

One eyebrow rising in surprise, Draco inclined his head as a slow grin spread itself across his face. “Excellent idea, Kirman.” He glanced around the room at the unsuspecting faces of his and Hermione’s oldest friends. Of course, there was no way to know for certain who amongst them might have had any prior experience with such pleasures, but he would have laid odds that it would be few to none. This would be… interesting.

Meanwhile, Hermione found herself caught between the mad desire to laugh and a sensation of purest panic. What in Merlin’s name was wrong with Malfoy? How could he be so foolish as to agree to something like this? Because… because under the circumstances… She darted a wild look at Draco, who seemed curiously oblivious, both to the situation and to her panic. He must still be a bit stonkered himself from before, and not thinking clearly. That was it.

“Um…” she began hesitantly. “I really don’t think…”

“No worries, Granger,” Draco interrupted airily, waving a hand and then tunnelling beneath her hair to rest it lightly at the nape of her neck. He gave her a playful, little squeeze. “It’ll be fun.”

Meanwhile, Danny had busied himself filling the bowl of a small stone pipe with a couple of quite generous pinches of the fragrant green stuff from a small, plastic bag he’d fished out of his jeans pocket.
“What is that?” Pansy whispered to Ron, who stood closest to her. “Some sort of weird Muggle herb?”

He shrugged. “Haven’t a clue.” He turned to Harry, standing on his other side with Ginny. “Do you know?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah,” he whispered, “it’s--”

“Cannabis sativa.”

“Longbottom…?” Blaise started, whipping his head around to stare at Neville, who looked back at him calmly.

“Marijuana.” Neville was quite matter-of-fact. “Also known as ‘weed.’ ”

All eyes were instantly drawn to him. Nearly, anyway. Four pairs were trained on Draco and Hermione in frank disbelief.

Draco leaned towards Danny and Mark, crooking his finger to draw them closer. “Very sheltered school,” he said, sotto voce. “Extremely remote.”

“Bloody hell, Malfoy, where is this school anyway, Siberia?” Danny muttered. “How the fuck…”

“How do you know so much about it, anyway?” Theo was saying in the meantime, studying Neville intently.

“Studied it this past year in one of my classes,” Neville shrugged, with just a hint of a smile. For once, he knew something the rest of them didn’t, and by the gods, he was enjoying it.

“Tell us,” Luna urged, her eyes wide.

“Right, well…” Neville grinned shyly, warming to the subject as everybody else leaned in a bit closer to listen. “When you dry parts of the Cannabis sativa plant, the leaves and flowers and epidermal growths specifically, you get a psychotropic substance. Quite ancient, actually. There’s evidence of people using it going back to the Neolithic age. Eight thousand years, easy. Been used for centuries to induce trances. For divination.” He sat back, crossing his arms smugly over his chest.

“Divination… Don’t recall Trelawney saying anything about this stuff,” Ron muttered under his breath. Next to him, Pansy sniggered.

“Psychotropic…?” Goyle was still confounded by the unfamiliar word. “What’re you on about, Longbottom?”

And then, the distinctive scent of burning weed filled the room as Danny lit up. He took a deep hit from the pipe, sucking it down and holding it as he handed the pipe and the lighter to Draco.

“Gets you shit-faced but in a different way, mate,” Draco croaked in Goyle’s direction, finally releasing a small stream of smoke from his mouth and nose. “Look, just watch us and do the same, yeah?”

He passed the pipe to Hermione, who shook her head and handed it to Gemma. Somebody had to keep their wits about them.

Meanwhile, Ginny had another question, this one rather more interesting. “Neville, have you ever tried it yourself?”
He nodded with that same slightly embarrassed little smile. “Yeah, I have done, actually. Several times.”

Draco’s eyes widened and he looked at Neville with newfound appreciation. So. Longbottom had partaken. Would wonders never cease? His gaze traversed the rest of the room, settling on the small knot of people at the far end. Potter was grinning faintly. Obviously, like Longbottom, he’d had some experience with it. It was written all over his face. Weasley, on the other hand, had a blank, open-mouthed look, reminiscent of a goldfish. Clearly, he was a neophyte. As were Goyle, Nott, Zabini, and Parkinson, Draco was certain, if the small “O” her mouth now formed were any indication. He was sure that Weasley’s sister and Lovegood were as well.

After Gemma, the pipe and lighter had made their way into the hands of Maggie and then Mark. He looked around when he was finished, unsure for the moment of where they should go next.

“I’ll have a go,” Ginny piped up, reaching for them. “Harry, what do I do?”

Harry grinned. He hadn’t done this in ages, not since his cousin Dudley had deigned to share some with him the summer after fifth year and again, early in the summer following the sixth. There had been several occasions, late at night after Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had gone to bed. At the time, Harry concluded that Dudley, already a bit sozzled, must have forgotten temporarily just how contemptible his cousin truly was when he’d knocked on Harry’s bedroom door.

“Okay, look, you just take a pull and hold it for a few seconds, that’s all. Swallow and hold it in. Then you let it out. Oh, and don’t—”

Too late. Ginny released the smoke in an explosion of violent coughing, her eyes streaming.

“Sorry, love, I was just about to warn you. You can’t take in too much at once. It can be pretty harsh.”

She nodded, chagrined, her face still a bit red, wiping her eyes and handing the pipe and lighter to her brother.

Ron looked around furtively. “What d’you reckon, Harry?” he asked quietly.

Harry’s cheeky grin was answer enough.

“Right,” Ron muttered. Obligingly flicking the lighter, Harry kindled the crushed leaves in the pipe’s bowl whilst Ron drew on it. His eyes grew wide as valiantly, he held the smoke in his lungs for several seconds, and then released it in a small cloud that hung in the air, dissipating slowly. He blinked several times and then shrugged, vaguely disappointed. Apart from a burning sensation in his throat, he didn’t really feel any different to the way he’d done before.

Harry took a turn next, holding and swallowing as he leaned over to hand the pipe and lighter on to Blaise.

On it went, eventually being refilled, making several rounds of the entire company.

All but one.
“Oi… D’you lot realise…” Mark murmured, his voice mellow and lazy. “There are dragons on that picture frame?”

The room had gone quiet some time earlier, everyone falling into a comfortable lethargy as they lay sprawled on the sofas or in a relaxed haze against loose cushions on the floor.

Danny struggled to sit up, straining to turn his head in Mark’s direction. “What’re you on about, cock? What picture?”

“That one! Over there!” Mark’s arm rose, a finger pointing in the general direction of the framed map, and then it flopped back to his side.

Danny squinted, and then his eyes widened. “Fuck! Where’d that come from, Malfoy? It wasn’t there before… was it?”

Wriggling closer to Hermione, his cheek pressed against her right breast, Draco smiled beatifically, his eyes hooded. “Birthday present. From my parents. Hung it up after you left.”

“But… sh!… those dragons are… they’re… I mean…” Danny was suddenly bereft of coherent expression.

“Oh, don’t be stupid, Kirman,” Mark mumbled. “They just look like they’re moving. They’re not. Not really.”

“They’re not?” Danny was confused.

“Nah!” Mark was confident. “This shit is bloody amazing, though.”

Like a chain reaction, a series of knowing looks rippled around the room. Ron opened his mouth and was promptly silenced by a sharp elbow to his ribs from Ginny and then Hermione’s warning glare from across the room.

At the same time, she had begun giving Draco surreptitious little pokes. “You’ve got to stop them, Malfoy!” she hissed in his ear. “I can’t do it! They’ll only respond to you!”

With some effort, Draco raised his head, giving Hermione a lopsided grin. “Anything for you, darling,” he murmured.

“Gosh, thanks!” Hermione rolled her eyes, swallowing a traitorous laugh, and then sobered quickly. This had better work the first time out, she knew. It would have to be both wandless and silent.

Lifting his head a bit further, Draco frowned briefly in a concerted attempt to focus, levelling his slightly wavery gaze at the dragons and then screwing his eyes shut. Sensing his attention, they lashed their long, sinewy tails, arching their long necks and raising their heads to belch out small bursts of flame and smoke.

Dracones…

He scrambled desperately for the rest of the spell through the cobwebs that were cluttering his head.

And then he remembered.

Dracones tranquillate!

Brows raised in hopeful question marks, he swivelled his gaze upwards. Hermione glanced quickly at the picture frame and then back at him with a broad smile.
“You did it, love!” she whispered. “They’ve stopped!” Her mouth brushed his in a quick kiss and then she pulled him back down to her again with a small, relieved sigh.

“So…” Maggie said suddenly to the room at large, pulling herself up on one elbow from where she lay partially draped over Mark. “Tell us about where you lot went to school together.”

Now there was a loaded question if ever there was one. Both Hermione and Draco opened their mouths to reply.

“Hogwarts, you mean?”

It was Ron. He had a rather loopy smile on his face as he lounged against the wall adjacent to the large windows.

“Great place, terrific. Out in the middle of bloody nowhere, though.”

“Whereabouts?” Maggie sat up, folding her legs beneath her and propping her chin on her elbow. And then, *Hogwarts?* Before she had a chance to ask, however, Ron pushed on.

“Scotland. I think. Yeah, definitely. Scotland. That’s right.” Ron nodded gravely. “In the middle of all these mountains. Or… well… really big hills, anyway.”

Somebody snorted with laughter, followed by a chorus of titters.

“It’s… you know… typical boarding school shit, very competitive, loads of work, house cup, all that… stuff…” Harry had rushed to fill in the gap, but now his voice trailed off and he grinned weakly, waving his hand in a vague gesture.

A sudden giggle came from next to him. “Remember that time you two missed the train!” Ginny sputtered, one hand to her mouth. “And you took Dad’s car! Mum was ready to murder you both!”

“Yeah, the whole school heard about that one!” Theo chimed in, snickering. “Ever get the splinters out of your arses?”

“Splinters out of your arses…” Greg guffawed. “Good one, Nott!”

Ron flushed a bright crimson. “Yeah, well… least me and Harry never fell off the staircase between floors, Goyle!”

“I never!” Greg protested hotly.

“You did, y’ know,” Draco drawled. “Third year. I was there, remember? Scraped you up off the floor.”

“Hey, bloody thing moved suddenly!”

Gemma and Maggie shot astonished glances at each other. Danny, on the other hand, was busy studying the dragons, who were now obediently stationary. Every once in a while he prodded at them gently with a fingertip and then stared a while longer. Mark had dozed off sitting up at one end of the sofa.

Everyone else relapsed into a comfortable silence once again for several minutes.

Then Blaise gave a sudden bark of laughter. “Fuck, Draco, what about that duel you and Potter had?”
Danny turned mid-poke, ears pricked. *Duel,* did he say?

“Well, *Lockhart!* Pointless little fuckwit, strutting about like a bloody peacock. Duelling Club, my arse,” Draco snorted, rolling his eyes and then he chuckled. “Reckon that one was a draw, wouldn’t you *s-s-say,* Potter?”

“Poor old Justin!” Harry remembered, shaking his head. “He really thought--”

“Well, it really did look as if--” Neville began.

“After all, Harry—*Parseltongue,* for fuck’s sake!” Ron rolled his eyes. “*I mean.*”

“Yeah--” Gemma started, but Harry cut her off.

“Not as weird as being Millicent Bulstrode’s cat!”

It was Hermione. She’d been so quiet up to this moment that at the sound of her voice, everyone turned to stare at her. She giggled, then clapped her hand over her mouth, amazed at what had just flown out.

Draco looked at her in some surprise. *Huh! Contact high.* “Granger…” he warned quietly, shushing her, though he couldn’t help grinning.

In the last few minutes, the conversation had abruptly taken a truly bizarre turn. Danny ventured a look at Gemma and Maggie, and they shrugged, nonplussed. It was the weed, he concluded. Either that or this lot had gone to school in a *seriously* strange place.

Nah. It was the weed. Had to be.

Danny shook his head again, amazed. He might have to consider his sources more carefully from now on. He had the distinct feeling he’d got a bit more than he’d paid for this time.

*Mmmmph…* Pansy murmured. She’d wound up sitting with her back to Ron’s, and now she leaned her head back so it grazed his shoulder. “I’m *famished.*”

‘Yeah,” he agreed. “Me too. Bloody *starving.*” He licked his lips and then cleared his throat. “I could really do with something cold.”

“Yes, that sounds great,” Theo chimed in, and before long there was an overwhelming consensus to the effect that ingesting something cold and sweet as soon as possible was absolutely essential.

“I know!” Hermione said excitedly, getting to her feet and looking first at Draco and then at their Oxford friends. “*G & D’s!*”

look…” She glanced around at her boyfriend stretched out beside her, eyes closed, and then at Mark and Maggie, lying lazily intertwined on the soft sofa cushions on the floor. “We’re a bit tired—up very early this morning, see. D’you suppose you could bring us back something? We’ll give you the money.”

Hermione huffed somewhat melodramatically, chuckling a moment later as Draco’s muttered ‘Lazy sods!’ drew nods of unabashedly cheerful confirmation from Mark and Danny. “Yeah, yeah…” she sighed. “Okay, suppose we can manage. What do you fancy?”

A moment of some discussion followed, and then Mark sat up, digging into his jeans pocket for some money. “Right, here’s £7.00. That should cover it. Get us a tub, yeah? What flavours, you lot?”

Two minutes’ further discussion yielded an order for one large tub of Belgian Chocolate, Mars Bar, and After Eight Mint, topped with hot fudge and whipped cream.

Five minutes later, eleven parched and insatiably hungry people had left the four of them comfortably ensconced in a pleasantly sleepy fog, and gathered on the pavement in front of the house. It was just past eleven when they began their trek to what was sounding increasingly like nirvana to everyone: the ice cream café.

The casual observer anywhere along the Iffley Road would have been witness to a curious procession straggling along in small knots of two and three. Periodic giggles and rowdy shouts punctuated their meandering progress into the roundabout and lingered in the air as they crossed the Plain into the High Street.

“Several of the colleges are along here,” Hermione explained to whoever was in earshot. At that moment, it was Pansy, Ron, Luna and Neville, Harry and Ginny a couple of feet behind them. “Magdalen’s first—here on the right, see? And across the road is the Botanic Garden. It’s really beautiful. So peaceful. I love it there.”

“I noticed there was a very pretty garden behind your flat.” Luna gave a small skip to keep up with Neville’s longer strides. “Is it yours?”

“Mmm.” Hermione smiled, remembering the day it was planted. “We did it together, actually.”

“Nah, come on, you’re joking!” Ron was plainly incredulous, his words a perfect articulation of the expression on Neville’s face. “You’re not seriously gonna tell me that Malfoy is into gardening now.”

“Well,” Hermione replied, eyes twinkling mischievously, “he did buy a hedge clipper, you know, all on his own.”

“Sounds dangerous!” Harry laughed. “Mind what you’re about when he’s got his hands on that thing!”

“Oi! I heard that, Potter!” came an irate voice from the tail end of the group.

Numbers 71 and 72 in particular caught several eyes, bringing everyone to the display windows of Oxford Holographics and Hoyle’s Games and Puzzles.

“Ooh…” Luna breathed, her nose pressed to the glass of number 71. She was staring at several holograms, one in particular. It was of a ballerina en pointe and spinning gracefully in a never-ending circle, her skirts whirling around in a blur of palest silver. “What is that?” She dropped her voice quite low. “Is it Spelled?”
“No,” Hermione laughed. “It’s a hologram. It’s a sort of photography that records the images in 3-D. Three dimensionally,” she added, noticing the blank looks on the faces around her.

“Shit!” Theo stared at the assorted images that seemed to leap at him, impulsively reaching out to touch them himself and finding his hand coming up against the window pane instead.

Meanwhile, Ginny was staring at a set of magic card tricks in the window next door. “Hermione, what’s that? Is it really magic?”

Hermione shook her head. “Not the way… well… not that way, no. It’s all sleight of hand, fool the eye, that sort of thing.”

“Ah…” Ginny nodded, though she couldn’t really fathom a brand of magic that was so alien to her native understanding of it.

“Bloody hell!” Ron pointed excitedly, expelling an explosive breath. “Harry, will you look at that! Wicked!” He was staring at a particularly beautiful chess set in the window display, each wooden piece hand-carved and painted. He turned to Draco, who had come up behind him along with Blaise, Theo and Greg. “That’s… that looks like…”

“Nope.” Draco shook his head. “It’s not, I swear. Does look rather like it though.” He paused, and then he smiled evilly. “You play, don’t you, Weasley?”

Ron nodded.

Draco cast another look at the chess set in the shop window. “Me too. I’ve had my eye on this set for some time. Make a really nice present…” He flashed a winsome, hopeful smile at Hermione. The hint did not go unnoticed, and she rolled her eyes in response, mouth twitching. And then, almost as an afterthought, he remarked, “We should play sometime, yeah?”

Ron’s eyes opened very wide and there was a good five-second, surprised silence before he grinned too. “Sure, yeah… that’d be great.”

“Must warn you though,” Draco drawled, his smile supremely confident. “I will beat the crap out of you.”

“No worries, Malfoy! I can handle myself,” Ron retorted. “You just look to your own game.”

“Fair enough,” Draco agreed, turning back to look at the collection of board games, juggling pins, and card sets that were on display.

The group wended their way up the street, which was still surprisingly busy considering the late hour.

“Merlin’s balls, look at all those--” Greg began under his breath, as he watched the street traffic whizzing past.

Draco laughed. “Bicycles, mate. Everybody rides ‘em round here. They’re a fucking hazard sometimes, I swear! You really have to watch yourself crossing the road! Bloody idiot nearly ran me down the other day. Come on, you lot,” he called out, turning then to survey the stragglers further behind. “They’re closing in half an hour.”

They continued on their way, Draco and Hermione taking it in turn to point out the Exam Schools and several of the colleges-- Queen’s, All Souls, Oriel, Lincoln, Brasenose, and University-- looming tall and magisterial as they slumbered in shrouds of darkness, ornate lamps casting circles of light.
against their ancient stone facades.

Finally the troupe reached the crossroads at the end of the High Street. There, at the northwest corner where the High became Queen Street to the west and St Aldates turned into Cornmarket Street to the North, was Carfax Tower, dating from the thirteenth century.

“IT’s just there, not much further,” Hermione told everyone as they turned the corner into St Aldates.

“Finally!” Heaving a sigh, Pansy casually slipped her arm through Ron’s and smiled prettily up at him. “I’m positively starved, aren’t you?”

“Uh… yeah… starved…” he floundered, colouring slightly. Those eyes, so round and blue, with that fringe of dark lashes… he could fall right into those eyes of hers. Patting the hand that rested so comfortably and naturally now on his arm, he started off again with a smile as self-satisfied as the fabled Cheshire Cat’s.

George and Danver, or G & D’s, on the corner of Pembroke Street and St Aldates, was an American-style ice cream café, one of two such shops in Oxford. The group wandered in past the table and chairs that stood beneath the blue-striped awning outside, past the bicycles parked by the door, taking in the brightly lit, cheery surroundings with ill-concealed fascination.

There was certainly nothing quite like this in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. The proclamation “Knowledge is Good” and a question were written on a blackboard hanging on the wall. When Pansy asked, Draco explained that answering the question of the day correctly meant winning a scoop of free ice cream. Just one of G & D’s unique traditions.

Monday’s Hoop Night was another. “Throw a cow through the basketball hoop,” Greg read on another sign, “and win a half-litre of ice cream.”

“Throw a cow…?” he repeated, brow furrowed.

“Not a real one, Goyle!” Theo snorted. “One of those plush ones in the basket, see?” He shook his head in amazement. It was a wonder that Gregory Goyle had managed to survive seven years at Hogwarts without either failing miserably or becoming utterly fed up with the many jokes of which he’d been the gullible butt. His persistent naiveté had made him a natural target even within his own house. Apparently, though, it was rivalled only by his forgiving nature. Or possibly, Theo concluded to himself, he was simply oblivious.

A long, glass-enclosed counter stretching nearly the length of the café held an assortment of scrumptious-looking offerings. A series of artfully written menus, their graphics colourful against the black backgrounds, were posted on the wall behind it, and small, round, wooden tables lined the opposite wall up to the large, plate-glass window at the front of the café. Newspapers, magazines, and issues of The Beano, a popular children’s comic book, lay randomly strewn on the various tables.

“Malfoy!” Hermione whispered suddenly, drawing him aside. “They don’t have money! Not Muggle money, I mean! What are we--”

She had a point. He’d forgotten all about that.

“No worries,” he told her under his breath, and then, “My treat, everybody! Consider it… um… consider it a belated birthday celebration.”

“Very belated!” Pansy laughed. “Your birthday was two months ago, Draco!”
“Ah, Pans, you remembered! I’m touched!” he sighed dramatically, one hand to his heart.

“As if I could forget! I only went to every single one of your birthday parties from the time we were two until we were eleven, not to mention you telling me every chance you got, ‘my birthday’s the fifth of June!’”

Draco chuckled, remembering. “Too right I did! Annoying little bugger, wasn’t I!”

Grinning wickedly, Pansy opened her mouth to reply, and her impulse to agree wasn’t the only one. But a comment from Ron, who was standing at her side, pre-empted her comeback.

“Think I fancy one of those sandwich-looking things,” he said, pointing to several plates in the glass case before them. “A… what is it? A boggle?” he said. “And then some ice cream. Right.” He grinned, satisfied, folding his arms across his chest.

“That’s ‘bagel,’ long ‘a,’” Hermione giggled. “You’re that hungry, still?”

Ginny let out a hoot of knowing laughter from where she stood with Harry, Luna and Neville, a few feet away. “Oh come on, Hermione, it hasn’t been that long, has it? My brother’s always hungry!”

Vivid memories of Ron at the Gryffindor table over the years returned. He’d often eaten to a degree and in such a manner that Hermione herself had felt a bit sick at the sight. Now she snickered. “I haven’t forgotten! Ron, where do you put it all, anyway?”

“We’ve been wondering that too, Weasley, for years!” Blaise called out from the other side of the café, where Theo and Greg let out brief sniggers of agreement. “We used to lay odds on how much you could eat, isn’t that right? “ He took in his three former Slytherin housemates with a single glance. “Made quite a nice little bundle one time, as I recall…” His smile was serene at the memory.

There was a tense moment that seemed to stop time, in which everybody froze and all eyes went to Ron. He had ceased his scrutiny of the various inviting bagel sandwiches to swivel his head around in Blaise’s direction. And then he lifted his shoulders in a shrug, breaking into a sheepish grin.

“Reckon you did, mate,” he conceded, flushing slightly. “Glad I could oblige. Now—” he turned back to the display case and pointed. “That Mega Veggie one, with the oozy green stuff—"

“Guacamole,” Harry filled in, as collectively, everybody relaxed again.

“Yeah, right, guacamole. Whatever that is.” Ron nodded. “I’ll have that.”

* *

Double Decker, Raspberry Pavlova, Grand Marnier, Bailey’s Irish Cream, and Lovers’ Tiff…five exotic and original ice cream flavours amongst the many rich, heavenly varieties created and made exclusively by G & D’s. The list was extensive, and had everybody’s mind well and truly boggled.

“What the fuck are those things?” Theo had wondered, looking at the multi-coloured Gummy Bears in one of the dishes of available toppings. Not surprisingly, Ron had already chosen to decorate his Monster-sized bowl of Bananarama, Strawberry and Pistachio with a handful of the chewy, gelatinous little sweets.
“Mmm… amazing…” Neville sighed contentedly though a mouthful of creamy Crunchie Bar dripping with butterscotch sauce. Small drops began to leak from the bottom of his waffle cone, and he hastily caught them on his tongue.

“What’s Silly Hat Night?” Luna piped up, licking a swirl of ice cream out of her cone and pointing to another sign.

“Oh, that’s every Tuesday,” Hermione explained. “You just show up wearing the most ridiculous hat you can find. It’s fun. We were here one night when somebody came in wearing a hat made completely out of juggling pins! Must have been at least ten of them. I don’t know how he did it!”

“Remember the bloke with the fish on his head?” Draco sniggered. “And the one with the Viking horns?”

“What about the hat that was made entirely of Legos?” Hermione countered, falling back against Draco and giggling helplessly. “I thought that girl was going to topple over!”

“What are--” Ginny began.

“These little plastic bricks you fit together to build things,” Harry explained. “My cousin Dudley had a shitload of them when we were small.” His voice turned wistful. “Never let me touch them.”

Ginny patted his hand, and he shook himself out of the memory with a little smile. “Never mind. I’ll Conjure you some Legos for your next birthday.” she said, her voice a teasing whisper in his ear.

Harry turned his head slightly, a corner of his mouth quirking.

“They’ve got this book, see,” Draco remarked a moment later, savouring a bite of sinfully rich White Chocolate covered in sprinkles. “Where you can make suggestions for new ice cream flavours and they’ll try to make them. I can sort of see Chocolate and Chili… but Guinness? And Port and Stilton, for fuck’s sake?” He made a face. “I’ll take my port and Stilton the usual way, thanks!”

“Oh come on, where’s your spirit of adventure, Malfoy?” Hermione teased, leaning against him affectionately. She spooned up a tantalising dollop of strawberry ice cream, waving it in front of him. “There’s more to ice cream than just chocolate, you know!”

“Yes, very true.” Draco’s eyes glinted dangerously. “I assure you, darling, my spirit of adventure is alive and quite well, thank you. Remind me later and I’ll be happy to illustrate...”

Catcalls erupted and, blushing, Hermione shovelled the ice cream into Draco’s mouth, stopping any further elaboration on that particular topic. He licked the spoon completely clean, an unrepentantly wicked smile on his face.

“Hermione,” Harry began, “think you might be coming down to London anytime soon? You and Malfoy, that is.”

_Much better. Points to Potter._ Draco smirked, wrapping a possessive arm around Hermione’s shoulders.

“Well, I don’t know, really. Why?” She snuggled back against him, completely stuffed, reaching up to lace her fingers through his.

“Well… we were talking before, Gin and I, and we thought, you know, that it would be good to do this again… not wait for so much time to go by.” He dropped his voice, adding, “We could even meet in Muggle London if you want.”
“You game, Ginny?” Hermione teased, but beneath her words, there was genuine curiosity.

“Sure!” the red-haired girl replied. “Actually, I’ve wondered about it all my life.”

“Dad,” Ron put in, nodding. Their father’s propensities had affected all the Weasleys to some degree. “Me too, to be honest. Maybe…” He cast a hopeful, sidelong glance at Pansy, who looked up from her banana split with an enigmatic smile. “What d’ you reckon, Pansy? Would you…?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she purred.

Ron grinned, turning his attention back to his food, the tips of his ears bright crimson.

“We definitely should do this,” Hermione declared. “Whoever can make it. It’ll be great.”

She looked around from one face to another, beaming. It was wonderful, being with her old friends once again and, remarkably, discovering the possibility of friendship in those with whom such a thing had been out of the question for so many years.

* * *

The entrance to Bellewether Crescent was a five-minute walk from G & D’s. Just before closing, they entered The Chequers. With admirable precision, Hermione sent them to the back in twos and threes. There, with the help of Draco’s wand, six wizards and three witches disappeared into wizarding Oxford, where they Apparated home.

At one in the morning on this clear, moonless night, the back garden was sunk in shadows, scores of tiny stars winking steadily in the vast, black-velvet canopy overhead. Dense clouds scudding past blanketed them momentarily, propelled by the wind that moved the high branches to sway gracefully now and then.

Hermione and Draco shared a chaise lounge, which they’d pulled into the centre of the patio so they could lie back and watch the sky. She lay in the V of his legs, her head resting on his chest, his arms securely around her. For long moments, they were completely silent.

“So-- what did you think?” she murmured eventually, stifling a yawn.

It was getting so that he could read the meaning of her most cryptic questions and comments, supply the missing words. “About tonight, you mean? It was good. Better than I expected, even. You?”

“I think everybody had a wonderful time. And oh, Draco, the food—you were magnificent at the grill!” Giggling, she twisted round a bit so she could see his face. “Bet nobody expected to see you doing anything like that!”

He laughed softly. “Too right they didn’t! I’m sure I’ve put a permanent blot on the houses of Malfoy and Slytherin! Have to say, though… when that lot upstairs turned up out of the blue…”

Hermione groaned. “I know! Of all times! I was completely tongue-tied. It was mortifying! But you— you were fantastic! So calm! As if it were nothing! How did you do it?”

“Well, you know it was only a matter of time anyway,” Draco reflected, catching an errant curl and wrapping it round his finger. He’d come to really love her hair, most of all when it was at its fullest,
the silken waves and ringlets begging to be touched. “Bound to happen at some point. So I just thought, well, don’t let anybody twig to how shocked we are, just act normal.”

“And you pulled it off brilliantly!”

“I did, didn’t I.” His grin was impossibly smug. “Thought you were going to hit me, though, when I took the pipe from Danny!”

“Oh, that!” Now Hermione sat up all the way and turned to face Draco. “Yes! I couldn’t believe you did that! Didn’t you consider what could come out, with everybody wrecked?”

“Ah, but you see, darling…” Draco’s voice was silky as he pulled her close, lifting her legs so that they straddled his own. Their noses were nearly touching and he could feel her breath warming his skin. “That was precisely the point. Reckoned whatever anybody said would sound completely arse-brained and nobody would pay attention, least of all Danny and Mark and that lot. You know how it is when we do a bit of weed. Everything seems daft after a while.”

Hermione chuckled, touching her forehead to his for a moment, and then sighed. “Very clever, Malfoy. Though I suppose that eventually, we’ll have to tell them something, anyway. About what we really are. Don’t you think?”

“Mmm,” he murmured against the soft skin of her neck, where he’d begun leaving soft, fluttery kisses. “’Spose we will do. Eventually.” His voice dropped to a sultry whisper, sending a thrill of excitement through her. “But just at the moment… you smell bloody fantastic, Granger. Do believe I’d like to find out if the rest of you smells…” -- he nuzzled her skin just below the hairline behind her ear, inhaling the apricot scent of her hair -- “and tastes…” – there was a warm, wet, tickling sensation as his tongue curled itself, snake-like, around her earlobe -- “as delicious…” – he drew it into his mouth then, and suckled -- “…as this very small section…” – pulling away, his lips began a slow, meandering descent down the slender column of her neck towards her collarbone-- “…of your anatomy…”

By this time, she’d begun to wriggle against him, causing untold sensations, unbearably delightful and heated, in his nether regions. Unable to stifle a groan, he pressed himself against her, attacking her mouth with his own in a deep, lingering kiss.

“Fancy doing it outdoors?” he whispered, when they came up for air finally.

“No! I mean… yes, I would--” She gave a wild, little giggle at the very thought, so naughty and fraught with risk. “But not here! It’s just a bit too open! We really could be seen!”

“Not if we’re under a blanket. And it just so happens, my love…” he said slyly, his eye on an unused paper napkin left over from the barbeque. “…that we have one to hand!”

It was the work of a mere moment, and then he’d successfully Transfigured the napkin, which responded to his quiet “Locomotor blanket!” by floating from the nearby table to settle lightly over the two of them.

“Now then,” Draco murmured, caressing her mouth with tender butterfly kisses. “Any other objections? Or can I ravish you to my heart’s content?”

“Ravish away,” Hermione whispered, shivering with pleasure as she felt cool fingers on the flesh of her back, rippling under her shirt as, deftly, they unclasped her bra. “I’m all yours.”
TBC

Photo Album

Oxford Holographics and Hoyle’s Games and Puzzles, 71 and 72 High Street, Oxford

Draco’s coveted chess set from Hoyle’s
Alice in Wonderland chess set and Magic card tricks from Hoyle’s
Carfax

George and Danver, 94 St Aldates, Oxford
Interiors, G & D’s

Trafalgar Square at Legoland, Windsor. Incredible!
The Chrysler Building made from Legos, Toys R Us, New York City. Wow!

Definitely worthy of Silly Hat Night!

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I have made no money from this story. Only the original characters and plot belong to me.

A/N: Thanks and banana splits from G & D’s to my two trusty betas, mister_otter and kazfeist. You are fabulous in the extreme!

Thanks, too, to my friend Robin, for a bit of help on the finer points of Latin verb conjugation and the odd Britpick.

_Dracones Tranquillate! _– In Latin, "Dragons, be calm!"
George and Danver is actually one of three G & Ds in Oxford. The third, George and Delila, is in Cowley Road, and opened up in December of 2007. The business was started by an enterprising Oxford student, George Stroup, who wanted to offer really good, homemade, all-natural ice cream made with local Jersey cream, and also run a business with the progressive philosophy of being “an integral part of the community and an efficient, sustainable vehicle for social good.” Read all about G & D’s at their website:

http://gdcafe.com/FrontPage/frontPage.htm
Saturday lunchtime
9 September

The taste on his tongue—like intensely salty, 200-proof soy sauce in viscous paste form—was enough to make Draco screw up his face in disgust. Rather indelicately, he removed the offending piece of partially masticated, buttered toast from his mouth, the gods-forsaken brown muck Hermione had spread on it still clinging to it.

“What in the bloody hell are you trying to do to me, woman?” he demanded, irate. “Please don’t tell me you actually made that! Blech!”

Shuddering involuntarily, he wrapped it in a paper napkin, balling it up for disposal, and lobbed the missile in the direction of the rubbish bin in the corner. It missed, bouncing off the wall instead and landing face-down and open on the floor, where it stuck.

“Look at that! And you were proposing that I actually eat it?” Draco clutched his throat
melodramatically. “Stuff’s vile! What the hell is it, anyway?”

Hermione laughed as she fetched a glass of water and pushed it towards him. “Here, you big baby! It’s Marmite, if you must know. Made from…” She paused, inspecting the list of ingredients on the small jar. “Yeast extract, mostly. Lots of B vitamins. Very healthy!” She glanced up at him, a tiny, decidedly wicked smile on her face.

Wicked smile duly noted. This was clearly premeditated. “I’m touched that you are so concerned for my well-being, Granger. Is this some sort of bizarre Muggle delicacy? Really-- do they eat such muck on a regular basis?”

“Well, actually, lots of people do, yes. On toast, or cheese biscuits, something like that. You can’t live in this country, not the Muggle part of it anyway, and not know what Marmite is. You either love it or you--”

“Hate it. Yeah!” Draco gave a rueful laugh before taking another swig of water for good measure. “And where do you stand in this great debate?”

“Me?” Hermione turned large, innocent eyes on him. “I detest the stuff. Always have done.”

A heartbeat later, she was out of her chair and off like a shot, her pursuer’s cries about the unfairness of taking advantage of a hungry, trusting man who is complete rubbish in the kitchen reverberating down the long hallway that led to their bedroom. There was one loud shriek that ended in a breathless giggle, and then dead silence.

He had tackled her, barrelling into her so that she fell backwards onto the bed and then throwing his body full-length over hers. Now, pressed flush against each other, their chests rose and fell in tandem as they struggled to catch their breaths, Draco leaning on his elbows and peering down at Hermione’s flushed face and bright, mischievous eyes. Her hair lay spread out on the pillows, framing her face in a rippling mass of curls and waves.

“Didn’t know you could run that fast,” he panted. “You’re good!”

“I can run faster than that, you know,” she said softly, growing still under his grip. “I let you catch me!”

“Did you now?” He fixed her with his clear, grey gaze and drew closer. “And why would that be?”

“You know why.”

Her voice was low, and something in its tone—a determination, a hunger—thrilled him. Hands cupping his face, she drew him down into a sensuous kiss. He could feel her smiling against his mouth, the soft, moist tip of her tongue teasing him as her lips moved against his own. In that moment, it was positively the sexiest thing he’d ever experienced, and in a sort of fever, he slid his hands beneath her head, clutching handfuls of her hair and breathing in her scent, tasting her, wanting to sink into her as he returned those tempting kisses.

A door slammed.

“Anybody home?” a cheery voice called out.

Danny.

“It’s awfully quiet. They must be out.”
And Gemma.

Fuck.

“We’re so stupid! We knew they were coming back today!” Hermione hissed in Draco’s ear. She’d rolled them over a moment earlier, and now she sat astride him, pressed deliciously against the erection burgeoning inside his loose, cotton trousers, her hands frozen in the process of tugging his t-shirt up over his head. “How could we forget?”

She collapsed against him in a warm, slightly sweaty heap and they held each other tightly for a moment, breathing hard, before reluctantly righting their clothing and trailing out of the bedroom.

“Malfoy, Hermione,” Danny grinned, spotting the two of them over Gemma’s shoulder as they emerged from the hallway into the sitting room. “So you are here, then. See, Gem?”

“Oh good, we were hoping you both would be here when we got in,” Gemma said, giving Hermione a warm hug, and then Draco too.

He allowed it and then took a step back. This hugging and kissing thing Muggles seemed to enjoy doing so casually—he still wasn’t entirely used to it, even after three terms of living amongst them with increasing comfort and ease, but he supposed it really wasn’t half bad anyway. Loads better than the brittle veneer of affection—or not affection, but more its facsimile, really— that he so often witnessed amongst people of his own background, the touch that seemed to skim the surface but never convey any true warmth or depth of feeling. Even his oldest friends played by those rules, though to a lesser degree. At least with them, though, he was fairly confident of the feeling beneath the exterior.

Several suitcases stood by the front door, and now Danny gripped two of them and began hauling them in the direction of his and Gemma’s room. “Bit of help wouldn’t go amiss, you lot,” he tossed over his shoulder with a cheeky grin.

Draco heaved a dramatic sigh and bent to grab two more pieces of luggage. “Fuck’s sake, Kirman, what the hell have you got in here? The entire Bod, condensed?”

Laughing, the girls brought up the rear with the remaining things, and before long, it was in a rather intimidating pile, waiting to be unpacked.

“Right, that’s enough of that for now,” Danny announced. “What say we get out of here, go have a bit of lunch somewhere?”

“Excellent suggestion,” Draco replied, “especially considering that Granger here tried to poison me earlier. I’m ready for something that’s actually edible!”

Hermione and Draco followed Gemma and Danny’s lead and soon the four of them were standing in front of the Magic Café, a very quick walk from the flat on nearby Magdalen Road. Catching sight of the name on the bright red exterior, Draco’s eyebrows rose slightly as he caught Hermione’s eye, the two of them sharing a private smile as they went inside.

There was an appealing earthiness, a homely, unpretentious quality to the place, that was immediately apparent. Beneath the deep-blue ceiling, cheery yellow and orange walls were decorated with a collection of paintings and photos by local artists. A large, comfy sofa replete with lots of cushions and throws and surrounded by large, leafy plants beckoned, and beyond, there were wooden tables of different sizes for dining. The huge notice board was overflowing with adverts for a wide variety of activities, everything alternative Oxford had to offer from Reiki, Shiatsu and holistic massage to
dance and meditation classes, theatre and film performances.

Best of all, however, was the richly enticing odours coming from the food bar at the far end of the café. They drew the four friends closer to examine the day’s offerings.

“Gemma and I came here a lot last year. Strictly vegetarian, by the way,” Danny explained, adding, “Hope that’s okay.”

Shit. What his mouth had really been all set for was something along the lines of politically incorrect, unenlightened pub food, something suitably greasy in fact. With chips. Smothered in ketchup. Draco opened his mouth to reply.

“Sounds great! We’d love it, wouldn’t we?” Hermione trilled, looking pointedly at Draco.

“Sure. Great. Love it,” he muttered, a sceptical eyebrow raised, and glanced up at the board announcing the day’s specials. “Hmm. Lasagne with funghi?” A memory suddenly surfaced, a day in sixth year when their Herbology class had made an excursion to the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest to collect species of poisonous wild mushrooms. “Sounds yummy. Reckon I’ll have the soup.”

* 

“So, what’ve you lot been up to whilst we’ve been gone?” Gemma asked brightly, digging into a large salad with gusto.  

Hermione paused in her attempt to cool off a small wedge of rich, cheesy lasagne by blowing lightly on it. “Oh, you know, working. The usual. We planted a garden too, did you see?”

“I know! It’s beautiful!” Gemma nodded, spearing a juicy grape tomato and popping it into her mouth. “You did all that on your own, Hermione? I admire you!”

Hermione grinned, casting a warm smile in Draco’s direction. “I didn’t exactly do it all on my own. Draco helped a lot. It’s really as much his as mine.”

Danny laid down his fork, folding his arms across his chest with a smirk. “How sweet. I’m touched.” He snickered. “Wish I’d been here to see that. Malfoy with dirt under his fingernails!”

Draco shot him a dark glance. “Gloves, Kirman. Marvellous invention. And what have you been up to the last three months? Lying about doing fuck-all, no doubt.”

Chuckling, Danny nodded and forked up a bite of his pasta. “That’s about it. No, not really. I was working for my dad most of the time. He’s a builder. Helped him with some jobs. Dad said it was ‘character-building.’ All I know is, I was fucking knackered. All the time.”

“He was too tired even to come and see me sometimes,” Gemma pouted, and then turned to Danny with a taunting smile tugging at her mouth. “Or so you said. Maybe that was just a big excuse, yeah?”

“Right,” Danny laughed, rolling his eyes. “ Barely had the energy for a proper wank, much less anything or anyone else. No, love, for better or worse, you’re it.”
“Good.” Gemma grinned, satisfied. “I had better be.” And then a completely different thought popped into her head. “Hey, has anyone got much reading done for next term yet?”

Hermione’s forkful of lasagne sent up richly fragrant curls of steam as she paused to answer the question. “Mmm. I have, actually. A bit. I’m prepping for a period survey. Up to my neck in the Gawain poet these days. You?”


“How!” Danny snorted, shaking his head. “Try immersing yourself in Descartes after a day on a building site, and having your dad as your boss.”

Draco nodded, thinking of all the sheer physical labour involved in his own job at Blackwell’s. “I hear you, mate. I should be reading Gawain’ as well. Hermione keeps leaving it all over the flat to remind me.” He stretched luxuriantly and yawned. “Just can’t get myself to start.”

Just then, the first, sweet strains of a lute and an accompanying guitar sounded from somewhere behind them, and everyone turned to look. A young couple sat together in a corner of the café, dressed in the sort of romantic, loosely flowing clothing equally reminiscent of the Renaissance and the New-Age hippie types who thronged to Glastonbury every year for the big festival.

“Wow,” Hermione breathed.

“Oh, yes, I forgot to mention that. There’s live music here every Saturday lunchtime. Nice, yeah?” Gemma winked. “It’s another reason we like it. And one more thing—there’s a fantastic bookshop next door. We simply have to stop there before we leave.”

“You won’t have to twist my arm!” Hermione grinned, standing to have a look at the luscious array of cakes on offer in the glass display case. Sitting back down, she looked round the table brightly. “Anybody feel like something for afters?” Her sidelong glance in Draco’s direction smouldered, and she leaned in closer to him. “Passion cake, perhaps?”

To his chagrin, there was a rush of heat and a stirring in his crotch, and hurriedly, he pulled the cloth napkin over his lap. Evil woman. Two could play at that game, however. His smile was wolfish as he gazed back at her.

“Perfect,” he replied.

Across the table, Gemma caught Danny’s eye and they shared a knowing smirk. It was refreshing and even comforting, somehow, to know that things hadn’t changed a bit since they’d left in June. Lucky thing they’d moved their bed to the other wall.

It was good to be back.
The shriek that lanced through the quiet, sleep-shrouded flat late that night had three hearts racing. Draco and Hermione shot up in bed, banging into each other in the process, and then she fumbled with the lamp on the small bedside table, her hand shaking. And then they heard it again.

“Fuck fuck FUCK! Son of a bitch!” It was Gemma, and she was howling in frustration and anger. “Who was the brainless twat that left the goddamned toilet seat up?”

Hermione and Draco skidded into the bathroom, one behind the other, in time to switch on the light, only to find Gemma struggling to her feet from a sitting position deep in the toilet bowl. Water ran from her bum in streams down both legs, puddling on the floor. She glared at the two of them, fixing her gaze on Draco. He shrugged, his mouth twitching. “Wasn’t me.”

In the meanwhile, Hermione had turned away, her hand over her mouth, her face reddening with the effort to hold back her giggles. Just then, Danny poked his head around the doorway and immediately began to back away again when he spotted the murderous expression on his girlfriend’s face.

“Sorry, sorry!” he sputtered, gesturing haplessly as he banged backwards into the opposite wall. “It was an accident, Gem! I swear!”

Gemma bore down on him, eyes blazing, her knickers and the bottom four inches of her sleep shirt drenched and dripping.

“I am absolutely SOAKED! Not to mention mortified! Not to mention that this is absolutely disgusting! I cannot BELIEVE I fell into the toilet! In the DARK!! EW!!”

In her anger, Gemma was truly formidable. Danny stood flattened against the wall, a distinctly deer-caught-in-the-headlamps expression of stunned horror on his face. Hastily, Hermione moved between them, taking Gemma’s arm.
“Come on, Gem,” she coaxed, pulling her back into the bathroom. “Let’s get you into the shower, yeah? It was just an accident. Men,” she sighed dramatically. “Right? I mean, really. They just don’t think sometimes, do they!”

She shot a meaningful look at Draco and tilted her head as if to say, *Get him out of here until she calms down!*

Draco nodded tersely and gave Danny a small shove. The two of them moved away from the bathroom and down the hall towards Danny and Gemma’s room. It wasn’t until they were safely behind closed doors that the sniggers started.

“ Fucking hell, Draco, did you see the look on her face? I thought I was a dead man this time for sure!” Sagging against the door, Danny dissolved into helpless laughter.

“Kirman, you wanker, d’you mean to tell me this isn’t the first time?” Draco exclaimed.

“Nope,” Danny admitted, grinning sheepishly. “It’s got to be the third, at least. Last time was when I was staying at her parents’ house. Oh, *God…*” Laughter overtook him again, and he flopped down on the bed.

Snorting, Draco pulled the desk chair out and straddled it backwards, chin resting on top of the chair back. He sighed, unable to wipe the grin off his face.

“Fuckwit! You deserve whatever you get, then!”

“Reckon so. But I’ll make it up to her. I always do. You know,” Danny mused philosophically, stretching out on the bed, his hands behind his head, “it’s almost worth pissing her off.” He winked and then closed his eyes, an incorrigible grin on his face.

“Right, I’ll leave you to it, then.” Hoisting himself out of the chair, Draco returned to his own bed, where he burrowed beneath the covers and waited for his bedmate to return.

When she did, twenty minutes later, he was snoring softly, his back to her side of the bed. She slipped in quietly, curling herself around him, her hand resting at his waist. A moment later, just as she was drifting off, she felt his hand covering hers and moving it down, down inside his pyjama trousers… until it met with the happy surprise of his cock, awake and very ready to play.

“Hi,” she whispered, nuzzling her nose into the soft hair at the nape of his neck. “Still up, I see.”

“Only just. Ha ha, very funny,” he added with a drowsy chuckle, drawing her hand over his erection and holding it there. “I do believe,” he murmured, “you owe me from this morning, when we were so rudely interrupted.”

“Oh, yes? I thought I’d discharged that debt a bit earlier tonight.” Her warm breath tickled the bare skin of his back as she rubbed her cheek against the smooth flesh, leaving a sprinkling of light kisses in its wake.

“Yes, well…” His voice was low and lazy, and she could hear amusement in it—and something else as well. He’d begun languidly stroking his shaft a few minutes earlier, but now he increased the pace, lacing their fingers together, his cock swelling and becoming almost painfully turgid as his desire grew. “It was a *very* good start, love, but I would venture to say… the job’s not *quite* done yet.”

She said nothing, instead giving him a quick, firm, little squeeze. His soft, answering moan made her
12 September  
Tuesday morning

There were two shirts, one a t-shirt and the other his nice, mint-green pullover. At least she thought it was that one. She couldn’t really tell, encased as it was in a grey dust ball. A pair of underpants turned up, rolled in a ball and tossed on the floor far under the desk. No telling how long that had been there. Hermione wrinkled her nose in distaste. Getting down on her hands and knees, she peered under the bed, where she discovered several rather dodgy-looking small items, clearly clothing of some sort but completely concealed within dust bunnies. She sneezed twice before reaching in with a gingerly hand and pulling them out. They joined the growing, rather forlorn pile of clothing cast off after the wearing and then forgotten. It was her turn to do their laundry, and once again, she found herself on a hunt for articles of Draco’s clothing that had found their way into the mysterious far reaches of their bedroom.

“I’m not your mother, you know, Malfoy!” she muttered to herself as she moved about the room, scooping up whatever errant item of clothing she spotted and throwing it onto a pile in the middle of the floor. “Hah! What am I saying? It’s not as if she picks up his dirty clothes! Well, I’m not a house-elf either! Ugh, really! Twenty years old and still throwing his clothes on the floor like a little kid! Honestly!”

She’d thought that once they moved in together, he’d leave this sloppy habit behind. She really had done. The fact that he was inclined towards a lazy disregard for his own things had been something of a shock, at first. Well, not everything, of course. His books and his wand and other treasured personal possessions were very well cared for indeed, she’d noticed. But boring stuff like clothing was beneath the radar of his concern. He’d always had somebody to pick up after him and make sure that he would continue to look his impeccable best, and when it came time to live on his own at college, he’d preferred to ignore the socks and underwear that piled up beneath the bed and in the corners, going through the clean stuff still in his drawers until he had nothing left to put on, and then a mammoth load of laundry was reluctantly done.

It’s not exactly rocket science, Hermione continued to fume silently. It doesn’t get done by itself, and it doesn’t get done when it’s shoved under a chair either!

Wait! Why am I doing this, she wondered suddenly, and stopped dead in her tracks, a sock—either meant to be green or slightly mouldy by now, she wasn’t certain—dangling from her hand. Setting her mouth in a determined line, she tossed the sock onto the pile and marched out of the bedroom. 

Five minutes later, she was back, sighing in defeat-- because she knew that constitutionally, she just could not continue to share the room and yet ignore his mess. The very fact of it, not to mention the sight of it when she stumbled on one of Draco’s little surprises unexpectedly, just bothered her too much. She would simply have to go about solving this problem in another way.

When Draco arrived home from Blackwell’s that evening, he noticed two things in the dimly lit
bedroom: one, that it had been tidied. There was a fresh, faintly lemony scent in the air. *Nice.* He nodded with approval. Second, there was a small mountain of clothing buttressing one of the walls. Hmm. He moved closer, peering down at the pile and then wrinkling his nose slightly. *Ah.* The mountain in question belonged to him.

Backing away, he stripped off his t-shirt, khakis and boxers, and tossed them onto the pile. Might as well do. It was all dirty anyway. Where better for his sweaty clothes to go? Grinning contentedly, he pulled on a pair of cut-offs and strolled in the direction of the bathroom, intent on a shower.

“Honey, I’m home!” he called out, cracking himself up, and, still laughing, shut the bathroom door behind him.

*#

The next morning, Hermione was up and gone by the time Draco stirred. She had an early day at Blackwell’s and wouldn’t be home till mid-afternoon. Reaching over his head, he stretched, sighing happily. A whole morning off. His own hours at the bookshop wouldn’t begin until two.

Sitting up, he scratched his bare belly absently, and then trundled over to the window. A pair of squirrels chased each other in a frantic scuffle up and down the boughs of the nearby tree, their clawed feet making scratching, scrabbling sounds as they ran. Beyond the trees, their garden was a riot of colour and vitality, its growth explosive because of the recent rain. Smiling, he turned away and wandered to the chest of drawers to find something to wear.

The note stood squarely in the centre of the chest. Hermione had made it from a piece of construction paper and written in her neat script with a purple marker.

“All your clothes need washing. *(Please put your dirty clothes in the hamper. Thank you.)* Love, H.”

There was an arrow beneath the words which drew his eye to the wall on his right. There was the pile of clothing, just as he’d left it the night before. But now there was a sign on blue construction paper Cellotaped to the wall above the mound. An arrow drawn in red marker pointed straight down to the offending clothes.

**PLEASE PUT US IN THE HAMPER, NOT ON THE FLOOR.**

One eyebrow arched ever so slightly and then he broke into a grin. *Very creative, Granger.* Moving towards the dirty clothing that waited for him, he bent to gather it up. Just then, the phone rang, and both the clothing and his resolve were left to languish on the floor.

*#

14 September
Thursday

“Draco?” Hermione’s voice was sweet. “What are you doing today?”

They were at the kitchen table enjoying a late breakfast together, neither of them having to work that day. She had not said a single word about the clothes, which, to Draco’s embarrassment, still sat in the same spot on the bedroom floor. Once again, he’d forgotten about them, probably, he reasoned, because he’d grown so used to seeing them there. They had become virtually invisible. Well, to him anyway. Not to Hermione, he would be willing to wager, despite her lack of comment. Just now, he really hoped that they could enjoy their meal without his dirty socks coming into the conversation.

“Me?”

“Mmm. I was just wondering. Because I thought maybe I’d go out with Gemma for a bit—you know, lunch and then the Ashmolean. It’s been ages.”

The silence that followed was positively pregnant with the words that as yet remained unspoken on his part. Me? Naturally, I plan to hang out here all day and do laundry. Spiffing.

“Oh, I dunno,” he replied casually, avoiding her gaze. “Danny said something about going running and then for a swim at the sports complex. Might tag along. Fancy meeting up for dinner later?”

Silently, he congratulated himself. What woman could resist being taken to dinner? He could always do the laundry later. It was just too nice a day.

*

17 September
Sunday

Four more signs had joined their compatriots by the time Draco awakened to the veritable racket the birds had set up in the trees outside their bedroom window. Opening one eye blearily, he squinted at the bedside clock. Half seven.

Oh, this was ridiculously early for a Sunday morning. It was Sunday, he was fairly certain, despite the woolly-headed sensation that he was swimming up out of a fog. The evening before, whilst watching a televised struggle to the death between the Huddersfield Giants and the Catalans Dragons, he and Danny had consumed a rather sizeable quantity of beer. Danny’s explanations of the finer points of rugby had gradually lost themselves in the pleasant alcoholic haze that settled over them, and both gave up, finally, happily sinking deeper.

Despite the headache that had begun to pulse between his eyes, he became aware, gradually, that he was alone in the bed. Casting an arm out, he slid his hand along the smooth bottom sheet as far as he could reach, and came up empty.

Bugger.
He hoisted himself up on one elbow and peered around the room. Nope, she wasn’t anywhere in sight, to the extent that he could trust his sight at the moment. Groaning, he was about to flop back into a prone position when something caught his eye. Several somethings, in fact. Despite the protests of his poor throbbing head, he dragged himself out of bed to investigate.

The first new sign was done on hot-pink construction paper and was in two parts, taped together. It was affixed to the wall alongside the one that asked politely for laundry to be placed where it belonged. This one was far more blunt.

The message was written in huge, black letters, and its meaning was clear, even in Draco’s post-Rugby-blowout haze:

**DON’T LEAVE US HERE**

Draco groaned. Another of Granger’s signs.

As with the original sign, a long arrow pointed its wordless accusation straight down to the ignominious pile of clothing-- now larger by another pair of socks and a shirt courtesy of the night before. He vaguely recalled thinking, at the time, that the pile was already well established. Logic had dictated that newly dirty items should simply be added to the existing collection.

A second sign was posted alongside the first. It consisted of a single word written in tomato red:

**PLEASE!**

It was all too much for such an ungodly hour. Draco gave up and crawled back into bed. He found the third sign a bit later, when he went to use the loo. Taped above the hamper, the pale blue sign relayed its terse message in large, black letters, with the obligatory arrow:

**HAMPER**

Draco tried to ignore the message, but it might as well have been in flashing neon. He did his business as quickly as he could, washed his hands, and then turned to dry them on the towel, only to find that once again, he was face to face with the reminder of his slothful, slovenly ways.

Hurriedly exiting the bathroom, he went in search of Hermione and discovered her sitting primly on the sofa, legs tucked beneath her, reading a book. Her gaze flickered up in his direction for a moment and then dropped back to the page she’d been reading.

And then he saw the final sign. It was taped to the wall above her head. The message was straightforward and impossible to mistake:
ON STRIKE

Oh, now this really was too much. Just barely stifling the urge to roll his eyes in exasperation, Draco dropped onto the adjacent sofa and waited for Hermione to take notice of him again.

And waited.

Finally, he cleared his throat.

“Bloody hell, Granger, this isn’t like you,” he began tentatively, testing the waters. “You’re always so--”

“Flexible? Easy-going?” Hermione looked him straight in the eye then. “Forgiving?”

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but she cut him off. “Oh, I’m all of those things. I can be very forgiving. And I shall be. When I have a reason to be. In the meantime, if you’ll excuse me, I’m in the middle of a very important passage.”

She turned her attention back to the book in her hands, studiously ignoring Draco, who found himself mentally flapping about like a fish out of water, completely at a loss for words.

“But… but…” he finally managed to splutter, when he’d found his tongue and his wits.

“Sod it all, Hermione, what does ‘on strike’ mean, exactly?”

She slanted a look at him, and a small, enigmatic smile quirked the corners of her mouth.

“Exactly… what you think it means.”

A heartbeat later, he was still staring at her in the attempt to process the full ramifications of that statement. She made no further attempt to elaborate, however, and after a moment of being utterly ignored, he got up and wandered into the kitchen to find some breakfast.

Danny was sitting at the table with a steaming mug of coffee and some buttered toast.

“And any more of that?” Draco mumbled, running a distracted hand through his hair and leaving it standing in unruly tufts.

“Yeah, half a pot still,” Danny replied, jerking his head towards the coffee maker and then pushing the plate of toast in Draco’s general direction. He took another sip and then grinned maliciously. “‘Hamper’? What’s that all about, anyway?”

Draco had finished pouring out a full cup of the fragrant brew for himself and now he slumped down into a chair beside Danny. “Oh, you saw that, did you? Yeah…”

“So? What gives?” Danny was intrigued. “Not sure what to call the big wicker thingy in the loo?” And then the light of understanding dawned in his eyes, and he snickered. “Oh, I see. She’s finally twigged to the fact that you’re an utter pig, yeah?”

“Oh, she knew that already, I reckon.” Draco gave a grim laugh, absently scratching at a small stain on the side of the coffee mug before picking it up to take a sip, and then letting out a surprised yelp. “Fuck, that’s hot!”

He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth and then continued morosely. “Yeah, well, s’pose I’ve been a bit of a tosser, letting her pick up after me. Wasn’t fair, really.”
Danny leaned back in the chair and regarded Draco thoughtfully. “What happened?”

“She left me a note a few days ago. There was a sign on the wall too, right above a pile of my dirty shit that she’d found under the bed and whatever. It was funny, really. Sort of cute. Asked me to pick up my stuff and put it in the--”

“Hamper, yeah.” Danny grinned. “And?”

“And… well… I was going to, honestly, but… I dunno, I forgot. Or no, that’s not true, really. The truth is, I just wasn’t bothered. So she started putting up more signs.” He rolled his eyes, sighing heavily, his mug meeting the table with a clink. “So like her! Shit, I’m not five years old! I don’t need…”

“Sure about that, mate?” Danny asked quietly.

Draco glanced at him warily, shoulders tensed, and then he sighed again, defeated. “Okay, yeah… I know. Reckon I pushed her to it.” He gave Danny a rueful grin. “And now… well, go have a look at the latest one.” He put his finger to his lips and tilted his head in the direction of the sitting room.

Curious, Danny rose from the table quietly, pushing the connecting door open a crack so he could take a peek. He turned back, chuckling and shaking his head.

“You’ve had it, Malfoy. She means business now.”

Indeed. She had him by the balls and he knew it. And the damnable thing was, she was totally in the right. He knew that as well.

Only one thing to do. Or maybe…

A slow, secret smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and he sat back to nurse his coffee, a faraway look in his eyes.

Oh yes. He had a plan.

* *

He’d sent Paladin back to the Manor a couple of weeks earlier, in anticipation of their flatmates’ return, so there was no way to give his parents any advance warning of his imminent arrival. Draco pondered this as he loaded his freshly washed clothing into the dryer. He hoped his mother would be there at least. She was the one he really needed to see.

Right. Get this lot sorted. That should take no more than an hour at most. He checked the time. It was past one. Make some excuse to Hermione about having to go out… Apparate home… and then, if all worked out the way he hoped it would, he could move on to Phase Two. It would be perfect. He felt very nearly gleeful as he dropped the last, damp sock into the dryer, shutting the door with a decisive bang and then turning around, arms folded over his chest in obvious satisfaction.

“Oi!” Danny’s voice was a startling intrusion into the schemes that were unfolding pleasantly in Draco’s head. “What are you looking so pleased with yourself about?”

“Nothing…” Draco paused dramatically, and then grinned. “Except… I think I am about to redeem
myself in a rather spectacular fashion, if all goes according to plan.”

“Malfoy, you devil.” Danny shook his head in admiration. “Trust you to find a way to come out of the shite smelling like a fucking rose!”

Draco’s smile was complacent. “Learn from the master, my son,” he replied serenely. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, I have things to do.”

He found Hermione in the garden, pulling weeds. Her back was to him as he approached, a floppy straw hat partially obscuring her vision in all directions.

“Ahem.”

She turned slightly, peering up at him from under the brim of the hat. Rather a silly hat, he thought. Endearing though.

“Yes? Did you want something?” she asked politely. “Because I’m rather busy at the moment.”

“No, no… well, that is to say… yes, actually. Just wanted to tell you that I’m going out for a bit. Got an errand to run. Won’t be long.”

He began backing away, before she had a chance to ask him where he was off to, or if he could pick up something at the shops or whatever else might pop into her head.

Startled and then amused—he really did look rather funny! What in Merlin’s name could be going on to make him look so edgy?-- Hermione nodded. “All right. See you later then.” She turned back to her weeding, a smile curling the corners of her mouth ever so slightly.

Good! He’d made it back to the house before she could question him further. Draco felt momentarily weak with relief, and then he took off for Bellewether Crescent, the only safe Apparition point now that Gemma and Danny were back.

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The stately, old house was quiet, drowsing in the afternoon sunshine that streamed in through the tall windows. Draco closed the massive double doors of the yellow drawing room behind him as he left, still unsure of his parents’ whereabouts.

Bloody place seemed huge all of a sudden. The impression struck him forcibly, and he nearly laughed out loud at the realisation. His cosy portion of the house in Iffley Road already felt so much like home that the house in which he’d grown up had begun to seem like someplace perfectly beautiful to visit, but distant somehow-- not somewhere in which to stay very long.

He moved down the wide corridor off the entrance hall, poking his head into the blue drawing room next and then into his father’s study. Nobody there either. Well, after all, he reasoned, it was a Sunday afternoon and chances were that his mother had made plans on such a glorious day. He wished suddenly that there had been some way of contacting them. He needed at least one of them to be there or else his wonderful plan would fall apart. It was with some surprise that he spotted both his parents through the French doors in the dining room. They were strolling arm in arm in the Lady Garden, surrounded by lush beds of flowers that sang with vibrant colour and fragrance, and tall, perfectly sculpted trees.
Opening the doors, he stepped out onto the terrace and watched them a moment longer before making his presence known. And then he called out, waving.

Both his parents snapped their heads around in surprise, and then Narcissa gave her husband’s arm a small, excited poke.

“Oh my stars, Lucius, look! It’s Draco! What on earth…” she exclaimed, pulling her arm out of his and hurrying towards the terrace that overlooked the garden. Lucius watched her go for a moment and then followed, his own momentary surprise resolving quickly into an expression that was typically circumspect and unreadable.

“Hello, Mother,” Draco chuckled. “Sorry if I startled you!”

“We’ll join you in just a moment, darling. Wait for us in the blue drawing room,” she called over her shoulder, as she hurried towards the ground-floor garden entrance.

Draco sighed, smiling, and turned to do as she’d asked. The drawing room was cool and tranquil in the soft afternoon light that filtered through the voile curtains. Sinking down into the voluminous cushions of the sofa, he waited, listening to the soft, regular tick of the mantel clock. Tiny dust motes danced in the pale afternoon sunshine. He leaned back against the soft pillows and closed his eyes. So comfortable and quiet. He felt himself drifting off…

“Draco, darling! What a wonderful surprise! What brings you home so unexpectedly?” Narcissa walked into the drawing room with a briskness to her step, her arms open. And then suddenly a frisson of worry crossed her brow. “Is everything all right? Nothing is the matter, is it?”

Draco’s eyes snapped open and he started up, opening his mouth to reply, when his father’s voice broke in.

“Draco. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

It was the same cool, slightly sardonic tone he’d heard all his life. Except… there seemed to be a certain light in his father’s eyes, a genuine curiosity, that was new and unexpected. As if he really were interested for once.

He stood, accepting his father’s brief handshake and taking his mother’s two hands in his own before allowing her to enfold him in a quick, firm hug.

“So. Sit down, dear. I’ll call for tea. You must be hungry.” Narcissa turned her head slightly.

“Missy!”

Almost instantly, the tiny, ancient house-elf appeared, dropping a respectful curtsey before her mistress and master, and then turning to Draco.

“Oh, young Master! I is so pleased to see you again!” The smile on her wizened little face caused lines to erupt like ripples in a pond. Draco had been her special charge when he was a baby and throughout his young childhood, and she’d never got over a rather proprietary, maternal feeling about him.

“Hello, Missy,” he said, flashing her a fond smile. The special feeling was mutual and had not faded over the years.

“Tea, please, Missy! We’ll have Master Draco’s favourites. Smoked salmon… oh, and those nice goat cheese and watercress sandwiches. Some of that lovely fruit tart, too, if we still have any.”
“Yes, Mistress.” Old Missy dropped another rather creaky curtsey and vanished, reappearing moments later with the tea things. Leaving them on the low table that stood before the twin sofas, she vanished.

Draco popped a small, crustless sandwich into his mouth and then took a gulp of the hot, sweet tea, a necessary social preamble to the conversation. Now that he’d taken partaken at least marginally, he was ready to get straight to the point.

“Mother… Father,” he began. “I’ve come to borrow a Portkey.”

“Oh?” Narcissa stopped, her cup halfway to her lips. “A Portkey? Why is that?”

“Well, you see, it’s Gr—I mean… Hermione’s birthday the day after tomorrow, and I want to surprise her. There’s someplace she’s always wanted to go, and she mentioned it once, though I doubt she thinks I even remember. I… um… well, I’ve been something of an arse lately, and I thought…”

“How better to make it up to her than to whisk her away somewhere. Kill two Bowtruckles with one stone, as it were. Yes?”

Lucius’ voice was calm and measured, his cool gaze laced with just the merest hint of amusement.

Draco regarded his comment with some surprise. He’d hoped to keep this conversation between him and his mother, and had felt somewhat chagrined when circumstances had drawn his father in as well. And yet, the opposition he’d felt sure Lucius would immediately offer had not come.

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact! Exactly. And then I remembered that you have a collection of Portkeys you’ve used over the years in your travels. I wondered if—that is, I hoped—maybe I could borrow one.”

Draco sat leaning a bit forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped together. There was an earnestness in his face that was curiously affecting. Narcissa and Lucius exchanged glances, their expressions unreadable, and then Narcissa directed her attention back to her son.

“I see.” She paused for a moment, studying him carefully. “Have you given this idea sufficient thought, Draco?”

He nodded fervently. “It’s the perfect present.” Laughing slightly to cover his obvious eagerness, he added, “I hope!”

It was quite clear to Narcissa now, beyond any doubt—not that she’d truly had any before—that her son was mad about this girl. She couldn’t remember ever seeing him so doggedly single-minded in his attentions to a young lady before. Together, this young witch and his scholarly pursuits had become the emotional and intellectual centres of his life. They anchored him in a way that was singular, dramatic, and unwavering—and, Narcissa thought to herself, wonderful to see.

She smiled, turning to her husband. He sat in his wing chair, fingertips splayed together, his expression pensive.

“Lucius? What do you think?”

“I think, my dear, that our son will find a means to do this, with or without our help…” He paused as their faces fell. “… and therefore, we may as well give it. I would much prefer that he avoid the sorts of tedious methods of travel that Muggles must endure, would you not?” There was just the faintest smile on his face as he finished, sitting back in his chair and folding his hands together once again.
The sudden tension that had sprung up as he began to speak dissipated just as quickly, leaving Draco surprisingly relaxed under the circumstances.

Lucius pushed himself up out of the chair, his tone suddenly brisk. “Well, let us have a look at those Portkeys, shall we? They are in my study.”

The bathroom was steamy when Draco knocked and then, at the sound of Hermione’s voice, poked his head in. Danny had spirited Gemma away for the day, leaving a clear field for whatever his friend had planned.

“Fancy some company?”

Hermione’s hair was enveloped in fragrant suds that were piled up on her head like whipped cream. She peered around the glass partition at him, pushing a soapy stray curl out of her eyes, and smiled.

Gods, he’d missed that smile, so open and infectious. It had only been a matter of hours, really, since her “on strike” declaration, but it had felt like far longer than that. He barely managed to drop his boxers before she pulled him into the shower alongside her.

“Thank you, Draco.” Her voice was a warm, tickling whisper in his ear.

Her wet skin was deliciously heated and slick as it pressed against his own. He sank the fingers of one hand into her hair as the others kneaded the small of her back. “What for?”

“You know. I saw what you did today.”

“Well, but you did it, though, in the end. And that’s what matters.” Her smile turned faintly naughty as her hand migrated to the nicely defined curve of his bare bum, lingering there in a teasing caress. “Told you I would be forgiving.”

He bent his head, his mouth brushing hers lightly. “So you did. I’m afraid I’ll need lots of forgiveness or I might become horribly insecure.” He laughed softly and pressed his mouth to hers again, tasting her, deepening the kiss into a melting, breathless joining.

“Mmm, I certainly wouldn’t want that,” she whispered when the kiss finally broke, reaching between his legs and then smiling at what she found there. “Hello!”

Dropping to her knees beneath the cascading water, she gave his cock a leisurely swipe with her tongue, and then another.

Draco could feel his legs beginning to tremble. Locking his knees, he put a hand each against the tiled wall and the glass partition, and then abandoned himself to the delightful ministrations of Hermione’s mouth and tongue. Currents of water pulsed over them and ran down the drain in swirling eddies, growing tepid eventually, though they neither noticed nor cared.

In the hallway, Gemma and Danny were passing the bathroom en route to their room after a full day
out. They were looking forward to a cosy evening at home with a rented movie and some take-away Chinese. Before coming upstairs, they’d spotted a curious collection of rather cryptic signs stuffed into the outside rubbish bin. Danny had promised to explain it all to Gemma later. In the meantime, it seemed that all was right with the world once again at number 236 Iffley Road. As a particularly explosive moan erupted from inside the bathroom, they laughed softly and kept walking.

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“Hurry up, Granger! We haven’t got all night, y’know!”

Draco stood before the mirror above the chest of drawers, brushing his hair, the fringe of which insisted on hanging rakishly in front of his eyes. He studied his reflection and smiled his approval. Perfect, he thought, as he surveyed the soft, charcoal crewneck pullover, faded jeans that clung to him like a second skin, and a dove-grey sports jacket. She’ll like this. Just a hint of spicy cologne and he was ready.

Hermione hurried into the bedroom, doing a sort of half-skip, half-hop as she pulled on her ballet flats. Makeup was much better done in the bathroom, she’d discovered, and whilst she was about it, she had decided to dress there as well. The surprise element and all that. She’d recently bought a flirty little dress on sale in a little boutique in the Covered Market, putting it far back in the wardrobe so Draco wouldn’t spot it. She’d wanted to save it for a special occasion. Tonight apparently qualified, judging by Malfoy’s mysterious hints, though she had no idea why. Whatever it was, though, she was happy to go along.

The last several days hadn’t been much fun for her either. It was never easy ignoring Draco Malfoy, no matter what the circumstances. But being quite deliberately cool and detached, merely cordial, forcing herself to dampen or even stifle her naturally effusive responses, was really hard. A part of her had warred with herself over it too, chastising herself for being too hard on him, for being too much of a stickler for a principle, that being a slob wasn’t the worst thing in the world. The other part of her dug in her heels, knowing instinctively that patterns set early are impossible to change later, and she most certainly did not want to set herself up to be his mother or his maid.

Suddenly her reflection popped up behind his in the mirror as she gave her hair a quick, final scrunch to set the waves and small ringlets.

Pressing her lips together to smooth the shiny, flavoured gloss she’d applied, she opened her arms and twirled around, the skirt of the little frock flaring about her slim, tanned thighs. “Ready! How do I look?”

Draco’s answering smile was cocky. “Almost as good as I do, darling.” She giggled, giving his arm a light smack, and he laughed with her. “No, seriously—you look smashing! Positively edible!”

He turned to face her, grasping her about the waist and planting a firm kiss on her mouth. Mmm… tasted like… “Raspberry, right? Very nice!” He licked his lips slowly and grinned, and then took her by the hand. “Come on, then!”

“Where are we going?” Hermione had asked the question half a dozen times at least, and each time, Draco had steadfastly refused to divulge even the smallest detail. Now he merely smiled enigmatically and shook his head.
“Follow me,” was all he would say.

Mario’s was surprisingly busy on this Sunday night. However, when they arrived, there was no wait at all. Moreover, the waiter showed them to a secluded table partly obscured by the glossy fronds of a large potted plant. With a flourish, he lit the candle in the centre of the table, and then nodded in Draco’s direction.

“He didn’t leave us any menus,” Hermione protested, confused. “How are we supposed to--”

“It’s all arranged. I ordered in advance,” Draco replied smoothly, lounging back in his chair and looking absurdly pleased with himself for the second time that day.


Just then, the waiter approached with a basket of fresh, hot breads and a small plate of chilled butter in small, individually wrapped squares. Setting these down, he made a quick trip to the nearby serving station and returned carrying a bottle and a pair of wine glasses.

He poured out two glasses of the wine and set them before Hermione and Draco with a flourish, and then waited, eyeing Draco patiently as he sniffed and then tasted the vintage.

Draco closed his eyes with pleasure at the wonderful bouquet, and then smiled up at the waiter. “Perfect,” he sighed. “Thank you.” The waiter beamed, and turned smartly to attend to their meal.

Meanwhile, Hermione had got a look at the wine bottle, and now she gasped. “Malfoy—Barolo? This is the most expensive wine on the list! It’s--”

“Oh ah ah,” Draco corrected blithely, waggling his finger in the air. “Tonight we are celebrating.”

“I don’t understand,” she insisted. “What’s the occasion? I--”

A raised eyebrow and the patiently amused half-smile that quirked one end of Draco’s mouth stopped her dead.

“Oh! I” she breathed.

“‘Oh’ indeed, my love!” he agreed. “One doesn’t have a twenty-first birthday every day of the
week.”

“But… but,” she sputtered, “today’s not my birthday! It’s—”

“The day after tomorrow. Yes, I know. However,” he continued serenely, “tonight is a sort of preview, if you will.” He raised his glass and touched it to hers. “Happy birthday, Hermione. I love you.”

If anyone had told Hermione Granger when she was thirteen years old that the arrogant, conceited, rather nasty blond boy who’d been a thorn in her side from day one at school—whom she’d slapped quite hard once, in a fit of rage—would one day be toasting her with declarations of love—would, in fact, be the very one with whom she would find herself deeply in love—she’d have laughed herself sick. Yet now, here they were, and all she could do was look at him in wonder before echoing his words.

The arrival of their dinner just then – steaming platters of Tortelloni alla Calabrese, Spaghetti Bolognese, and spinach sautéed in garlic and olive oil—interrupted the moment, and both of them sighed and turned their attention to the food being served so elegantly onto their plates.

The tortelloni, tender little pasta dumplings filled with ricotta and spinach and served in a tomato cream sauce, was magnificent. Not to be outdone, the tender angel hair pasta was crowned with a rich meat sauce and topped by a generous sprinkling of freshly grated parmesan. The Barolo—rich, dry and robust—was the perfect complement to both. The meal was simply sublime.

Finally, Hermione sat back, one hand resting lightly on her belly.

“Phew!” she sighed happily. “I’m stuffed! I don’t think I could eat another thing!”

“Well…” Draco reflected, “I did order tiramisu and cappuccinos. But we can ask for it to be brought a bit later, if you like. Or we could even take it home.”

“Oh, yes, let’s!” And then Hermione’s enthusiasm turned to curiosity as she remembered something. “About my birthday—how come we’re celebrating it today? I meant to ask you that.”

“Well…” Draco began slowly, with a mysterious smile. “As I started to say before, tonight is a preview of sorts.” Digging into the pocket of his jacket, he drew out a narrow, rectangular, festively wrapped box about five inches long, and offered it to her, smiling. “Here. Go on, Granger. Open it.”

In that moment, Hermione knew what it felt like to stop breathing completely. There was a sudden heady confusion that could have been the wine, but she knew it was not. Taking several steadying breaths, she carefully opened the wrapping paper, her fingers trembling slightly as she peeled back the four corners and set the paper on the table. Lifting the cover, she stared at the contents and then looked up sharply at Draco, completely confused.

“What’s this? I don’t understand. A miniature wine bottle?”

She began to lift it out of its silken bed inside the box in order to examine it more closely, but Draco’s hand shot out, stopping her.

“No! Don’t touch it. Not yet, anyway. We’ll be using it on Tuesday.”

“But—but what…?” Hermione began, and then suddenly she understood, and clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh my gosh, Malfoy—it’s a—”

“Clever witch, I knew you’d catch on,” he whispered, leaning in close and grinning wickedly. “Now
guess where to! The clues are right in front of you!”

Hmm. Hermione looked around her at the other diners enjoying their meals. Restaurant. Not much to go on. Italian restaurant. Wait. It couldn’t be…

“Draco… not… Italy??” she gasped.

He nodded, delighted. “Go on! Now figure out where!”

Hermione gazed about her wildly, trying to spot another clue. All she could see were the sort of things one would find in any Italian restaurant: tables, platters of food, bottles of wine, diners busy eating…

She turned back to face Draco, stumped, inadvertently brushing against her napkin and sending it fluttering to the floor. With a softly muttered imprecation, she bent to retrieve it, setting it down on the table in front of her. As she did so, her gaze fell on something she’d failed to notice before. Eyes widening, she looked quickly at the printed wine list standing between the salt and pepper shakers. There it was again, right at the top—the logo of the restaurant, a drawing of the Colosseum. In…

“Merlin! Oh, Draco!” Hermione breathed, eyes huge and her voice a reverent hush. “Rome?”

The rendering of the Colosseum at Mario’s

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This chapter and the next several that take place in Rome were written and first posted at CG some time ago. Strangely enough, right around the same time as the (much) later posting at GE, Tom Felton took his RL girlfriend to Rome as a birthday surprise. So... life does indeed imitate art, it seems!
As always, thanks for consistently wonderful feedback and support to my two wonderful betas and friends, kazfeist and mister_otter. Lunch at the Magic Café is on me!

Disclaimer: Only the plot and original characters are mine. I make no money from this story.

**The Bod**—short for the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

**The Ashmolean**—The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Beaumont Street, Oxford, is the world’s first university museum.

![The Ashmolean](image)

**Marmite**—It’s true, you either love it or hate it. There doesn’t seem to be room for
much in between! American writer Bill Bryson, in his very funny *Notes from a Small Island*, says: "There are certain things that you have to be British, or at least older than me, or possibly both, to appreciate: skiffle music, salt-cellars with a single hole, [and] Marmite (an edible yeast extract with the visual properties of an industrial lubricant)."
Monday afternoon, 18 September

"Trastevere."

Draco had paused in his efforts to close the zip on his rucksack to answer Hermione's question. It lay in the middle of the bed, stubbornly refusing to cooperate. Throwing his arms up in the air in complete exasperation, he flopped down next to the rucksack and continued.

"It's one of the older quarters of Rome, mediaeval actually."

"That's where the Portkey is going to take us?" Hermione stopped her own packing to look at Draco quizzically. "So then... it must be--"

He nodded. "Yep. For centuries. But remember how it was in Glastonbury? Same thing in Trastevere. Hide-in-plain-sight sort of thing. My parents' Portkey will take us straight to a concealed room in one of the little shops there. It's a way-station for wizarding travel into and out of Rome. One of them, anyway. There are others as well."

"Oh!" Hermione grew quiet for a moment as she thought all this through. "Have you been? To Rome, I mean?"

He nodded once again, sitting up now and folding his arms over his bent knees, his expression pensive. "Mmm. When I was a kid, we travelled quite a lot, actually. My father's business took him
all over—still does-- and he brought Mother and me along sometimes. Paris, Rome, Geneva, Amsterdam, Brussels, Barcelona…" He shook his head to dispel the excitement that had flared in Hermione's eyes. "It wasn't like that. At the time, I hated being dragged round that way. I was left on my own a lot, and I was lonely and bored. Though to be fair, my mother did try to amuse me from time to time.

"She took me to museums, places like that, but… well…" Draco paused, grimacing. "To be honest, I was a right little prick a lot of the time. Took it out on her, even though I knew she was trying to please me. So eventually, she stopped trying and left me to sulk. And then the whole thing became a fait accompli. I realise now just how hard she really did try. But you know…" His voice trailed off, and when he spoke again, his voice was low. "She could have stood on her head and it wouldn't have been enough for me. I was just too angry."

And hurt, too, beneath the anger. It must be so hard growing up believing that you just don't matter terribly much, to one of your parents at least, Hermione reflected, and she turned to look at him with eyes that were suddenly over-bright.

"Well," she replied briskly, giving her eyes a quick swipe. "This visit to Rome will be different! We are going to have a fantastic time, I just know it! Oh, Draco!" She bounced with excitement. "I still can't believe we're really going! For three whole days!" Moving swiftly to his side of the bed, she sat down, resting her chin atop his bent knees. "Thank you so much! I… I'm just…"

"I know." He grinned, reaching to lace his fingers through the hair at the back of her head and drawing her closer. "Come here, Birthday Girl. I'm in need of a kiss."

Hermione smiled as she leaned in, brushing her lips against his. It was the very least she could do.

* *

The room was cramped and a bit stuffy as Draco pulled Hermione to her feet from the spot on the bare floor where they'd both landed rather unceremoniously a moment earlier.

"What is this place?" she whispered, reaching behind to brush herself off. Crowded with objects of all sorts, the store room was dimly lit, the occupants of its many shelves covered in protective cloth and looking like slumbering phantoms.

"Polvere di Tempo," he told her, wiping a hand on the back of his jeans and then sliding his wand out of the back pocket. "Lumos!"

A small blaze of light at the tip of his wand illuminated the area immediately around them.

"Much better," he murmured. "Come on." Taking Hermione by the hand, he started off, but she pulled him to a halt.

"Poly-- what did you say this place is called?"

His teeth gleamed in the small sphere of light glowing from his wand tip, as he grinned. "Polvere di Tempo. Means 'Dust of Time.' Owner's a wizard, but he sells all sorts of timepieces, magical and Muggle. You'll see."

Ever so quietly, Draco turned the knob on the door that separated the store room from the rest of the shop. Peering through the inch-wide crack that opened up, the two of them surveyed the small shop that, in this last hour before closing, was nearly empty of customers.

Finally, the last of them, a middle-aged German couple, departed. They were clearly delighted with
their purchase, chattering animatedly as the shop door closed behind them. Silently, Draco and Hermione slipped through.

The shop's owner was nowhere in sight. Peeking over the side of the register, they spotted a balding man with a neatly trimmed white beard, crouching down and straightening several items on a low shelf in the display case. Startled, he looked up, and almost instantly, his face became wreathed in smiles. He scrambled to his feet, thrusting his hand out in welcome.

"Signor Draco! Is that really you? Come stai?"

"Mr. Rodriguez! It's good to see you again!" Draco shook his hand warmly, his own grin wide and delighted. "It's been a long time, hasn't it!"

Adrian Rodriguez-- wizard, Argentinian expat, and master craftsman of arcane and wonderfully eccentric timepieces-- nodded emphatically. "Indeed yes, young sir! You must call me Adrian now that you are a grown man. The last time I saw you, you were only so big…" The hand that he extended hovered at half Draco's height.

Draco chuckled. "Oh, surely I was a bit taller than that! But you're right, it's been ages. I couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen. You have a good memory!"

A sudden mental image of Draco as he'd been when they'd first met at the age of eleven—a pale, slender boy no taller than she—flashed into Hermione's thoughts, and she pictured him here, in this place, inspecting everything with a child's intense curiosity.

"And who is this charming young lady at your side, if I might ask?" Adrian's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Oh! Yes, sorry!" Draco flushed slightly, stepping back and slipping his arm around Hermione's waist, drawing her forward a step. "Signor Adrian Rodriguez, may I present Hermione Granger? Adrian's shop is probably the coolest in Rome, if not the whole world," he added with a grin. "I always loved coming here when I was a kid."

How captivating this magical place must have been to a young, impressionable boy! Smiling fondly at Draco, Hermione held out her hand and Adrian pressed his lips to it with a grand flourish. Surely there was something to be said for the old cliché about Latin men and their hot blood, she mused, blushing, and then took her first really good look around the place.

Remarkably, the interior of the shop looked very like the inside of a tall-masted ship. Everywhere, there were objects created to measure time and distance, none of them mechanical: compasses, sundials, sextants, astrolabes, hourglasses, globes, candles that functioned as clocks, and even kaleidoscopes and funky jewelry made from timepieces.

"See, what's so amazing is, Adrian makes everything himself!" Draco enthused. "I mean, look at this, for instance." He gestured at a curious-looking object.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, studying it with a small, unconscious frown of concentration.

"Horologium Nocturnum," Draco replied. "For reckoning the time at night, using the stars. This thing always fascinated me when I was a kid. And…" Looking around, he dropped his voice to a cautious whisper. "He's even got Time-Turners you won't find anywhere else! He's the source."

"Merlin!" Hermione breathed, her eyes quite round. "Is that really true?"

Adrian inclined his head with a small, modest smile. "Sí. They are my particular passion."
"Oh, but that's fantastic!" Hermione’s eyes widened as she spotted a huge, eighteen-hour hourglass, and then she gave her watch a quick glance and looked back at Adrian. "May we look around just for a minute or two longer? I know it's past closing time."

"Of course, of course!" Adrian's hands flapped like birds' wings as he reassured them of their welcome. "Allow me to give you some caffe, eh? I was just about to make some for myself."

One hour and some very strong espresso later, following an impassioned discourse on the sorry state of affairs in Italian wizarding politics-- apparently even more susceptible to pockets of corruption than the British Ministry of Magic-- Draco and Hermione bade the dapper shop owner and craftsman a good night and wandered out into the street.

The waning sun cast long, late-afternoon shadows on the terracotta, wine, and maize-coloured stucco. Ancient buildings stood, higgledy-piggledy, in narrow, cobbled lanes that meandered and then turned back in on themselves. Ivy like leafy, green spider-webbing wandered over the centuries-old facades, entwining with the vines that trailed gracefully from window boxes bright with late-summer geraniums. Freshly laundered clothes flapped cheerfully from windows framed by tall, louvred shutters.

"Oh…"

Draco turned at the sound of Hermione's voice, her breathy sigh awestruck, very nearly reverent. It was her first real look at the city of Rome, and it came just as the setting sun bathed the world before her in a wash of molten gold. He grinned, giving himself an inward pat on the back for a choice well made. She loved it already. This gift was truly going to be perfect.

"Oh…" she murmured again, "Draco! It's…"

"Enchanting? Picturesque? Incredibly romantic? The very b--" he began before she pressed her palm to his mouth.

"All of the above and more!" she giggled. "And stop looking so bloody pleased with yourself, Malfoy!"

"I can't help it," he responded, his grin unabashedly cocky. "I am rather in awe of my own brilliance at the moment, to be honest."

She swung around to face him, dropping her rucksack and threading her arms securely around his waist. "I suppose you are entitled in the circumstances, aren't you," she murmured, gazing up at him, her hair shot through with strands of pure gold from the halo the sun had created behind her. "Mind it doesn't go to your head, though, or I shall have to teach you your place!"

His answering smile was slow and suggestive as he bent to nuzzle the smooth, lightly perfumed skin of her throat, his voice feather-soft. "That, darling, is one lesson I shall look forward to."

There were several moments of time-stopping, breathtaking little kisses that had Hermione utterly lost, and then he switched gears quite suddenly, breaking away and looking down at her, all business. "Look—are you hungry?"

She nodded fervently, quite keenly aware, abruptly, of just how hollow her stomach felt.

"Because," he went on, "I'm starved. What say we drop our gear off at the hotel and have dinner somewhere?"

"Brilliant." Hermione looped her arm through his, slanting a bright smile up at him as they set off.
"Lead the way!"

The walk along the Via del Moro, as gradually it led them through other small, winding streets, was quick, though Hermione was torn between a desire to linger and stroll in the soft, late-summer evening, and the need to satisfy her growing hunger. Finally, they crossed the busy Viale di Trastevere and found their way to the nearby Via della Luce.

After a few minutes, Draco stopped them and pointed.

"There," he said. "That's it. The Celio." He gave her hand a quick tug. "Come on!"

The Hotel Celio was housed in a grand, late-19th-century house, cream and pale yellow stucco with a pair of cupola-like structures on its roof. Wrought-iron grillwork adorned the front entrance and dressed several of the upper-storey windows, framing small balconies.

Draco recalled the last time he'd been here in this hotel. It was the summer after first year, and his father had had to travel to Rome at the last minute, to close a rather delicate business deal in person. His mother, he remembered, had always harboured a particular fondness for the Eternal City and had jumped at the opportunity to come along; on the other hand, Draco had not had a choice in the matter, once again finding himself trailing resentfully behind his parents. The timing could not have been worse. This weekend was to have been a belated celebration of his twelfth birthday, and now he wouldn't be celebrating it with his friends, after he'd been promised he could.

He'd had the whole thing planned. Several friends from school would come and stay the entire weekend. Blaise had promised to bring a load of cool things he'd bought at Zonko's, and Draco had envisioned the four of them up all night, messing about with stuff from the joke shop and stuffing themselves full of goodies Missy would have prepared especially at Draco's request. But the best bit would have been the flying, which was his passion. He'd asked that they bring their brooms along. Loads of time in the air—racing his friends, impromptu games of Quidditch, showing off for each other—would have made his birthday weekend perfect. That, and Missy's incredible chocolate ganache cake. And then, suddenly, there was no birthday party, no friends coming, nothing but an unexpected trip to stupid, fucking Rome, the last place he wanted to be.

Eventually, knowing there was nothing to be done, he'd consoled himself with the thought that at the very least, he could wheelie several extravagant presents out of his mother, playing upon the endless well of her guilt. There was that marvellous contraption at Signor Rodriguez' shop—he hoped it would still be there after a year, or one like it—and there were some books he'd been wanting, too, and oh!—he'd read about a new Italian racing broom that had recently come out, the Cometa 780X. It was supposed to be incredibly fast and sleek, and rumour had it that the entire Italian Quidditch team had been kitted out with them. He was fairly sure he could work it so that he'd have one in hand, or at the least, on order, by the time they returned to England.

So it was with a certain grim satisfaction that he'd followed his parents into the hotel's lobby, waiting sullenly as his father spoke to the clerk behind the highly polished mahogany desk. A reproduction of a 15th-century fresco, featuring what looked to Draco like a rather disgruntled angel, hung behind the desk. The angel looked as if he didn't want to be there any more than Draco did; the frozen, painted expression mirrored his own with startling clarity.

That memory, nearly a decade old now, resonated sharply, and Draco blinked, shaking his head slightly to clear the unpleasant cobwebs away. The sour-faced angel in the fresco was still there on the wall, but Hermione was here too now, standing before him and smiling expectantly as she waited. And here he was, no longer a boy of twelve, worlds away from the lonely child who was too often left to his own devices and had, of necessity, learned the value of low expectations.
"Is that not correct, Signor? Scusi… Signor?"

"What? Oh—oh, yes," Draco hastened to reply, feeling as if he'd just emerged from a small fog. "Three nights, yes. Sorry." He smiled rather lamely at the desk clerk, who managed an exasperated half-smile in return before setting about filling in the remaining details of their stay.

There was no lift in the hotel, so it was fortunate, Draco reflected, that Hermione had listened to him and packed lightly. The porter swung the two rucksacks over his shoulder and signaled that they should follow.

They made their way up the stairs and down the tiled corridor with its rich, crimson, floral-print wallpaper, stopping at last at the door to their room. There was no number on the door, but instead, the name “Botticelli.” Draco and Hermione exchanged curious glances as the porter turned the key in the lock, pushing the door open ahead of them and beckoning them to enter. Once they were inside, the reason for the room’s name became obvious. Above the bed was a reproduction of a fresco by the 15th-century artist, entitled “Allegoria dell’Abbondanza,” according to the tiny plaque beneath.

Depositing their bags near the bed, the porter retreated to the door, a faint smile on his face, waiting.

"Right, thanks." Draco deposited a wad of notes in the porter's open palm, and then waited until the door closed behind him before muttering, "Now bugger off!" He turned to Hermione, incredulous. "Did you see the way his hand was out? Greedy little sod!" he snorted, flopping down on the generous bed with a deep sigh.

"Well, he's only doing his job, you know," Hermione reasoned, walking to the window and moving the sheer, white curtain aside to have a look at the view. "I mean, that's where he really makes his money, I bet. His salary’s probably pretty low."

"Oh, advocating for hotel employees now, are we? S.P.A.M.?"

Hermione turned to regard him quizzically. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Society for the Promotion and Advancement of Moneygrubbers, naturally."

A giggle. "That's just silly!"

"Quite possibly."

By the time they made it out of their room, it was nearly nine, and “famished” did not even begin to describe how hungry both Hermione and Draco had become. The very same porter offered his own suggestion for where to get simply amazing pizza and even hailed a taxi for them, explaining to the driver in rapid-fire Italian exactly where he was to take them—pronto. Hermione glanced at Draco, an eyebrow suggestively raised.

"Probably angling for another tip," he muttered in response as they settled themselves in the taxi.

"Oh come on!" She rolled her eyes. "Don’t be such a cynic! Anyway, he…"

"Right. I see. How much, Granger?" Draco’s tone was one of exaggerated patience.

"Never mind that! He deserved it!” Hermione said, sticking her chin out resolutely, and then lacing
her fingers through his and pulling his hand into her lap. She slanted a sly smile up at him. “It wasn’t just for the taxi, anyway.”

“No?” This was getting interesting. He glanced at her, a small thrill of excitement coursing through him as she began idly tracing patterns from his hand up the inside of his arm. “What else, then?”

“Oh… things…” Hermione replied lightly, lifting his hand to her lips and pressing a kiss to his palm. “Nice things. I promise.”

Draco chuckled softly. “Whose birthday is it, anyway?”

Hermione glanced at her watch and then grinned smugly. “Mine, in about three hours. Ah ah,” she teased, shaking her head as he opened his mouth to question her further. “Patience, Malfoy.”

Before too long, the taxi had deposited them in the Vicolo del Bologna, in front of a tiny pizzeria called Dar Poeta.

Small as it was, it offered a few tables outdoors under wide, canvas umbrellas, clusters of tea lights on each table like tiny, fiery stars. Happily, there was one that had recently been vacated, and they made themselves comfortable there to enjoy the people-watching show of after-dark Trastevere as they ate.

* The night air was comfortably cool with just a light breeze as they strolled in the direction of the Ponte Šisto, a narrow footbridge that spanned the Tiber not far from where they’d just eaten. Comfortably full, the gooey, garlicky pizza and very nice house red a satisfying memory, they walked arm in arm to the centre of the bridge and stood quietly for several minutes, looking out over the river.

“This is heavenly,” Hermione murmured. “I can’t believe we’re really here.”

Draco turned his head to look at her. A freshet of cool air ruffled her hair, blowing a few stray curls about her face. The light of the streetlamps cast a golden glow over her skin, and a dreamy half-smile played about her lips as she gazed at the dark water and at people wandering the banks of the river. She was enchanting.

It was so typically Hermione to find genuine pleasure in the smallest, simplest things, instead of expecting value according to the amount of money spent. Even after nearly a year together, such an idea was still a bit foreign to him, but whereas once, he’d have found it naïve and pointless, now it seemed refreshing. Moreover, he’d been learning to recognise those simple pleasures and then take them for himself when he found them. It had been one of her greatest gifts to him, though he’d never articulated it.

Finding himself unaccountably moved all of a sudden, he swallowed and gave her a crooked little smile, squeezing her hand. “Only the beginning, love. We’ve better than two whole days ahead of us.”

Hermione turned to him with a brilliant smile. “I know. It’s fantastic. This is the best birthday present I’ve ever had, you know. Th--”

Swiftly, he leaned in and silenced her with a kiss. “No more thanks necessary. At least…” His eyes glinted dangerously. “Not in words.”
“Whatever can you mean?” Hermione demurred, wide-eyed, and then giggled. “Come on, let’s walk a bit more! I’m positively stuffed!”

Tuesday, 19 September

Early-morning sunshine filtered in through the gauzy white curtains. They lifted gently in the fresh breeze that signalled a cool, bright day.

Voices echoed from the street beneath their window and there was the rumble of an occasional car passing. Somewhere a dog was barking in short, staccato yelps.

The two figures buried beneath the duvet stirred slightly, and they turned towards each other even as the vestiges of sleep still clung to them, slipping comfortably back into half-dreams in each other’s arms.

Finally, a near-whisper: “Hermione?”

Yawning sleepily: “Mmmm…?”

“‘Morning, Birthday Girl…”

A luxuriant sigh and a stretch and then she burrowed back down into his warmth. “‘Morning…” A moment’s pause and then an embarrassed little laugh. “Oh my gosh, that’s right… I nearly forgot!”

Snuggling closer, she nuzzled the base of his throat and his upper chest, leaving small, tender kisses everywhere. He sighed happily and wound his arms around her, relishing the feel of her warm mouth on his skin, and then the moist tip of her tongue as it trailed over his right nipple.

She slid lower then, kissing the smooth, taut flesh of his belly, circling his navel with her tongue and then slipping it in. An answering heat had begun to course through him, and just as he was quite pleasantly anticipating where her mouth would travel next, there was a soft knock on the door, and then another, this time a bit louder.

Twin groans rose, muffled, from under the duvet and then, Draco’s head popped out. He regarded the door through eyes slitted open against the light. Maybe whoever it was would just go away.

No such luck.

At the third knock, he heaved himself out of bed, swearing softly, and grabbed his jeans, pulling them on haphazardly and yanking up the zip as he opened the door.

The porter, Pietro, stood placidly before him, a large tray in hand. On it were a small vase of fresh-cut wildflowers and assorted breakfast things: two small glasses of orange juice, bowls of creamy, fruited yoghurt, a plate of assorted cheeses, croissants that were flaky and tender and still warm from the oven, pots of sweet butter and strawberry jam, a small bowl of purple grapes and chunks of melon, a dainty, elegant silver pot filled with rich hot chocolate, and two china cups and saucers.

“Buon giorno, Signor. It is a lovely morning. Here is your breakfast. I hope you and the signorina will enjoy it.”

Smiling deferentially, Pietro set the tray down on the table by the window. He was careful to avert his gaze from the bed, where Hermione still lay buried under the covers, only the top of her head and a pair of large, brown eyes visible. Then he backed discreetly towards the door.
Draco watched him go without making a move. When the door had finally shut, he turned in some small triumph towards Hermione, who was now sitting up, hugging her knees to her chest, brows drawn down in mock reproach.

“Very nice. You really should have given him a little something, you know,” she said, her mouth twitching.

“Sod it all, Hermione, the little wanker’s got his hand out every time I turn round! Next thing you know, he’ll be waiting for me in the loo with a wad of toilet paper in one hand and the other hand out, whilst I--”

“Enough!” Hermione protested, laughing, her cheeks pink. “Really did not need that image first thing in the morning!”

“Me either,” Draco muttered darkly. “Though frankly, I wouldn’t put it past him!” His stomach erupted in a hungry rumble, and he gave it an embarrassed pat. “Well, let’s eat. This looks great.”

Over their meal, they formulated their plans for the day. Hermione spent half of breakfast with her nose buried in brochures and the guidebook thoughtfully provided by the hotel, and had discovered a self-guided, literary walking tour of the city that had her bubbling with excitement as she rattled off the names of famous writers who’d lived in Rome at one time or another. In addition, both of them were quite keen to explore Rome’s antiquities, starting with the Colosseum.

“Ooh, what shall we do first?” Her smile was as infectious and gleeful as a little girl’s as she turned the pages of the guidebook, poring over its colourful photographs.

“Well,” Draco replied, taking a last sip of the delicious cocoa and setting the cup back in its saucer with a clink. “It’s your day, so I think you should choose. Whatever you want.”

Hermione sat back and regarded Draco thoughtfully for all of about ten seconds. Then, she jumped up and practically leapt into his lap, nearly knocking over his cup and saucer in the process, throwing her arms around his neck and peppering his face with kisses.

“Oi! Can’t breathe!” he sputtered, laughing. “Think I’d rather keep my windpipe inside my throat, if you don’t mind!”

“Draco Malfoy,” Hermione said, looking very serious all of a sudden as she gazed into his clear, grey eyes. “This… is amazing. You are amazing.”

“Am I?” he drawled, quirking a mischievous grin and shrugging. “Reckon I could be… persuaded.”

Hermione’s gaze softened, her voice dropping to a seductive near-whisper.

“Oh, I intend to make sure you’re fully persuaded, Malfoy. In fact, here is a little something in advance.” She leaned in and softly brushed her lips over his once, twice. “Consider it a preview.”

“Look, Granger,” he said smoothly, pulling her closer so that she sat squarely on his cock, already stiffening and demanding attention. “I’ve an idea. Let’s forget the preview and get to the main attraction straightaway, instead of later. Brilliant way to spend the morning. The Colosseum’s been around for two thousand years. It isn’t going anywhere. What do you say?” Before she had a chance to reply, he caught her mouth in a lingering, soulful kiss, hoping it would do the rest of the talking for him.

Alas, no.
“Tempting…” Hermione sighed, pushing away from him with some genuine regret. “But… so much to do and so little time!”

She hopped off his lap before he could stop her, and disappeared into the bathroom. He could hear the water running, and he heaved a sorry sigh before rising from the chair to finish dressing.

*Shit, I must be losing my touch.*

With a rueful grin, he pulled a blue t-shirt over his head and ran a hand through his hair.

A few moments later, Hermione emerged from the bathroom, dressed and ready to go. As she passed him, a fresh vanilla scent wafted like a small cloud around his head, and he breathed it in greedily. Turning back as she slung her bag over one shoulder, she smiled and blew him a flirty little kiss.

“Ready?” she asked innocently, opening the door.

“No… well, yeah, I suppose. You’re a cruel woman, you know that?” he muttered, glancing down to be sure that the evidence of his desire to stay in bed had gone down sufficiently. *Little tease. You owe me, Granger.*

A peal of laughter floated back into the room from the corridor just outside the door.

*It was a short walk to the Ponte Palatino and then across the river to the long, open stretch of grass that one encountered on the other side of the bridge, just before the Colosseum. Known in ancient times as the Circus Maximus, it had once been the site of public games and entertainments on a grand scale, such as chariot racing. Now a park, it was dotted with people enjoying the lovely weather.*

Hermione and Draco traversed the open green in thoughtful silence. It was so quiet now, so apparently unremarkable, and yet, one might almost imagine the sounds of horses’ hooves pounding the paved tracks, whips cracking over their flanks, the shouts of the drivers and the screams of the spectators rising full-throated into the air as the chariots went thundering to the race’s end.

Before long, the Colosseum stood before them, towering above them like a two thousand-year-old spectre of stone, half fallen away but still proud and aware of its power. They entered along with a throng of others, making their way inside to gaze, awestruck, at the sheer size of this true marvel of early architecture.

“Did you know it was built to seat 75,000 people?” Hermione said, reading from the pocket guidebook she’d pulled out of her satchel.

Draco nodded slowly. Somebody bumped into him from behind, but he scarcely noticed. As he stared down from the height of the stands, he began to perspire lightly.

By the time they had descended the steps and were walking out into the street, he felt curiously detached, almost light-headed.

“…absolutely *barbaric!* It just makes me so *angry!* I mean, *think* about it—how completely sick is it that people got their kicks from the pain and suffering of others? That they could actually build a place just so they could come and watch other people—and animals!—*suffer* and then *die!* For *entertainment!* That’s just… it’s just…”

“Inhuman,” Draco said dully. “I know.” His eyes were slightly glazed as he stared out at the street before him, filled with tourists in bright clothing who were milling about and snapping pictures.
“What sort of mentality would allow for such monstrous cruelty, I wonder?” There was a leaden, self-deprecatory irony in his voice that made Hermione turn and stare at him.

And then she was caught between the truth of her own words and a sudden, horrified awareness of the way they must have resonated with him. She hadn’t thought. But of course, he knew. He’d seen it all for himself.

Swiftly, she clutched his arm, slipping her hand into his and squeezing it tightly. “Oh, Draco, I’m so sorry. Please forgive me!”

“What is there to forgive? What you said is true, all of it. If anybody understands it, it’s me. It was part of my life for years.”

“But you—”

“Granger. Stop.” There was a weary patience in his voice. “Please. No sugar-coating because you care about me. The root of this mentality we’re talking about is the ability to enjoy making somebody else suffer, even on the smallest scale. You know better than anybody what a bastard I could be!”

She looked away, her throat closing, and nodded as she struggled for composure. Swallowing hard, she turned back again.

“Yes. Yes, you were. You were really horrid, and not only to me.” She paused, the unremitting harshness of her own words catching her off-guard.

The surprise was not only hers. Draco had not expected such ready, naked agreement, even though he fully believed what he had said a moment before. It was somewhat disconcerting. And along with that, something else pushed its way into his thoughts-- the one thing he hadn’t had the courage to confront in the past eleven months with Hermione.

“Look, Hermione… I…” Words seemed to fail him suddenly, his mouth dry as sawdust with the fear of what her response might be if he plucked up the courage, finally, to frame the one question he’d avoided asking for months.

“I wasn’t done, Draco. Listen to me. I was about to say that although you were really awful, that wasn’t all there was to you. I know that now, from everything you’ve told me. You know,” she mused, “you’ve been given a sort of gift, in a way. You know what it means to be like that and then walk away from it. Do you honestly think I could be with you if I didn’t believe that?”

Draco turned to her with eyes that were so dry, they burned. He blinked several times and then raised a fist to rub at them roughly. When he spoke, his voice was almost inaudible.

“Are you saying… I mean… shit, Hermione…” Say it, you coward. Just fucking say it. The words spilled out of him in a rush. “Forgive me. Please. I’m sorry!”

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…

Two little words, so easily said when they’re not even really meant, child’s play in fact, but like bile in his throat because he’d wanted so badly to say them for so long and was afraid. Afraid of what would happen if he stirred things up, reminded her. Surely she’d walk away, amazed at herself for even considering taking up with him after the way he’d treated her for so long-- the way he’d been, period. He hadn’t dared risk it—what he’d found with her was too precious and unsullied.

And now he had probably thrown it all away. It would shatter in the soil, in this place of so much ancient misery. She would say she forgave him, of course she would, but then she would realise and
she would not be able to stick it. Numbly, he wondered how long it would take.

“Draco… look at me, please.” Gently, she turned his face to hers. “We’re talking about two things here, really, aren’t we: how you were at school when we were kids, and then what you were forced to do later on, when you didn’t want to do it. You were never a Death Eater, not really. I don’t care what’s on your arm!”

Her eyes blazed suddenly. “I know you, Draco Malfoy. You meant it when you told me you came to hate all of it. Oh, Draco…” Holding his face in her hands so that he couldn’t look away, she continued to regard him intently, but now her gaze softened and her smile became wistful. “I forgave you a long time ago. Of course I did. Didn’t you know that?”

“But… but I never said…”

“I knew you would eventually. At least I hoped you would. For yourself as much as for me. I’m so glad you did, finally.”

“I wanted to for so long. But I… I thought…”

“No more thinking. It’s done with now. We’re okay, I promise.” She grabbed his hand and held it tightly. “You can’t get rid of me that easily, you know.” She gave a tremulous little laugh. “You might be sorry about that someday!”

Never. Not in a million years. He shook his head, without words for the moment, his heart suddenly light in a way he hadn’t even known it could be.

“Come on, then,” she said brightly, tugging at him. “We’ve loads more to see!”

They spent the next couple of hours wandering around a Rome that many people never suspect even exists and will never see, far from the sunlit romance of the cobbled streets and piazzas: a city that is virtually underground. It was something else Hermione had uncovered in the hotel guidebook, a tour of several areas long buried for centuries and then discovered and excavated.

They entered through the basilica of San Clemente, going down to its lower levels and back thousands of years as they descended, winding up finally in the Mithraeum, a hidden, silent place devoted to the worship of the Persian god Mithras. It spoke of the dangerous, thrilling secrecy of cult worship amongst the faithful, with its altar and its image of the god killing the sacred bull. Both Hermione and Draco looked about them with a sense of wonder and a clear, innate recognition of the potent magic that permeated every stone.

From there, the tour took them to an underground chamber in the house of the infamous Nero, the Domus Aurea. Here, there was just a small taste of the immeasurable opulence that must have characterised the life of the Imperial family, particularly in Nero’s time.

Finally, and most fascinating of all to Draco because of his intense interest in the tribes of pagan Europe, there was the Tullianum, an ancient prison deep underground, levels below the Mamertine, an underground prison built above it.

For a time, they stood silently in the confining space, stone walls sweating around them, and then Draco spoke quietly.

“He was here. He died here, you know. Vercingetorix.”
Hermione looked at him curiously. “Remind me who that was?”

“He was chieftain of the Arverni in Gaul more than two thousand years ago. He was the one who united the tribes and led them against Caesar. Up to that point, he was the only one to really successfully stand up to Rome, and he very nearly won, too. Huh!” Draco shook his head. “Too bad he didn’t. He was very brave, a brilliant warrior, you know? But in the end, he couldn’t hold it together and he lost. And when he surrendered finally, he did it with honour, on his own, giving up his armour and weapons and laying them at Caesar’s feet. So the story goes, anyway.

“But the really rotten thing,” he continued, “was that instead of treating him with the respect due another leader, Caesar threw Vercingetorix into prison, kept him in this hellish place for years, until finally, he paraded him through the streets of Rome for the final humiliation, and then had him strangled in his cell. Another fine example of their values, yeah? No honour in what Caesar did, none at all. You know, I’ve often wondered what would’ve happened if the tribes of Europe had managed to stop Rome.”

“It’s hard to even imagine that,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “Because so much of our culture has been influenced by the Roman occupation. I mean, think about it—so many place names, so many architectural and engineering advances… they really left their mark on Britain, and the rest of Europe as well, didn’t they.”

“True,” Draco agreed. “Too bad the tribes couldn’t have got it together though. But there was too much in-fighting. Rome just rolled over everyone, crushed all resistance.” He glanced around again and shivered involuntarily. “This place gives me the creeps. Feel like I can’t breathe. Let’s get out of here, yeah?”

Lunch under the wide umbrellas of an outdoor café was a welcome respite from all the walking. Over sandwiches, iced drinks and gelati, they indulged in the most entertaining and cheapest pastime of all: people-watching. Afterwards, refreshed, they headed back to the Forum with its many temple ruins and impressive arches, ending with a hike up the Palatine.

They wandered for a while, gazing at the remains of various buildings that dotted the hill: the Domus Liviae, or house of Livia, notorious wife of the Emperor Augustus, was one. The Temple of Cybele was another. Finally, and most impressively, there was the Flavian Palace, an extensive structure built over the reigns of several emperors, ending with Septimius Severus.

“According to the guidebook, the cave is supposed to have been under Livia’s house,” Hermione murmured, studying the guidebook and then pointing. “You know, the Lupercal-- where the she-wolf nursed Romulus and Remus until the shepherd found them. Do you know the story?”

Draco nodded. Among his other secret Muggle reading forays years before, he’d enjoyed mythology, mostly Norse and Celtic, but Greek and Roman as well. Now, seeing the place where some of those stories originated, he felt a curious sense of elation, and he knew Hermione was feeling it too.

The sun had dropped lower in the sky by the time they made their way down the hill. The day was by no means over, however, not if Draco had anything to say about it.

“Look, what about this,” he told Hermione. “Let’s go back to the hotel and rest for a bit, get cleaned up. There’s someplace very special I want to take you tonight.”

Tired suddenly and picturing the lovely, soft bed in their room and a hot shower, she expelled a
grateful sigh and smiled. “That sounds wonderful!”

She threaded her arm through his and they set off, back towards the Ponte Palatino and beyond, the Via della Luce. Casting a furtive, sidelong glance at her, he smiled to himself.

*Ten, nine, eight, seven…*

“Okay, okay! *Tell* me! Where are you taking me?” Hermione tugged at his arm as she half-skipped along beside him, her eyes dancing with excitement.

“Impressive, Granger. You beat your own record this time, only four seconds!” he chuckled.

“Well?”

“Sorry, not telling! You’ll just have to be patient! You’ll like it, though,” he added enigmatically.

“That’s helpful!” She pulled a frown that lasted all of three seconds. “Someplace posh? Should I get dressed up?”

He bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud at her curiosity, but he couldn’t hide his amusement.

“Wear something smart, yeah.”

It was clear to Hermione that this was all the information she was going to get out of Draco, for the time being at least. She let out a frustrated little huff, and then nodded, resigned to banking her intense curiosity temporarily in favour of the element of surprise. She smiled to herself as they walked. Somehow, she had the feeling she wouldn’t be disappointed.

*

Sinking into the tub full of bubbles, all the aches from hours of trudging from one part of the city to the next began to ease. Hermione sighed with pleasure, disappearing up to her chin and luxuriating in the soothing heat and buoyancy of the water. She closed her eyes and drifted for a while, images of floating endlessly on a tranquil sea passing behind her eyes.

The fingertips that pressed gently into her shoulders, kneading the tired muscles, made her smile.

“That’s lovely,” she murmured, her eyes still closed. “Don’t stop.”

His nimble fingers continued their meandering massage, moving from the tops of her shoulders to her neck just below her hairline, thumbs pressing into the area to either side of her spine as he worked his way down, the other fingertips casting their magic in wider circles around her shoulder blades and then lower, dipping below the water’s surface to massage the lower portion of her back.

“I’d do more, but I can’t reach,” he whispered suggestively, his lips grazing her ear.

“I think we can solve that little problem fairly easily, don’t you?” she replied with a languorous smile, scooting forward a bit and patting the clots of creamy foam.

“Thought you’d never ask.”

He was in the tub behind her almost before she could blink, his clothes tossed haphazardly on the floor. She settled back against him, nestling in the cradle of his arms and legs and resting her head on his warm, wet chest.

“Now this is nice,” she sighed contentedly. “I knew something was missing…”
“Always ready to be of service, milady,” he grinned. “Is there something else I can do for you?”

This was too good an opportunity to pass up. “Wash my hair?” It was one of her pet indulgences, that and having somebody brush out her hair. But she rarely asked, thinking her hair too wild to inflict on anybody else. It was her birthday, though.

“My pleasure,” he said, his voice positively sultry. Hermione caught her breath. Only Draco Malfoy, she decided, could infuse the idea of a simple shampoo with such deliciously lascivious possibilities.

The shampoo, a wonderfully rich blend provided by the hotel, felt cool against her scalp as he poured several capfuls into her wet hair. The massage he’d given her earlier didn’t even touch the one to which he was treating her scalp now, his fingers traversing her head in lazy patterns and then drawing down the length of her hair, pulling it gently away from her head and working up more lather. Then, just when she thought she couldn’t possibly become more relaxed, she felt two fingers on each temple, pressing in gentle circles there.

“I didn’t know you knew about acupressure, Malfoy,” she murmured.

“Acupressure, is it? I just know it’s what my mother used to ask me to do for her whenever she had a headache. Said it was wonderfully relaxing. You like this?”

The light, soothing pressure he was exerting lifted tension she hadn’t even known was there, and her head lolled back onto his chest, suddenly heavy. “Mmm, yes… it’s sublime…”

Abruptly, his hands left her temples. Hermione opened her eyes momentarily, regretful at the loss, and then her breath caught in her throat.

Dipping into the bubbles, he’d scooped up two foamy handfuls, and now he settled his hands over her breasts, commencing the same gentle circular massage there as he’d given other parts of her body.

Except that now, his touch elicited an entirely different reaction.

The bubbly lather turned her wet breasts slick and slippery, her nipples hardening almost instantly at the electric sensations his teasing fingertips were eliciting. She moaned softly, arching into his touch; he responded by sending one hand sliding down her body to settle between her thighs, lightly caressing that most private of places.

“Ohhh… yes…” she sighed, pressing back against his solid, yielding warmth, and feeling a part of him surging against her, hard and huge and not at all yielding. His finger had begun delicately circling her clit, moving ever closer to the swollen little nub but not touching it. It was an exquisite agony, and she squirmed and moved against his hand, willing his fingers closer, needing the sweet relief of his touch. She was so close now… so ready. “Please…”

“Move up,” he told her quietly.

Gripping the edges of the tub, she lifted herself off him slightly, the water and bubbles cascading down her body, and felt his hands on her hips, guiding her back down until he was fully buried inside of her.

In unison, they let out a satisfied sigh, and for a moment, they were very still, enjoying the delicious sensations produced by their joining.

Draco gave a husky laugh of delight, his hands idly caressing the soft skin at Hermione’s waist as she settled herself against him comfortably. “We don’t want to cause a flood in here, do we. So let’s
take this nice and easy.”

“Right. Though…” She wiggled a bit more, feeling the imperative to move now. “I don’t know if I can. This just feels too good.”

“It’ll feel even better, you’ll see. Just let me do all the work, love. You hold onto the tub and I’ll hold you.” He smiled, dropping a kiss on the warm, soapy skin of her back. One hand moved to fondle her left breast, teasing her soapy nipple, whilst the other returned to the warm depths between her legs, caressing her clit in leisurely strokes.

“Good?” he asked softly.

Oh yes. She nodded, feeling almost boneless with the pleasure he was giving her.

And then he began to move: a slow, steady undulation, a controlled rolling of his hips that had him thrusting up into her, driving into her deeply, in the most exquisitely tortuous manner.

It didn’t take long—not nearly long enough!—for either of them, before they shouted their rapturous completion together, incoherent cries of love and pleasure that echoed back to them from the marble tiles.

A moment to catch their breaths, and then Draco leaned over the side of the tub.


By half seven, they were on their way to dinner, walking hand in hand from the hotel along the Via della Luce to a destination Draco obstinately refused to divulge, merely propelling her firmly along with a small, pleased smile on his face. After only a few minutes, he stopped them in front of a whitewashed building of stone and brick. Beneath the large, open windows were several outdoor tables under white umbrellas, surrounded by large planters.

“Well, Granger, this is it,” he said, gesturing. “The Antica Trattoria Da Carlone. Best restaurant in Rome, in my opinion anyway. Ready for your birthday dinner, love?”

Hermione nodded enthusiastically, gazing around her in delight. She was absolutely starved, suddenly.

Even from outside, the place was inviting. They moved closer, peering through the windows to the warmly lit interior. Inside and out, the restaurant was busy with diners enjoying a variety of tantalising foods and wines at tables covered in cream brocade. Framed photographs in black and white decorated the walls. The overall effect was that of a comfortable dining room in somebody’s home, where splendidly rich and tantalising odours set one’s mouth watering.

They were shown to a table beside one of the large windows open to the soft evening air. Hermione looked out, craning her neck to see the patch of sky between the roofline of the building and the wide umbrella just outside the window.

“There are loads of stars out tonight,” she said quietly.

“Find one to wish on?” Draco asked softly. He remembered the first time Hermione had told him of her lifelong penchant for wishing on stars. It seemed ages ago, somehow. So much had happened since then.
“I already have,” she answered, smiling secretively. “Outside.”

“I know, you can’t tell me,” he sighed, grinning. “That’s okay. I made a wish too, you know.”

“Did you?”

“Well, yeah, sort of. No way, Granger,” he laughed, shaking his head as she opened her mouth to question him further. “What’s that Muggle expression you use sometimes—you know, the one about geese?”

“‘What’s good for the goose is good for the gander,’ you mean?”

“That’s the one. Well, there you go.” His smile was complacent. “Let’s order, shall we?” He turned his attention to the menu and away from her inquisitive eyes, hoping their wishes had been the same.

Two hours later, they sat back in their chairs, the identical, slightly glazed look in their eyes.

They’d begun with a lovely, light starter of prosciutto and melon, over which they’d begun talking about the various things they’d seen earlier that day. Their wine order had arrived as well, a wonderful Barolo that Draco had insisted upon as a nicely apropos connection to the pre-birthday dinner they’d had back in Oxford two nights earlier. Besides, it would be the perfect accompaniment to their food, an order of Bucatini alla Matriciana—tubular pasta in a tomato, chili pepper, and bacon sauce—and one of Spaghetti Carbonara, pasta with bacon and onions in a cream sauce laced with cheese and white wine. The food was prepared to order, beautifully presented and completely delectable.

By the time the chocolate mousse cake and espresso had arrived, both of them were feeling fairly dazed. But this was a birthday dinner, and what was a birthday without cake? They’d sighed, willing to make the sacrifice, and plunged their forks into the decadently rich, dark mousse.

“How in Merlin’s name did we manage to eat so much?” Hermione groaned now. “I can’t believe it!”

Draco pressed his hands over his belly. Somehow he suspected he’d just managed to attach a whole new meaning to the word ‘over-indulgence.’

“Oh, you mean you don’t fancy something else then?” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t think I could eat another thing. For about a week.”

“No? Not even one thin wafer?” Hermione smirked, winking at him, her words delivered in a horrifically bad French accent that recalled another hilarious Monty Python film she’d introduced him to, the unforgettable restaurant vomit scene from “The Meaning of Life.” After bouts of helpless laughter mixed with uncontrollable retching, he’d accused her of being a sadist, and from then on, “one thin wafer” had been a running joke between them.

“Ugh, no, you evil woman, not even that!” he snorted, and pushed his chair back from the table. “Let’s go, yeah? There’s someplace else I want to take you.”

The stars were out in force by the time they left Da Carlone, scattered across the blue-black night sky like a shower of diamonds.

“I don’t suppose it would do me any good to ask where we’re going,” Hermione remarked, eyeing Draco speculatively as they strolled along the street humming with Trastevere’s lively nightlife.
“Tsk. Such impatience. We’re nearly there, anyway. Think you can hold out a little longer?” Draco teased, taking her hand.

“I suppose, if I must!” She heaved an exaggerated sigh, rolling her eyes. “I believe you enjoy torturing me, Malfoy!”

“All in a good cause, darling, I promise,” he replied smoothly, his smugness becoming positively infuriating.

They were approaching the Ponte Palatino once again. The ancient city, lit spectacularly from within, rose before them on the other side, an incandescent jewel in the velvet darkness.

“Right, now close your eyes,” Draco instructed once they’d crossed the river, taking her hand firmly. “And keep them closed. Trust me.”

I do. I do trust you. “Okay,” she agreed, squeezing his hand and shutting her eyes tightly against the temptation to peek.

Three minutes later, he stopped them. All around, there was the most intense perfume. It smelled like a vast field of…

“Flowers! Where are we? Can I open my eyes now?”

“Yes,” Draco said simply. “Open your eyes, Hermione.”

Millions of roses, a virtual jungle of them in countless colours, sizes and scents, surrounded them.

“Oh,” she breathed, turning around in a slow circle, mesmerised. “Oh, Draco! What is this place?”

“The Roseto Comunale. The public rose gardens. Recognise where we are?” He tilted his head with a smile, inviting her to look around more closely.

Hermione narrowed her eyes for a moment, studying their surroundings, and then clapped her hands together. “The Circus Maximus, right?”

He nodded.

“But…” she began again. “We didn’t see this before. How come?”

“We walked along the parallel road on the other side of the park, and I made sure to hurry us along so you wouldn’t spot it in the distance. I wanted to save it for tonight.” Draco looked away, a small, pleased smile quirking his mouth.

“It’s incredible! But…”

Draco could practically see the wheels turning, and he grinned, waiting for the inevitable next question.

“…But I don’t understand—how is it that everything’s in bloom now? Aren’t roses pretty much done by the middle of summer?”

That was his girl. Couldn’t get much past her.

“Well done, Granger. The roses here bloom well past the time they would usually fade, because they’re enchanted. Only the wizarding community here knows of this. It’s a well-kept secret. Muggle Rome has never been able to explain it, and mostly, I think they’ve given up trying by now.
“For nearly three hundred years, it was Rome’s Jewish cemetery, you know. But well before that, centuries before, in fact, it was a garden, planted and tended by Rome’s wizards for the magical properties of the flowers. Used for all sorts of potions.”

“I can imagine!” Hermione exclaimed, looking around and inhaling the softly perfumed air deeply. “Professor Sprout would have a field day here!”

Draco snickered. “Too right she would. Probably go into fits at the very sight of the place! Anyway,” he continued, “since about fifty years ago, it’s been strictly a garden again. But the rose bushes have been blooming for eight hundred years. There are over a thousand species. Pretty amazing, really.”

“Morgana! It’s spectacular!” Hermione sighed, and then looped her arm through his. “Let’s walk, shall we?”

As they strolled the paths, they passed others, mostly couples, enjoying the garden under the stars, intoxicated by the beauty and the heady fragrance that surrounded them. Eventually, Draco led Hermione into a covered arbour where there was a stone bench.

“Close your eyes!” he told her.

“Again?” she giggled.

“No questions, just do it!” he insisted, and laid his hand over her eyes for a moment, closing them. “Right, now… hang on…”

A few seconds of near-silence passed, during which Hermione could hear Draco muttering to himself a short distance away.

And then…

“Open your eyes!”

He was seated on the bench beside her, brandishing two slender, crystal wine glasses he’d Conjured. With a sheepish grin, he handed one to her.

“It was meant to be champagne, but… well… reckon I must’ve cocked it up somehow.” At her quizzical look, he rolled his eyes, letting out a brief, embarrassed laugh. “Ginger ale.”

She laughed, shaking her head, and raised her glass, touching it to his with a small, bell-like ping.

The bubbles tickled as the first sip went down. Hermione’s eyes were bright with tears that she didn’t even attempt to wipe away. Instead, she laughed shakily as they rolled down her cheeks, putting down her glass, finally, and throwing her arms around Draco.

For once, she was speechless. There simply were no words. All she could do was hang on to him for dear life as she struggled for a modicum of composure. For his part, he was quite content to be the recipient of such pure, unrestrained affection. He held her close as her tears dripped onto his neck, one hand buried in her soft hair and the other gently stroking her back.

Finally, he tipped her chin up, kissing her soundly. “Come on, love. Let’s get out of here. The night’s still young!”

The night had grown a good deal older by the time they emerged from the cosy, little wine bar, where they’d spent several very relaxed hours making their way through the better part of two bottles
of vintage wine while listening to equally vintage live jazz and mellow, New-Age music.

Clouds had covered the stars and the slip of a crescent moon in gauzy, smoke-grey tatters when at last they wandered back into the street. People were still out, enjoying the night life, but their numbers had dwindled somewhat. It was late, well past midnight, and Rome had begun winding down for the night.

Hermione clutched Draco’s arm as they navigated somewhat unsteadily along the cobblestones.

“Taxi!” he called out, oblivious to the fact that there were none in sight, and then he looked at her and began to laugh. “Granger, you are totally pissed.”

Hermione stuck her chin out defiantly. “Am not! If I were, there would be a taxi here now! And I don’t see a single one, not anywhere!”

There was a curious, twisted logic to that, somehow, but Draco lacked the mental energy to work it out.

Her ankle twisted suddenly on the uneven cobbles and she lurched forward, saved from falling on her face by his quick, albeit ungraceful, grab of her elbow as she went down. He hauled her upright again and she turned a goofy smile in his direction.

“Thanks,” she sighed, moving on somewhat firmer footing now, and then she glanced ahead at something that glowed brightly in the near distance. ‘Oh my gosh, Draco, look!’ she breathed, digging her nails into his bare arm. “Come on!”

He winced slightly, extricating his flesh from her fingers as tactfully as he could manage, and narrowed his eyes, peering ahead.

Suddenly far more steady on her feet than she’d been a few minutes earlier, Hermione tugged Draco forward in her excitement. Within a few minutes, they stood in the Piazza Trevi, looking at one of Rome’s most famous and beautiful icons.

The Fontana di Trevi, originally built in the fifteenth century and rebuilt in the early eighteenth, was a breathtaking work of Baroque sculpture. Replete with a quirky history and well-known body of legends and traditions, it was a popular tourist magnet.

At this late hour, there were still a number of stragglers milling about the fountain’s wide pool, where recessed lights beneath the water cast spots of pure white surrounded by surging foam all along the base of the stone statuary.

Hermione turned to Draco with a dazzling smile. “We have to toss coins in, both of us. It’s good luck.”

“Muggle custom?” he asked.

She nodded. “Mmm. The idea is, if you throw a coin in, you’ll return to Rome one day soon. I remember when I was eight or nine, I saw an old film on the telly once. It was the most romantic thing ever! ‘Three Coins in the Fountain,’ it was called.”

“And Muggles actually believe something so daft?” Draco raised an amused eyebrow.

“No, silly. It’s just a lovely old tradition, more like wishful thinking, I suppose. Come on, Malfoy, let’s do it! It would be wonderful to think of coming back someday!” Hermione flashed another smile at him and began digging in her bag for some loose change. After a moment, she pulled her
hand out, triumphant.

“Right! I’m ready!” She turned around, her back to the fountain. Closing her eyes tightly, she swung her arm up and around in a single, swift motion, lobbing the coin hard over the opposite shoulder. It landed in the fountain with a resounding plunk.

Immediately, she whirled around, a satisfied grin on her face, and dusted off her hands as she watched the water settle once again.

“Oh, now you,” she instructed firmly.

Draco shrugged his acquiescence, shoving his hand into a pocket to see if he had coins to spare. He found two, both silver and each worth one hundred lire, with a picture of the goddess Minerva standing next to a small, leafy tree. He took one and made to toss it, but Hermione stopped him.

“No, no! You have to do it the way I did, otherwise it doesn’t work!” she said fervently, her hand staying his arm. “Turn around, that’s right. Face away from the fountain. Now hold the coin in your right hand… good… and throw it over your left shoulder, like I did.”

All this rather girly wishing stuff in front of other people… well… he could definitely have done without it. But he supposed he could do it if it would make her happy.

Closing his eyes briefly, he thought once again about his earlier, very private wish, and tossed the coin over his shoulder. It hit the water hard, causing a small geyser to spray up all around it.

Hermione clapped her hands with pleasure and threw her arms around him in a quick hug, resting her cheek against his chest. “Oh, well done, Malfoy! Now we’ll both come back someday!” Her voice dropped to a near-whisper. “Do you… do you suppose we’ll come back together?”

The question was tentative, shy even, and nearly inaudible. She’d wanted to ask, hoping for the answer she sought, yet… almost hoping he hadn’t heard at all. Because of course, the question was really much larger than its words.

He’d heard.

He’d heard, and suddenly, he felt a powerful desire to make certain that they would, indeed, come back to Rome together. More than that, he needed, suddenly, to be certain that she would always be there in his life. His fingers closed around the second coin in his pocket, warm and bit sweaty from his palm now.

“Here, look, why not chuck another one in, then, just for a bit of extra luck?” he ventured, holding out the coin to her.

Hermione looked at him curiously, and then a faint smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Shall I?”

“Yeah, why not? Reckon it couldn’t hurt.” Draco dropped the coin into her open palm and then carefully closed her fingers over it, finally covering her hand with his own.

She looked down at their joined hands, and then back up at him, confused. “What…?” she began, uncertainly.

Draco remained silent, closing his eyes instead. A look of intense concentration passed over his face, his brows drawn and his lips moving soundlessly. The moment passed and he opened his eyes once more, his features relaxing.
He took his hand away, and slowly, Hermione opened her fingers only to gaze, dumbfounded, at her palm.

In it lay a silver ring, engraved with the markings of the 100-lire coin she had held only a moment before, the foliage of the tree now transformed into a leafy vine that wound around the ring, inside and out. There was a tiny inscription too: *HG & DM 19.9.2000.*

“Draco…” Hermione said softly, her eyes wide and lambent in the soft lights that emanated from the fountain. “What is this? What have you done? I don’t…”

Rather than replying immediately, he took her hand and led her to a nearby bench, where they sat down. Gazing down at his lap where her hand still rested in his, he cleared his throat.

“Hermione,” he started, and all traces of the cocky demeanour she knew so well were utterly gone. “You asked if we would come back here together someday. Well… I want to. Very much. In fact, I…” He paused, feeling the beginnings of an unaccustomed flush creeping up his neck to colour his cheeks. “…I really can’t imagine coming with anybody else. But… well… it’s more than that. I just… I just want to be with you. All the time. And I’ve been hoping, you know… that you feel the same way.”

Nervously, he slanted a furtive glance in her direction. She was looking back at him, wide-eyed and faintly dazed, the Transfigured ring in her open palm, shining in the fountain lights like a bit of faerie treasure.

“So… so I wanted to give you something, if you’ll have it… a token… something to show how I feel.” He paused to breathe, steadying himself and gathering his courage. “I love you, Hermione Granger. More than I can say. I have done for a long time. I thought… if you feel the same, if you would wear this ring, it would be… I mean, because… because we can’t, you know… get m—I mean, we’ve got two more years at uni, and…”

“We’re still very young,” Hermione murmured.

He nodded gratefully. “Yes. Exactly.”

“It would be a sort of promise, wouldn’t it,” she continued quietly. *A symbol. Of our feelings. Our commitment.* This was really happening… “Wow…” Her voice had dropped to a whisper now. “*Merlin*…”

He was studying her intently, a faint line of worry between eyes that were pale and lucent as a pool of water under clouds. “So… will you? Wear it, I mean?”

Hermione held her hand out to him. It shook slightly. “Put it on for me?” she asked, trembling with a sudden surge of emotions that she was only barely keeping in check.

In the meantime, the relief that washed over Draco, hearing her question, was pure bliss. Eagerly, he nodded and reached for the ring, slipping it onto the fourth finger of her left hand, where it moulded itself to her perfectly.

Hermione held out her hand to study the ring. It shone like a tiny fragment of starlight on her finger. Like a piece of a wishing star, she found herself thinking, and smiled in newfound surprise at the rightness of the thought. Coins in the fountain, her twenty-first birthday, the magic of a blackened night under a starry Roman sky… and a promise she found herself quite ready to make now.

Because she couldn’t imagine coming back to the Eternal City—*ever*—with anybody but him.
She had a sudden thought then, and spoke before her courage failed her.

“Would you wear one too?” Smiling shyly, she held up a matching coin she’d fished out of her bag.

He'd wondered if she might ask, hoped for it, but hadn't dared to let himself consider the possibility. A quiet joy filled him now as wordlessly, he held out his palm to receive the coin, still cool from its sojourn in Hermione’s change purse.

“What was the spell?” she asked quietly, and leaned in as he bent to whisper in her ear.

Then folding his fingers over the coin and holding his hand tightly between both of hers, she said in a hushed voice, “Crea annulus!”

The metal began to grow warm against his skin, and he could feel it shifting its shape, rippling as the sides of the flat coin began to curl in upon themselves, pulling away from the centre to create a hole there. When the last vibrations ebbed completely, he opened his fingers.

A ring identical to the one he’d Transfigured for Hermione now lay in his palm, still warm to the touch.

They looked at each other, elation at the repeated success of the spell causing both to break into delighted smiles.

“Nicely done, Granger,” Draco drawled, winking at her, and suddenly, the cheeky, self-assured Malfoy she’d grown to love was back. “Here, put it on for me, yeah?”

Happily, she obliged. Like her own, this one now sized itself to fit his finger perfectly upon contact.

“Only we will know how they came to be,” he mused, studying the ring as it glinted in the illuminations casting the fountain in a wash of gold. “I like that.”

He turned back to gaze at her, going very still as his eyes searched hers.

“Come here, Hermione,” he said very softly.

Shivering suddenly, she moved almost trance-like to him, and he drew her down onto his lap, twining his arms securely around her.

“I love you,” both said together, and they laughed, because all of a sudden, it was all so silly and wonderful and absolutely simple.

Leaning in, he kissed her, and it was light and chaste and sweet. And then he kissed her again. And again. One hand was in her hair, and the other at her waist, anchoring her, and the kisses were tremulous as lips and tongues touched—all velvet and fire and cool like rushing water, all at the same time somehow.

They kissed until they were quite dizzy with it.

“I think,” Hermione remarked presently, catching her breath at last, “I’d like to go back to the hotel now.”

Draco was momentarily taken aback. “Why? Is something wrong?”

Men. Totally clueless sometimes. She struggled to keep a straight face.

“Oh, no. Not at all. But… well… I’m a bit tired, you know. Such a long day. And we’ve lots
planned for tomorrow as well. So I was thinking—early bed tonight. Do you mind?"

A smile of comprehension slowly grew on Draco’s face.

“You know, I’m pretty knackered myself. We’ll just… yeah. Good idea, Granger.”

And it was.

Roseto Comunale

TBC
Compleanno Romano Photo Album I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Trying on a handmade bracelet

At the fabled Spanish Steps
At the Trevi Fountain

Polvere di Tempo

Adrian Rodriguez, craftsman of timepieces and proprietor of Polvere di Tempo
Leather Books and Mediaeval Candle Rolls

Sundials and Hourglasses
Compasses and Candlewatches

Horologium Nocturnum

Hotel Cielo
Hermione and Draco’s room and en-suite
Frescoed corridor, roof terrace, and breakfast room

Shots of Trastevere

Photo by Martha Miller
Church of Santa Maria, two views

Trastevere after dark
Dar Poeta

Pizza a la Romana

With arugula (rocket)

With zucchini (courgette) and onions
Vesuvius Pizza
Ponte Sisto, two views

Ancient Rome
Circus Maximus, photo by Tom Corser

Temple of Vesta
A/N: An eerie and quite wonderful coincidence happened in April 2009, long after these chapters were written and originally published at CG. Tom Felton decided to surprise his girlfriend with a trip to Rome for her birthday. She had always wanted to go. Sound familiar? :-) Life does indeed imitate art!

The first three photos in this album are ones they took while in Rome. Thanks to Tom for sharing.
Compleanno Romano Photo Album II

The Forum
Vercingetorix’ Surrender to Caesar. Second illustration by Alphonse Marie de Neuville, 1883

Antica Trattoria Da Carlone
Photo by Steve Canistra

Roseto Comunale
The Fontana di Trevi

Photo by Hisham Basheer
The sort of coin that Draco and Hermione Transfigured into promise rings
21 October
Saturday afternoon

“Nearly Hallowe’en, y’know. Fancy having a party?”

Gemma and Hermione were seated at the kitchen table, their books, index cards, Biros and laptops spread out in disarray before them. The pearl-grey afternoon light was a soft backdrop to the foliage that surrounded the house. Gold, scarlet, fiery orange and russet leaves were all woven together in a brilliant patchwork tapestry.

The girls had begun with the best of intentions, both of them with an essay to complete for the following week’s tutorials. Somehow, though, their studious efforts kept getting sabotaged by incipient boredom and a creeping restlessness and loss of focus affecting even Hermione, whose concentration skills were legend in the house. Gemma’s question was only the latest in a series of interruptions initiated by one or the other girl.

“It’s ten days away,” Hermione replied. “I know. A party would be fun, yeah. But…” Her eyes
Gemma grinned. She knew to expect something adventurous and out of the ordinary when Hermione had that particular look in her eye. “I’ll bite. What?”

“You know what would be even more fun?”

Gemm’s grin widened and she clapped her hands together delightedly. “Ooh, yeah! And you know what, they’re doing a Hallowe’en thing at the Magic. Open mic night—you know, live music, readings, that sort of thing. I think they’re having a costume judging as well. There’ll be all sorts of food and drink—we could go there! But first, we have to be home in case any little kids come round. I love that!”

Hermione nodded enthusiastically. “Me too! They’re so cute in their little costumes! Witches and wizards and goblins and faeries…” She trailed off and grew quiet, suddenly lost in a train of thought that eluded Gemma. Then she snapped herself out of it with a little shake. “There were always loads of kids in my neighbourhood when I was growing up. A group of us used to go round together on Hallowe’en, just in our own street. We always kept a bowl of sweets by the front door. My dad and I carved a pumpkin every year too. It was a family tradition. He’s brilliant at it—does these really amazing designs.”

“Definitely have to get a couple of pumpkins to carve,” Gemma agreed. “I bet Tesco will have some. We can put scented candles in them and have one in the sitting room window, maybe put one by the outside door downstairs. “ She pulled a piece of paper from a notebook and began scribbling furiously.

Hermione’s smile had turned oddly sly by then. “I’ve an idea that’ll make the pumpkin-carving even better…” she began, and Gemma stopped writing, instantly curious. She looked at Hermione expectantly.

“Well, see, I was thinking…”

The two girls were still laughing five minutes later as Draco and Danny came in. They’d gone to the sports centre for the afternoon to work out and then have a swim, and now they were windblown and rosy-cheeked from the chill in the late-afternoon air.

“Afternoon, ladies,” Danny said sunnily, dropping a kiss on the top of Gemma’s head and then tossing his gym bag on an empty chair on his way to the fridge. He pulled open the door and stuck his head inside, turning back a few seconds later with a couple of bottles of blackcurrant juice in hand. He tossed one to Draco, who snagged it in a neat, one-handed, mid-air catch.

“Thanks, mate,” Draco grinned, raising the bottle in a salute and then twisting the top off and taking a long, refreshing pull. “So what have you two been getting up to whilst we’ve been gone, eh? Miss us, did you?” He leaned over Hermione’s chair, wrapping his arms around her from behind and resting his chin on the top of her head.

“Did we?” Hermione turned large, innocent eyes to Gemma, who shrugged.
“Can’t remember,” she replied, straight-faced.

“Me either,” Hermione sighed. “Ooh, wait! There was that one minute—quarter to two, wasn’t it?—when we were positively pining. That was it, though,” she finished matter-of-factly, Gemma nodding in agreement.

“Sixty seconds, that’s all we rate? Very nice!” Draco snorted. “Could you possibly spare it? I dunno, Kirman, I say we forget the plans we were discussing for later—the very nice plans, mind,” he added, eyeing the two girls. “Because suddenly I’m feeling terribly taken for granted. You?”

Danny nodded gravely. “Oh yeah. Definitely. What about you and me nipping down to the Blue for a pint? It’s Bath against Gloucester today. They’ll have a good crowd.”

Draco tossed back the remainder of his drink, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Excellent idea. Unless, of course, we’ve been persuaded to change our minds. Though it would take a fair bit of persuading, I reckon…”

Bending down, he brought his mouth tantalisingly close to Hermione’s ear and gave her a soft, little kiss. “Think I’ll take a quick shower, Granger. Don’t miss me too much, yeah?”

* 

The following morning found the four of them at the kitchen table for their weekly Sunday brunch/house meeting. This Sunday, it was the guys’ turn to cook, and they’d gone out of their way to serve an impressive meal designed to demonstrate their culinary prowess and overall kitchen skills. All this by way of proving just how indispensable they really were, and how truly fortunate the girls were to have such talented, versatile men.

In the nearly two months since Danny and Gemma’s return, a great deal of ground had certainly been covered. Draco, for instance, had gone from complete ignorance regarding the operation of the drip coffeemaker (“What’s wrong with just using the electric kettle and boiling water for instant? It’s just as good!” “Tsk, Malfoy! Surely you can manage such a basic appliance!”) to a fair degree of proficiency at turning out a decent cup of freshly brewed coffee.

His first two attempts remained best forgotten, being something of an embarrassment when the faulty ratio of water to coffee produced a dense, sludgy muck on one occasion, and a pale brown, watery swill on another. Hermione tactfully refrained from pointing out that somebody who had done brilliantly at Potions surely ought to be able to manage a simple pot of coffee.

These incidents entered the annals of number 236’s rich history, along with the night that Danny inadvertently plunged the entire house into total darkness. He’d overloaded the electrical circuits by innocently plugging in his guitar and powerful amps at a time when two microwaves, one washing machine, a hair dryer, a dishwasher and two computers were already in use. The resulting blackout was a sobering experience, judging from the simultaneous howls of frustration and rather choice obscenities that rose from several of the surrounding flats in the house. Frantic searches for a working torch (“Gemma, one with batteries, yeah?”) and then the fuse box itself had taught everybody a valuable lesson about caution and being prepared. Hermione had stressed that last bit, pointing to her training as a former Girl Guide. Three sets of eyes had rolled at that one.

Then there was the time that Hermione’s hair had nearly gone up in flames whilst she was cooking a
big pot of spaghetti. Standing too close to the hob with one’s long, curly hair loose is never a good idea, she discovered. The odour of burnt hair had stayed in the kitchen for close to a week, not to mention the frizzled bits of hair that she’d had to snip off, strand by strand. Draco only barely refrained from mentioning that former Girl Guides ought to know better. However, his smirk said it all.

On this lazy Sunday morning, however, nothing was being burnt, blown up, reduced to a substance unrecognisable as food, or otherwise destroyed. In fact, the guys’ efforts had produced a very nice meal of pancakes, sausages, and fresh, cut-up strawberries and cantaloupe. The coffee’s enticing hazelnut aroma drew the female half of the flat into the kitchen like moths to a flame.

“Mmm, that smells heavenly,” Gemma sighed blissfully, dropping down into her chair. “What’ve you cooked?”

“My mum’s famous pancakes, I’ll have you know,” Danny proclaimed, and then grinned sheepishly at her raised eyebrow. The empty box from the mix was still partially visible from its place in the rubbish bin in the corner. “Well, all right, so we cheated just a little! But McDougall’s is what Mum always uses, so it still counts, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, love, it counts! No worries!” Gemma laughed, patting his hand and then serving herself from the stack of pancakes sitting on a plate in the centre of the table. Everyone else followed suit. She took a bite, chewed for a second and then looked back at Danny. “Um… they’re… not exactly hot, Danny.”

Danny and Draco looked at each other, dismayed.

“How long have they been sitting in the plate?” Hermione asked them gently.

“Shit, it must be at least twenty minutes,” Draco muttered. “But it takes so long to cook the bloody things, and you can only do a few at a time! Reckon they got cold, waiting.”

“Well…” Gemma began, “there is a way around that. Just so you know for the future. Two ways, actually. You can keep the finished ones warm in the oven whilst you’re cooking more, or…”

“We can pop our plates into the microwave and heat them up now,” Hermione finished, smiling reassuringly. “See? Problem solved!”

The two boys exchanged a frustrated glance and rose together, gathering up the plates.

“Whilst we’re waiting…” Hermione began brightly, “there’s something Gem and I want to talk over with you both.”

The boys looked expectantly at her as Danny handed Draco one plate after another to feed into and out of the microwave.

“Well, it’ll be Hallowe’en soon—in just over a week, actually—and we thought it would be fun to call round and get some people together—Mags and Mark, of course, and Tony and Suze, Chris and Fee, Steve and Gil if they’re around. And, well, dress up in costumes, and go out.”

“The Magic Café is doing their annual Hallowe’en bash,” Gemma put in, reaching out to accept her plate from Danny, the pancakes now steaming. “Thanks, love. Anyway, yeah, we thought we might go. Should be fun.”

“Costumes, eh?” Draco mused, sitting down finally with his own plate. “I like it. Anything we want?”
“Well, of course, the idea is to dress up as something scary.” Hermione took a sip of her orange juice. “You know, like... a werewolf or a vampire... or, well... lots of girls go as witches.”

Her eyes flicked briefly to his and she gave him a quick, surreptitious wink. He smiled to himself before he turned his attention back to the others.

“I’m up for it,” he decided. “What d’you reckon, Kirman? You game?”


Gemma glanced at Hermione and then cleared her throat. “We also thought, Hermione and I, that we could get some pumpkins for carving jack-o-lanterns. Messy, but fun. Ever done that, either of you?”

Both boys shook their heads no, but Draco couldn’t help grinning nostalgically at the question. Glancing at Hermione, he knew she was remembering exactly the same thing that had flashed into his mind: the Great Hall, decorated for Hallowe’en, scores of pumpkins floating high over everyone’s head. Whilst he’d never had a hand in their creation, he certainly appreciated them, especially when, on occasion, one could be made to explode directly over some hapless student’s head. He would never forget the sight of all that stringy, seed-laden pulp sitting on Terry Boot’s head in third year, like some sort of bizarre and very slimy orange fright wig. He felt a twinge of guilt at still finding it funny all these years later, but... well... everyone had laughed at the time, he remembered, even Hermione. He’d noticed because the entire Gryffindor table had been in rather noisy near-hysterics. She’d fought it, but finally, rolling her eyes, lost the battle. He remembered his amazement that such a goody-goody would actually have it in her.

“Boot,” he muttered, catching Hermione’s eye.

“That was so mean! Who did it? Did you ever find out?”

Had her mouth twitched, or was it his imagination? He shrugged, shaking his head, though he’d had his suspicions at the time, fairly certain it had been Crabbe, with Zabini and Nott egging him on. He decided to keep this to himself, not wanting to risk prejudicing Hermione against two of his friends even slightly.

“What are you two on about?” Danny wanted to know.

“Practical joke at school years ago,” Draco replied lightly. “This kid in our year ended up wearing the inside of a pumpkin as a hat.”

“Oh. Sounds nasty,” Danny chortled, biting into a juicy piece of sausage. Then he eyed his friend speculatively. “You didn’t do it, did you?”

Draco shook his head, determined to distance himself a bit further from the arse-brained, pubescent mentality that found that sort of thing hilarious. “Nah. Not me. Stupid joke. Moronic, really.”

“But funny,” Hermione added, smirking, and took a healthy bite of pancake and sausage, maple syrup dripping off into an amber pool on her plate.

Startled, Draco stared at her with newfound appreciation. Well, well. It seemed Granger would never cease to surprise him. He cleared his throat noisily, swallowing a snigger. “Right, well. Getting back to what we were talking about. You want to carve pumpkins?”

Gemma nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah. See, we thought—or rather, Hermione did, it was her idea, really—we could have a little competition. The two of us against you lot. Points for originality and best execution.”
A cocky smile spread itself slowly over Draco’s face. Competition? He’d never shied away from a good challenge in his life. “I think we could manage that… what do you say, Kirman?” he drawled.

Danny, too intent on his breakfast to bother with words, gave him a thumbs up.

“You’re on, ladies,” Draco grinned. “And now, a bit of house business…” He paused to clear his throat, his smile evil. “The small matter of absurdly long showers that use up all the hot water, leaving none for anybody else…”

Danny snorted, muttering something into his coffee mug about a certain pot calling the kettle black. Hermione turned pink and even Draco had the grace to flush, as he joined the good-natured laughter that erupted around him.

Over the course of the next week, plans for the pumpkin-carving competition began to gel in everyone’s spare time.

“Fuck’s sake, Malfoy, I reckon even we can do better than this!” Danny crumpled up his latest sketch with undue vehemence and lobbed it in the direction of the small waste basket under the window.

They were sitting at the desk in the tiny spare room one afternoon, on a break from studying. Paper and pencils were set out before them but so far, about half of the paper had wound up being binned.

He glanced at Draco’s latest effort. “What the hell is that supposed to be, anyway? Fairly dodgy-looking, whatever it is!”

Draco drew himself up, feigning insult. “I’ll have you know, before you jump to any further insulting conclusions, that this is meant to be a… a… well, a goblin, if you must know!” He’d been picturing the sinister-looking creatures he’d always seen in Gringott’s, but somehow he’d got the features wrong and it had wound up looking more like—

“‘Nosferatu’! Shit, that’s what it reminds me of! Ever see that film?”

Draco shook his head, intrigued. “What’s it about?”

Danny rolled his eyes ominously. “Probably the single creepiest vampire film of all time. It was made in Germany, in the 1920s. F.W. Murnau directed. I can’t believe you’ve never seen it! We shall definitely have to remedy that, mate! And as for this…” He indicated Draco’s sketch. “… maybe it’s not so bad after all. Pretty damned creepy in its own way. Question is, can we actually carve that?”

Draco looked down at the sketch, studying it carefully. It actually did look rather like a pumpkin-headed vampire at that. He let out a satisfied little snicker, leaning back in his chair, his hands folded carelessly behind his head. “Daniel, this little competition will be a walkover. Perhaps we should suggest putting a friendly little wager on the outcome, yeah? Just to make it interesting.”

“What did you have in mind?” Danny felt the corners of his mouth beginning to quirk upwards in a sly little smile.

“Oh, nothing too taxing… I expect we’ll be able to come up with something suitably enjoyable,
though, don’t you think?”

Oh, the possibilities… they were so very gratifying and, if both boys’ expressions were anything to go by, they’d be more than a little bit naughty as well.

For their part, the girls had already decided on the design they were going to use. Gemma had drawn it, Hermione abdicating in favour of her friend’s obvious advantage as an art history student with a not inconsiderable amount of artistic talent in her own right. In fact, the two of them were feeling pleasantly smug as they squirrelled the drawing away in a safe hiding place. This was going to be a piece of cake. The only question was, what prize would they be playing for?

That very question was decided later the same evening.

“I propose…” Hermione began airily, taking advantage of the fact that all four of them were in the sitting room at the same time for a change. “… that we make our little competition a bit more interesting.”

Draco smiled to himself. *Great minds.* Merlin, he did love this girl.

“Raise the stakes, you know?” she continued. “I mean, there really ought to be some sort of tribute the losers pay to the winners, don’t you think?”

“Course, yeah, we totally agree.” Draco smiled amenably and then leaned forward from his seat on the sofa, regarding Hermione with a predatory glint. “Any suggestions?”

Hermione felt a tiny, pleasurable shiver inch its way up her spine. She knew all too well what that look meant. “Well, yes, actually. We did talk about it, and we thought… what about the losers cooking a proper dinner and doing the washing up every night for a week?”

Draco glanced at Danny, who was sprawled on the floor, propped up on several large throw pillows. He shook his head. Draco turned back to Hermione, a complacent smirk on his face. “Pssh… Sorry, love, afraid that’s just too ordinary and boring, quite frankly. Surely we can come up with something much better than that.”

“Well, then, what about…” Gemma thought for a moment. “What about the losers being at the winners’ beck and call?”

“Like the sound of that,” Danny nodded. “Yeah, I think that could work, don’t you, Malfoy?”

“Define ‘beck and call,’ please,” Hermione cut in, darting a chagrined look at Gemma, who opened her mouth to reply. She was cut off by Draco, whose grin had turned positively feral by this time.

“‘Beck and call,’” he replied smoothly, “would mean that whatever—and I mean whatever—the winners wanted or needed, any time of day or night, the losers would have to supply it in a timely fashion. I think that’s fair, don’t you?”

Hermione was undeterred. “How long?”


“A week,” the boys said in unison.

“Four,” Hermione countered.

“Six,” Draco shot back, his eyes locking on hers.
“Five. Take it or leave it!” Hermione folded her arms across her chest, her mouth a determined line.

“Deal!” Draco exclaimed. “Agreed, everyone?”

There were nods all around. And so the deal was struck.

*

In the next couple of days, they’d got in touch with a bunch of their friends from the staircases, nearly all of whom were available and quite excited about the plans. Now, as the day drew closer, the question of costumes had to be settled as well.

It happened that there was a small shop near Hertford College that sold costumes in adult sizes as well as children’s, ones that were of better quality and more interesting than the usual, more mundane stuff. On the Wednesday before Hallowe’en, Draco found what he needed there and arrived home quite satisfied with his choice, stashing it in the back of the wardrobe. Danny and Gemma had decided to coordinate their costumes, keeping their selections a secret from everyone, even their flatmates. On the other hand, Hermione had found nothing she liked in the shops, but her sly smile told Draco that despite that, she would still have an intriguing surprise for him come Hallowe’en night.

*

On the Friday before Hallowe’en, a letter arrived in an envelope made of that creamy, heavy stock that Hermione had come to recognise immediately as Narcissa’s stationery. She turned the envelope over a couple of times in her hands as she came back upstairs after collecting the day’s post, wondering what could be in the letter.

Draco lay on a sofa in the sitting room, reading for one of his tutorials. Hermione paused at the end where his bare feet hung over the arm. The book obscured his face from view, but the rest of him was stretched out in elegant repose before her and she took a moment to enjoy the view. One arm was flung carelessly behind his head, and as a consequence, his black t-shirt had become hiked up, exposing a generous swath of taut abdomen. A fine line of soft, golden hair trailed down from his navel, disappearing enticingly inside his jeans. And as for them, well… snug-fitting, worn jeans definitely suited him, she decided. They rode low on his slim hips, moulding themselves to his thighs and bum, and really left very little to the imagination in other areas as well…

“See something you like?”

Amusement danced in the grey eyes that peeked over the top of his book, catching her in the act of ogling him.

It was far too late in the relationship for embarrassment. Because she really did love looking at him and he knew it, but of course it went both ways, and she knew that too.

“You know I do,” she murmured, and climbed onto the sofa, straddling him. “Much better.”
“Much,” he agreed. “You’re definitely more interesting than this.” He tossed his copy of Piers Plowman onto the coffee table and wound his arms comfortably around her, holding her firmly in place.

She wiggled a bit, adding some very pleasant friction in a particular part of his anatomy, and Draco sighed happily. One hand slid down from the small of her back to her bum, which he patted appreciatively and then continued to hold. “Just to keep you from falling. I have no designs on you whatsoever.”

She snorted. “A likely story, Malfoy!” Leaning down, she nuzzled him for a moment, feeling the hum of his chuckle as she pressed a kiss to his throat and enjoying his warmth and naturally clean scent. Her eyes drifted shut for a minute and then they snapped open, and she sat up suddenly.

“Oh! Nearly forgot! A letter came for you. It’s from your mum.” She plucked it up from the rug where it had fallen. “Here.”

Draco hoisted himself up on one elbow and slid a finger across the back of the envelope, slitting it open neatly. He pulled out a single piece of the note paper, inscribed with his mother’s elegant scrawl.

*Dearest Draco,* he read aloud.

*Your father and I would very much like you and Hermione to join us for luncheon on Wednesday, the first of November, if you are able to make time. I will explain more fully when you arrive.*

*Luncheon will be at one. Please do let me know as soon as possible whether the two of you can be here.*

*With love,*

*Mother*

“What’s that all about, do you suppose?” Hermione murmured, peering at the letter again.

“Buggered if I know!” Draco replied, and truly, he was mystified. “Suppose the only way to find out is to go. Can you? You don’t have anything on Wednesday afternoons, do you?”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. I’m free. Though I’ve got an essay due next Friday, y’know…”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Granger, it’s just lunch. And if I know you, the essay will be finished, revised, polished a hundred different ways, and tied up with a little red ribbon well before next Friday!”

He knew her too well. Laughing, she poked him playfully in the stomach and then snuggled back down into the crook of his arm. “Okay, okay! I’ll go!”

Holding her close, Draco sank back into the sofa cushions, but he was suddenly far from relaxed. Staring up at the play of light and shadow on the ceiling, he couldn’t help the small wave of apprehension that crept over him now. He trusted his mother implicitly, of course—but still… in all the time he and Hermione had been together, she had only been inside the Manor twice—once, officially—and not at all since that last time in early January. Nine months. Even he had scarcely
been home in all that time. What in the name of Merlin could his parents want suddenly?

Whatever it was, it would keep, he decided, resolutely pushing it out of his mind. There were more important things to think about before that, namely getting this bloody reading done by the end of the day and then making sure he and Danny had the telly reserved for tomorrow afternoon’s match-up between Leicester and Henley. Thinking about the rugby match got his thoughts drifting along connecting lines next. Refreshments. Much as he liked his Guinness, what he wouldn’t give for a bottle of fine, aged Ogden’s to enjoy during the match—he’d bet anything that Kirman would appreciate the stuff as much as he did. Ah well. No point in thinking about that. It was a line that couldn’t be crossed.

*

Monday afternoon
30 October

“Yuck! I forgot how slimey this stuff is!”

Hermione giggled as Gemma held a hand up coated with stringy orange pulp and pumpkin seeds. “Just deal with it, Martin! And then I can work on the rest. You definitely have the cushier job, you know!”

Gemma blew a lock of hair out of her eyes and eyed the pumpkin dubiously before sticking her hand back in. “Yeah, well, that’s easy for you to say!”

The two girls were seated on the kitchen floor, newspapers spread out before them. They’d cut the top off their pumpkin, a nice, fat one bought that morning in Tesco. They’d taken it in turn to carry it back home, huffing and struggling up the stairs with it. And now they were working on readying the round, orange globe for its next incarnation as a splendid jack-o-lantern.

Gemma laboured a few minutes longer, removing as much of the mushy stuff in the centre of the pumpkin as she possibly could. Then it was up to Hermione to scrape out the meat of the pumpkin from all around the sides and the bottom. This would be saved for cooking later. There were some wonderful recipes for sweet pumpkin bread, scones, and pie that she remembered her mother making every year at this time.

At last, the pumpkin had been sufficiently hollowed out and the task of carving the actual design could begin. Meanwhile, out in the back garden, Danny and Draco were similarly engaged, the time slot having been agreed by the four with the proviso that nobody would sneak around to peek at the opposition’s handiwork. They were all strictly on their honour.

“Not putting my hand in that. No way. Sorry, mate.” Draco shook his head and sat back on his haunches.

“Come on, you tosser, it’s not that bad! Look, just… okay, I’ll do it, then…” Danny heaved a sigh and plunged his own hand into the orifice they’d created after slicing the top off the pumpkin. Unfortunately, they’d misjudged and started the cut too far down, so that the pumpkin had been nearly bisected. Danny had observed that at the very least, they could always claim it was meant to be some sort of weird, giant vampire clam.
“Reasonable,” Draco had remarked, nodding.

The sketch he’d done lay on the paved patio floor beside the protective newspapers they had also spread as a work surface. He wondered, now, how well the design would translate now that they were actually doing the thing. Then he brushed away the nagging doubts. Even if it did look a bit strange when it was done, surely it would be better by far than whatever Hermione and Gemma would come up with. They’d probably do some sort of poncy, little-kid design like triangles for eyes and a big, snaggle-toothed grin meant to look evil. Typical.

“Oi! Come on, then. Your turn!” Danny’s voice broke into his reverie, and Draco took the large spoon he was handed and began to scrape the insides vigorously.

TBC

Max Schreck as the horrifying Count Orlok in “Nosferatu”
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Read more about “Nosferatu” here:

http://eric.b.olsen.tripod.com/nosferatu.html

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nosferatu
Tuesday evening
31 October
Hallowe’en

The two finished pumpkins sat regally on the coffee table in the sitting room, each covered with a towel, awaiting their official unveiling. That would happen when all the friends arrived. It would be down to them to vote on the winner.

Draco had grabbed the bag containing his costume and vanished into the bathroom to dress. That was fine with Hermione, as her costume had remained a steadfast secret as well, and she planned on making a grand entrance. Gemma and Danny were busy dressing in their room, their shouts and snorts of laughter reverberating through the adjoining wall and making Hermione giggle as she leaned closer to the mirror, deftly plying the black eyeliner pencil around her lids.

A soft knock on the door made her pause.

“Yes?” she answered sweetly.

“Are you ready?” It was Draco. “Because I am. Can I come in now?”

“Just one more minute! Nearly done.” She gave herself a last, quick look in the mirror, licked her lips, and then called, “Come in!”

The door opened slowly, and then a foot poked its way inside.

“Woo-hoo! Come on, Malfoy, let’s see some more, then!” Letting out a raucous wolf whistle, she clapped her hands.
She could hear him laughing softly to himself, and then there was a bit more of his leg, clad in a cuffed, black leather boot and above that, loose trousers. And then the door swung open all the way, and Draco the Buccaneer stood there in all his glory. He wore a loose, burgundy-coloured shirt open at the neck and showing a good deal of his toned chest, a long, brown coat over that, belted trousers that hung low on his hips, a small gold hoop in the ear he’d had pierced, and on his head, a rakish black bandanna. A fake cutlass was looped into a notch in his belt. He looked, Hermione decided, altogether scrumptious.

Funnily enough, that very same word was filling Draco’s thoughts as he got his first look at Hermione. She’d decided to dress as a faerie, but a decidedly naughty one. A very short, skimpy green dress held up by spaghetti straps was rent with holes everywhere and covered in a layer of black mesh, three black leather straps bisecting her middle from below her breasts to just above her navel. Ripped black tights and sheer black faerie wings, slightly ragged and hanging from her back somewhat askew, completed the outfit. On her feet she wore a pair of black stilettos.

“Gods, Hermione…” he breathed, his eyes raking over her form hungrily. “You look fucking amazing.”

She came closer, laying a hand on his bared chest and then slipping it under the fabric of the shirt to find a nipple already erect. “So… do… you…” she whispered, teasing it lightly. “Good enough to eat! How did you know I’ve always had a thing for pirates?”

He chuckled, and the sound of it started a pleasant tingling between her legs. She pressed her thighs together, squirming a little. At this rate, she’d have to change her knickers before they went out.

“I didn’t,” he replied huskily, smiling down at her, his eyes dark now. “But I liked it, and I thought you might do as well. Seems I was right…” Bending to nuzzle the side of her neck, he caught her earlobe between his teeth and gave it a little tug.

“Mmm… yes…” she sighed distractedly. “But… oh!… We have to go now… No, stop, Draco!” Giggling, she pushed herself back a bit, only to have him yank her flush against him, catching her mouth in a long, hard kiss.

Finally, he released her, satisfied. “Now I’ll stop, milady.” Bowing low, he gestured towards the bedroom door, giving her bum a quick pinch on the way out.

She was still laughingly brushing his wandering hands away as they emerged into the sitting room and sat down to wait.

“Right, you lot ready for us, then?” Danny called from down the hall.

“Ready and waiting!” Hermione called back. She glanced at Draco and they exchanged a grin. This was exciting. She’d tried all week to find out what their friends would be wearing, attempting to worm it out of Gemma every sneaky way she could think of, but to no avail.

“Right, close your eyes!” Gemma’s voice was getting nearer. “Okay… now… open them!”

There, in the centre of the sitting room, stood Magenta and Riff Raff in the flesh.

“Who the fuck are you two supposed to be?” Draco exclaimed, incredulous. “I mean, fantastic costumes and all, but who are you? A French maid and Igor?”

Danny and Gemma stopped dead and stared, first at each other and then at Draco.

“No way, Malfoy--you’re having us on, right?” Danny said slowly, “You don’t mean to say you’ve
never seen ‘Rocky Horror’?”

Draco shook his head and Hermione allowed herself a small, wistful grin. Of course he wouldn’t have known about it. How could he have done?

“What’s ‘Rocky Horror’?”

Gemma hit the heel of her hand against her forehead and groaned. “God, where have you been anyway? Oh yeah, I forgot—the wilds of remotest Scotland. Jeez, Draco—it’s a film and you positively have to see it! ‘The Rocky Horror Picture Show.’ It’s been around for absolutely ages. It’s a classic! You’ve seen it, Hermione…haven’t you?”

Hermione nodded. “Yeah, ages ago. Once.”

Gemma and Danny exchanged a look that quickly turned conspiratorial. “Right,” Danny announced, his smile wickedly smug. “Slight change of plans. We’ll go to the Magic for grub and some music and whatever, and then, my friend, we are going to the official midnight showing of ‘Rocky Horror.’ It’s at the UPP. It’s an annual Hallowe’en tradition. But first,” he grinned, waggling his eyebrows mysteriously. “First we have to arm ourselves! Come on, Gem, let’s see what we can dig up!” He grabbed her hand and the two of them ran off, laughing.

“What…?” Draco began, confused but most definitely intrigued now.

“You’ll see!” Hermione laughed, giving him a quick kiss on the tip of the nose. “It’ll be great.”

There was much opening and closing of drawers around the flat, and muffled conversation, although at one point, Hermione and Draco did catch what sounded like “Bugger! What happened to my watergun!” and “Have you got the toilet paper?”

Before very long, Gemma and Danny were back, a plastic bag in hand.

“Right, now we just have to wait for everybody else,” Danny said, sitting down on the sofa and absently twirling a long, blond lock of his wig around a finger. “Shouldn’t be long now.”

And indeed it wasn’t. Within ten minutes, the buzzer rang and they could hear footsteps clattering up the stairs and then a raucous banging on the door.

It seemed that everybody had decided to come together, and so, at ten past eight, a rowdy band of six colourfully costumed people burst into the flat, laughing and joking. Maggie and Mark had come, along with Susan and Tony and Steve and Gillian. Chris and Fiona had already made plans, but a quick call from Danny to Chris on his mobile let them know about the late-night plans, and they agreed to try and catch up with the group at the cinema instead.

“Blimey, Holdstock, that get-up suits you down to the ground! Er… what are you supposed to be anyway?”

A very dignified, “Sperm, of course. And Gil’s the egg.”

“Oh, right! Should’ve known, yeah. Sperm and egg.”

“Oi! Spencer! Come and have a look at Draco here. Doesn’t he look dashing! We better keep a close eye on our ladies!”

“Too right! If I’m not careful, I might just snog him myself!”
“Brilliant costume, Suze! I love it!”

Stage whisper: “Thanks! Tony’s already tried to rip it off twice!”

Attendant giggles all around.

Finally, in the midst of all the commotion, Draco held a hand up, shushing everyone.

“Right,” he said. “I know you’re all perishing with thirst, but first we need you lot to judge a contest for us. Pumpkin-carving, to be exact. We have here…” He swept his arm towards the two covered pumpkins on the coffee table. “…one pumpkin carved by yours truly and Kirman, and one carved by our lovely ladies. We ask that you view the results and decide, on a scale of one to ten, how they rate for originality of design and proficiency of execution. Now, without further ado…” He reached out and whipped the cover off his and Danny’s pumpkin.

Several sharp intakes of breath and “ooh”s greeted the sight of the jack-o-lantern, but after that it was silent as six pairs of eyes scrutinized the artistic handiwork before them.

The pumpkin had become a glowering face, light from the candle inside streaming out as malevolent rays from the beady, narrow eyes and mouth. It had been turned on its side so that the stem served as a huge, hooked nose. Pointy ears had been cut on the sides and pulled forward, flap-like, and light from the candle poured out from those two orifices, like a stream of liquefied brain matter. But the piece de resistance was the mouth: cruel, unforgiving and rapacious, it was open in a perpetual scream rather reminiscent of the painting by Munch, but with a twist: a pair of hideously long, sharp fangs protruded from it.

After several minutes during which the six judges came up close and inspected the pumpkin from all angles, Mark gestured for Hermione to remove the cover from the other one.

Danny and Draco had been standing behind the pumpkins and hadn’t actually seen the girls’ work at first, but now they moved forward. Involuntarily, their mouths dropped open and they stared, along with everybody else.

It was a thing to behold. A very round, wide pumpkin in shape, its centre had been carved out to suggest the very house they were all in. Every window, every door, the intricate brickwork, arches and gables—all of it was there in incredible detail. In the golden, light-suffused sky above, there were tiny, delicate stars and a crescent moon, and from every window light poured welcomingly, all of it backlit by several spice-scented candles inside. In one of the windows and beside the front door on the ground level, there were a pair of tiny, glowing jack-o-lanterns. Finally, standing on the sides of the house, there were two silhouetted couples obviously meant to represent Gemma and Danny on one side, and Hermione and Draco on the other.

For several minutes, nobody said a word, and then everyone began talking excitedly at once, so that nothing intelligible could be gleaned from what they said. Finally, Mark gestured to everyone, drawing them into a huddle, and for a moment or two, their voices dropped to a low hum within the circle. And then they separated, Mark moving forward to speak for the group.

“Well, you lot, you’ve set us a hard task with this. Because both jack-o-lanterns are fantastic. They’re also very different, aren’t they… so it’s a bit like comparing…”

“Apples and oranges,” somebody put in.

“Chalk and cheese,” another voice piped up.

“Yeah, exactly.” Mark’s voice was laced with mild sarcasm. “Anyway, on a scale of one to ten, for
“And utter brilliance of execution?” Draco suggested cheekily, waggling his eyebrows.

“Thanks, Malfoy,” Mark snorted. “Give us a chance, yeah? As I was saying, we agree that for originality of design, this pumpkin—which reminds me rather a lot of that movie, what was it? ‘Nosferatu’!—”

Here, Danny poked Draco triumphantly. “Told you!”

—deserves a nine. Because as good as this is, and it really is great, very creepy indeed—scary pumpkin faces aren’t exactly new. For execution, though, like I said, a perfect ten. Overall, great job, you lot!” He saluted Draco and Danny amidst the applause. They took rather stagey bows and then fell back, grinning. Nineteen out of twenty. Not too shabby.

“Now,” Mark continued, “getting on to the other pumpkin. This is a real work of art. Beautiful design, you two!”

Gemma preened with obvious pleasure, and Hermione gave her a quick, excited hug before turning back to listen.

“Ten for design, but if we could, we’d give it more, because honestly, this is amazing. And for execution… a ten as well. Because it really is beautifully done. Can’t find a single thing wrong with it. It’s quite extraordinary. How long did it take to carve, anyway?” Mark asked, leaning forward to get a closer look.

“About three hours, once we got started,” Gemma replied. “We took it in turn, after the design was drawn on with a marker. It helped to have an Exacto knife. Made the tiny cuts much easier to do cleanly.”

“Absolutely fantastic. Well,” he sighed, “it was close, but the final score was nineteen for the guys and twenty for the girls. And now, what about that drink? I think we’ve earned it!”

The four flatmates repaired to the kitchen to gather up some wine, glasses, and bottles of beer, the girls sneaking triumphant glances at each other all the while. The boys, however, were unusually quiet. As soon as they were behind closed doors, Hermione turned with a gleeful smile.

“Well, well, it appears that although the score was close, we have a clear win. And that means…” She moved closer to Draco, sliding her hands up his chest until they came to rest on his shoulders, and her voice became very soft. “… that you are essentially my slave for the next five days. I rather think I’m going to enjoy this.”

“That’s tonight through next Sunday, you do realise,” Gemma grinned. “I believe I’d like a glass of that wine now, Daniel.”

“I’ll have some too, please, Draco,” Hermione said sweetly, patting him on the cheek.

He shot her a look of dismayed disbelief and followed Danny to the table, where the beverages had been set out earlier. “Sod it all, Danny!” he hissed. “They’re going to make our lives hell for the next five days! This was not on the cards! I mean, what the fuck… how could we have lost?”

“Hubris, old son. It’ll get you every time,” Danny said sagely, and poured out a glass of wine for his lady. “Theirs was better, that’s all. We just have to eat this.”

Suddenly, Draco brightened. There was a silver lining to all this, he felt sure. And eating was a
definite part of it. This could actually turn out to be fun. Perhaps he’d begin this very night, surprise her with a special, late-night snack between the sheets. He suspected there would be something tasty for him as well.

* *

As promised in the adverts, the Magic Café’s annual Hallowe’en party was a lively affair. The open microphone meant that anybody who wanted to sing, play an instrument, do standup comedy, read a poem or tell a ghost story was welcome. There was one price for all you could eat and drink, and the food and spirits were plentiful. Most everybody arrived in some sort of costume, even if it was just a pair of fangs or a headband with furry ears attached and a tail pinned to one’s bum. It was crowded and exuberantly noisy.

The ten of them squeezed themselves around a corner table more comfortably meant for six and looked at the special menus for the evening. Somebody in a werewolf outfit was at the microphone, belting out an old chestnut, “The Monster Mash.” Badly.

“Spinach and potato pie, I think,” Maggie mused. “Anybody fancy sharing some nachos for starters?”

“Oh, yeah, I will!” Gil chirped. “I love nachos!”

There followed some discussion about the merits of the various salads versus the pasta dishes, the general consensus being that the lasagne was the best bet.

“What looks good to you, Granger?” Draco murmured into her hair as she leaned back against him. “Because I know what looks good to me.”

Even here, in a crowded café full of commotion, he could do it to her. She reached back and lightly stroked his face, trailing her fingertips along his jaw to his chin before turning and giving him a teasing smile.

“Oh, I don’t know… maybe the leek and potato soup and a big salad,” she replied innocently. “And some French bread. I’m famished!”

“Tease!” he whispered in her ear, and she could hear the smile in his voice. “Woman, you are maddening sometimes!”

“I try,” she sighed mischievously, and then perked up, pointing. “Oh, look!”

A trio of musicians, students by the look of them, had seated themselves before the microphone. All three were dressed in long, flowing black outfits and wore glow-in-the-dark earrings shaped like pumpkins, skeletons, or cauldrons. There was a smattering of polite applause and then the flautist stood.

“Thank you,” she said with a small curtsey. “We are Bachanalia, and we hope you enjoy our music. Happy Hallowe’en!”

They began to play a lilting Baroque air on flute, mandolin and dulcimer. The room fell nearly silent for the duration of the piece and then erupted in genuinely appreciative applause when they’d finished.

The music continued, but now small pockets of conversation resumed all around the café as people ate and drank. There was a constant stream of traffic as costumed newcomers arrived and others squeezed around the crowded tables to reach the ladies’ or gents’ or refresh their drinks.
“Are they going to have a costume judging?” Suze wondered. “They really should do. I mean, look at what’s here tonight!” She gestured around her at the myriad ghoulish, creepy and otherwise bizarrely dressed denizens of the café. “And you two” --she pointed at Danny and Gemma-- “— should definitely enter, because you look incredible! Sexiest Riff Raff I’ve ever seen, Danny!”

“Oi! Watch that!” Gemma said, pretending to frown, and then laughed, squeezing Danny’s arm. “He really is, isn’t he!”

Danny merely grinned, enjoying the attention, and leaned back in the booth, draping an arm lazily around Gemma.

“I think Hermione and Draco should enter as well. They look smashing!” Maggie piped up. “Where ever did you find that costume, Herm? It’s gorgeous and so decadent!”

“Ordered it online, actually,” Hermione replied. “I didn’t even know what I was looking for, but then this just sort of jumped off the screen at me!”

“No complaints,” Draco murmured, fingering the mesh that covered her skimpy, leaf-green frock and then lightly resting his fingertips on her bare shoulder. “You can dress like this all the time as far as I’m concerned!”

“Oh, right!” Hermione snorted, rolling her eyes. “Fancy me showing up for a tutorial with Greenlow in this! He’d think I’d lost the plot completely!”

“No, he’d be on the pull, more like!” Gillian sniggered, and then she grew serious. “I see how he looks at me sometimes. It’s a bit creepy.”

“Ugh, yeah, I know what you mean,” Hermione muttered. “I’ve noticed the same thing. Somebody ought to say something.”

Draco’s face darkened almost imperceptibly, but he remained silent.

“Thing is, nobody can unless there’s something definite to report! There’s got to be an incident. Otherwise, it’s just our word against a tutor’s.” Susan sat back, disgusted.

“Even then, it’s our word against a tutor’s,” Hermione exclaimed, her eyes flashing.

“That’s one drawback, one of the very few I think, of the system we have here,” Steve put in. “It’s not just to do with sexual harassment, which, by the way, can happen in reverse as well. It’s really anything untoward that could take place in the confines of a tutorial.”

As the others carried on discussing the issue, Draco pulled Hermione close, his mouth to her ear.

“He hasn’t ever tried anything with you, has he, Granger? Greenlow, I mean. If --”

“No, no, I promise! Don’t worry!” she whispered, and gave his hand a squeeze. He remained unconvinced, however, his grey eyes still dark with concern even as the conversation progressed and everybody got busy with their food.

As their rather decadent desserts arrived finally, a tall figure wrapped in a long, swirling black cloak stepped up to the microphone, a large, leather-bound book in his hands. With a grand flourish, he swept the hood away from his face, the skin chalk white with reddened lips and red-rimmed eyes. He smiled slowly, revealing a pair of sharp, white fangs, and opened the book.

“Good evening and happy Hallowe’en,” he began, scanning the crowd with dramatically hooded eyes. “I would like to share a passage from one of the most influential novels of the Gothic genre and
a particular favourite of mine: **Dracula** by Bram Stoker. Close your eyes and let the words carry you away…”

He began to read, and again, the noise dropped away to near-silence as his rich voice cast its spell.

“… I thought at the time that I must be dreaming when I saw them, they threw no shadow on the floor. They came close to me, and looked at me for some time, and then whispered together. Two were dark, and had high aquiline noses, like the Count, and great dark, piercing eyes, that seemed to be almost red when contrasted with the pale yellow moon. The other was fair, as fair as can be, with great masses of golden hair and eyes like pale sapphires. I seemed somehow to know her face, and to know it in connection with some dreamy fear, but I could not recollect at the moment how or where. All three had brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips.

There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. It is not good to note this down, lest some day it should meet Mina's eyes and cause her pain, but it is the truth. They whispered together, and then they all three laughed, such a silvery, musical laugh, but as hard as though the sound never could have come through the softness of human lips. It was like the intolerable, tingling sweetness of water glasses when played on by a cunning hand. The fair girl shook her head coquettishly, and the other two urged her on.

“One said, ‘Go on! You are first, and we shall follow. Yours is the right to begin.’

“The other added, ‘He is young and strong. There are kisses for us all.’”

“I know him!” Hermione said under her breath. “That's Ian Markwood! He's reading English. I see him around the department offices sometimes. I'm pretty sure he acts in the Oxford Revue.”

“I lay quiet,” Ian continued in a seductive near-whisper, now commanding the attention of the entire room, “looking out from under my eyelashes in an agony of delightful anticipation. The fair girl advanced and bent over me till I could feel the movement of her breath upon me. Sweet it was in one sense, honey-sweet, and sent the same tingling through the nerves as her voice, but with a bitter underlying the sweet, a bitter offensiveness, as one smells in blood.

“I was afraid to raise my eyelids, but looked out and saw perfectly under the lashes. The girl went on her knees, and bent over me, simply gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth.

Lower and lower went her head as the lips went below the range of my mouth and chin and seemed to fasten on my throat. Then she paused, and I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips, and I could feel the hot breath on my neck. Then the skin of my throat began to tingle as one's flesh does when the hand that is to tickle it approaches nearer, nearer. I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the super sensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in languorous ecstasy and waited, waited with beating heart…”

“Wow…” Gemma breathed, her eyes wide. “Herm, have you a copy of that book? I'd like to read it!”

Hermione nodded, grinning. “Pretty visceral stuff, isn’t it! Practically porn, by Victorian standards!
Stoker was dealing with some very taboo subjects for those times. Actually, Gothic lit has always done that, even as early as the eighteenth century.

“All that repressed sexuality oozing out in the form of vampirism, incubi and succubi, lots of blood and phallic imagery, symbolic rape, the subconscious going out of control in dreams, all sorts of dark stuff like that,” she added.

“And… these sorts of novels… they’re about creatures such as vampires?” Draco asked quietly.

Hermione nodded again. “Vampires, ghosts, goblins, demons, werewolves, witches and wizards… I think that people are fascinated by the idea of power beyond what they themselves can see or understand.”

“Or have,” Gillian put in. “That’s why fantasy and sci fi are so huge as well. We want to believe all of it, don’t we, because it’s so appealing.”

“Same reason everybody loves Hallowe’en, isn’t it. Because all sorts of things we know aren’t real are okay to believe in tonight,” said Danny.

Draco sneaked a pointed glance at Hermione. She sensed his gaze on her, lifting her eyes to his for a fleeting moment before returning them steadfastly to her cake.

Before they knew it, it was half eleven and time to leave if they wanted to make the midnight showing of the film. The walk along the Cowley Road to the cinema wasn’t a long one. The night air had turned chilly, the sky a mass of heavy, iron-grey clouds. They flew silently and swiftly over the dark expanse of sky, pushed by wind that bent the treetops to its will. When the clouds parted for brief moments, the moon appeared, shining like a beaten silver coin set in an unearthly aura of gold.

By the time they arrived at the Ultimate Picture Palace in Jeune Street, there was a fairly sizeable queue made up of multiple incarnations of Magenta, Riff Raff, Columbia, Rocky and above all, Dr. Frank-N-Furter. Taking it all in, Draco’s eyes nearly popped out of his head.

“What the bloody hell…” he began, laughing in astonishment as he looked around at the many guys in fishnet tights, garters, black leather bustiers and high heels, their eyes and eyebrows heavily made up and their lips a pouty flame-red. Many of them wore shoulder-length, curly black wigs as well.

“Malfoy here is a virgin, you see,” Danny explained to the others in a confidential tone.

“Fuck off, Kirman!” Draco sputtered, startled, setting off a round of snickers.

Holding back a giggle, Hermione laid a hand on his arm. “It just means you’ve never seen ‘Rocky Horror’ before, especially not like this.”

“Oh,” Draco muttered, with a small, chastened grin. “Anybody else here a virgin too?”

The lights went down and a pair of giant, blood-red lips appeared on the black screen to sing the opening song. And for Draco, it was all downhill—or sideways—or something—from there.

From the moment he found himself being pelted with rice, to the chants of “arsehole!” and “slag!” when the romantic leads were on screen in the car scene, to the showers of water squirting in graceful arcs from countless water pistols as rain poured down in the film—Draco grabbed the newspaper that Danny thrust in his direction and hastily covered his head, like everyone around him—to the volleys of toilet paper rolls that accompanied an exclamation of “great scott!”, he was
gobsmacked. It was a roller-coaster ride of rapid-fire surprises, and all he could do was watch everybody around him and just try to keep up.

That was impossible where the audience’s verbal responses were concerned. There were just too many. One would either have to be a Rocky Horror junkie or have a script in hand. So he gave up trying on that score. As for the rest, well…he did have help from Danny and Gemma, who apparently were Rocky Horror junkies—Danny confessed he’d been to see it interactively at least twenty-five times already—as well as Tony, Steve and Gillian, all of whom were veterans as well. Even Hermione was able to whisper a helpful hint now and then, in anticipation of the next bit coming up.

It was she who yanked him to his feet and gave his hip a titillating bump when the first notes of “The Time Warp” sounded. And then, as the entire room jumped up and began to do the steps, he found himself waving his arms, moving to the left and right, and gyrating right along with them.

Altogether, an eye-opening experience.

“‘Night, you two,” Gemma called as she and Danny made their way down the corridor. It was well past two.

“‘Night,” Draco and Hermione echoed. He walked wearily to the bed as she closed the door behind them. Leaning against it, she kicked off her shoes, a tired but satisfied smile on her face.

“That was fun,” she sighed, stretching her arms over her head with luxuriant, cat-like grace. “Have a good time, Malfoy?”

He paused in the middle of pulling off a boot and chuckled. “Shit, yeah! I’m still… I can’t fucking believe that whole Rocky Horror thing! I didn’t know Muggles--”

“Sshh!”

“Oh, right, yeah… sorry!” Draco dropped his voice low. “I didn’t know Muggles could be so… so…”


“Bloody insane, more like, but all the rest of it too, yeah!” He yanked off the other boot with a grunt, tossing it to the floor. “Merlin, that book, the one that Ian bloke was reading from at the café—Dracula? Bloody hell! Fantastic! And what everyone was saying about Gothic and fantasy lit—it’s just… I had no idea Muggles were—are—so into our world.”

“Our deep, dark secret, you see,” she teased, sitting down beside him on the bed. “Only difference is, Muggles have no clue just how real all of it is. I sometimes think about what would happen if they knew. Really knew.” She turned slightly. “Help me with my wings, please?”

Deftly unfastening them, he lowered his mouth to the nape of her neck and pressed warm lips to the skin there.

“Mmm… that’s lovely…” she sighed. “Must get undressed, though… totally knackered, love… Need sleep…”

“Let me,” he murmured, and she felt his fingers smoothing their way down her back and around the curve of her bum, to find the hem of the dress. Carefully, he drew it up over her head and was
happily confronted with the sight of Hermione in only a lacy, black strapless bra, an absurdly tiny pair of matching knickers, and sheer black, thigh-high tights. Her eyes were closing as she leaned back against him. He noticed that too.

There was a sudden tightening in his groin and he bit back a growl. “You’re heartless, Granger, you know that?” A disturbingly erotic image flitted into his head and reluctantly, he shook it off. Even he wasn’t that much of a perve. He’d always preferred a woman to be conscious when they fucked. And this was Hermione. *His* Hermione.

“Come on, sweetheart, up you get,” he sighed, lifting her legs and easing her down onto the bed. “Lift your bum for me.”

Pulling the coverlet out from under her, he tuckered her up, and then finished undressing himself. By the time he slipped, naked, into bed beside her, her breathing was soft and even.

“Hermione,” he said quietly, reaching out to smooth a stray curl from her cheek. Her skin was so smooth, he couldn’t resist letting his lips linger there. The delicate scent of apricots from her hair filled his senses, enticing him.

When she rolled over to nestle sleepily into his warmth, he was more than ready to receive her. One small hand found its way to his bum, where it traced small, ticklish circles. He wasn’t certain if she were awake or asleep now, or in that dream state halfway between the two, but his body was demanding that he investigate further.

“Um… Hermione?”

The hand that had been tickling the smooth, round cheek of his bum now moved around to his crotch, burrowing into the soft curls of his pubic hair and then to his very erect penis and scrotal sac.

Oh, she was awake all right. He let out a small moan and squeezed his eyes shut.

It was the most exquisite torture and he wanted more, pressing himself against her hand as it pumped up and down. And then, abruptly, it stopped, leaving his cock throbbing with want. A few agonising seconds passed before—*fuck, yes!*—he felt himself being taken deep into the warm, wet recesses of her mouth.

*So. Fucking. Good.*

Time slowed nearly to a halt and he drifted in seas of intensifying pleasure. And then, suddenly, the slow burn her touch had sparked in his balls flamed to life, raging along his shaft, and there was fuck-all he could do to hold it back.

“Granger,” he gritted out somewhat desperately, “I’m… uh… I can’t…”

And then it was all over, his cock pulsing hard as he emptied himself into her mouth.

The next thing he knew, she had emerged from beneath the covers, smiling and licking her lips as she opened her arms to him.

“Trick or treat!” she said with a playful wink.

“Oh, treat. *Definitely,*” he replied, his voice low and silky as he reached behind her to unclasp her bra, baring her breasts to his gaze. “But I mustn’t be selfish. I was taught to share.”

He had her knickers and tights off in a trice, commencing a dedicated mapping of every inch of her
skin with his mouth. Every freckle received a kiss, every gently undulating hill and valley he travelled as he worked his way down from her peaked nipples to her ribcage and then to her slightly rounded abdomen were worshipped with lips and tongue and teeth. Breathy sighs and the slight quivering of her skin spoke her pleasure.

Gently he parted her thighs, showering them with tiny kisses, his breath warm against the sensitive skin. Now open to his gaze, his own late-night snack glistened like a dewy flower before him.

Hunggrily, he moved in to devour her.

“Treacle toffee.” She grinned smugly, leaning forward to kiss the tip of his nose. He was still buried balls deep inside her as she straddled him, unwilling to let him move. His hands snaked around to rest on her bum. Then he pinched her, eliciting a surprised squeak. A quick stroke of the backs of his thighs in retaliation, and then she added another sweet to her personal list of favourites. “And nougats.”

“Chocolate creams.” His grin was boyish and impossibly smug. “Top that.”

“Chocolate *frogs.* Ha!”

“Mocha fudge. It’s sublime. Better than just about anything.”

“Even better than…?” Another stroke, this one venturing a bit further afield. His cock twitched back to life inside her.

“Uh… no. Not quite.” *Nothing’s as good as that.* Yum.

“Better.” She smiled lazily. “What about jelly babies? The really sticky ones.” Holding his gaze, she licked her lips slowly, and his cock gave another twitch. She could feel that he was almost fully hard again.

“Nope.” She’d nearly got him with that one. Then he had an inspiration. “Mars Bars. Chocolate on the outside and all that nougat and caramel on the inside. Soft and sweet and wonderfully *gooey.*” *Like you.* On that last word, he reached up to cup her breasts, slowly caressing her nipples with the pads of his thumbs.

*Oh…* A soft sigh escaped her. That was it, and she knew it. Moreover, she knew that he knew it.

He looked up at her, his mouth quirking in a tiny, wicked smile as he felt the creamy result of his words seeping into the dark-blond curls of his pubic hair where they were joined. And then he pulled her down so that her breasts were crushed against his chest and her face hovered just above his. His eyes glinted triumphantly.

“Got you, Granger.”

She contracted her inner muscles around him and the smile she gave him now was devastating. “About time, Malfoy.”

And then she kissed him.

Sweet.
Jack-o-lanterns by Robert Gusick
Recognise Mad-Eye Moody?

And Harry?
Rocky Horror Picture Show
Tim Curry as Dr. Frank-N-Furter
Richard O’Brien as Riff Raff

Dr. Frank-N-Furter, Columbia, and Magenta

Chapter End Notes
A/N:

Disclaimer: Not mine, except for the plot and original characters. I make no money from this story.

Eternal thanks to my lovely betas, kazfeist and mister_otter! Your support and the help you offer when I need to bounce ideas around are invaluable!

The magnificent manips of Hermione and Draco in their Halloween costumes were done by the very talented Mystik_Rose, aka Cheryl, from pics I sent her. Thank you, Cheryl, for your fabulous contribution to this chapter!

Robert Gusick carves masterful jack-o-lanterns! You can find out more about his artistry here:

http://pumpkins.gusick.com/

The passage from Dracula came from chapter three. If you haven’t got a copy of the book handy, you can read the entire thing here:

http://www.literature.org/authors/stoker-bram/dracula/

“The Rocky Horror Picture Show” was released in 1975 and has been a cult classic ever since. It was based on the stage production written by Richard O’Brien, who played Riff Raff both on stage and in the film. If you saw the film “Ever After” with Drew Barrymore, you might remember him as the lascivious nobleman who acquires the Cinderella character as a servant and tries to rape her.
1 November
Wednesday, late morning

“Do I look all right?”

Hermione smoothed down the skirt of her frock for what, Draco was certain, had to be the hundredth time in the space of the last hour. He looked at her, poker-faced.

“Well… I didn’t want to tell you this, but honestly, that frock doesn’t suit you at all. Sorry, love.”

For a split second, he knew he had her going. She stared at him, her eyes going quite round, and then they narrowed and she broke into a knowing grin.

“Prat!” she muttered. Turning back to the mirror, she scrunched the curls and waves with her fingers and fluffed her hair out one last time, and then licked a fingertip, leaning nearer to the mirror to rub a bit of errant mascara off the corner of her eye. “Look, um… I was wondering… were you planning to tell your parents about these?”

She held out her left hand, where the silver promise ring glinted in the bright light that suffused the room.
“I hadn’t thought,” Draco replied slowly, “but now you mention it … suppose I ought to, yeah? I mean, it’s… well… you know…”

She did know. Undeniably, a promise ring meant a great deal. It still scared her a little bit sometimes, when she really thought about just what it did signify, but she couldn’t deny the depth of her feelings for him. And that scared her too, sometimes, knowing how exposed and vulnerable her heart was now, how deeply entrenched he was inside it, and how much damage he had the power to do if he left her.

For his part, Draco had wanted to proclaim the powerful feelings he had for Hermione in a more visible and concrete way for some time. Although he knew he’d acted impulsively and perhaps even a bit precipitously in creating the ring, it had been a fervent leap of faith mixed with a good deal of hope.

And so—yes, it was time to tell his parents that they’d moved forward. More than time. They needed to know that he had no doubt whatsoever about what he wanted and what sort of life he intended to make for himself. Whatever it would be, wherever it would take him, he wanted Hermione there too.

“So,” he repeated firmly, no longer even a little bit unsure about the answer. “Absolutely.”

The smile she gave him then was dazzling. It lit her entire face, extending even to her eyes. Unconsciously, she patted the ring, her hands dropping into her lap as she steadied herself. Then she looked at him brightly.

“Ready to go, then?”

—

The entry hall of the Manor was exactly as Hermione remembered it from the last time she’d been there—had it really been ten months ago? Her arm was still looped through Draco’s after side-along Apparition from a safe point in Bellewether Crescent had deposited them there.

She’d insisted, first, on buying something nice to bring—it was the proper thing to do when a guest in somebody’s home, she remembered her mother always telling her. And so they’d stopped at The Third Eye and hunted about for something unusual, Hermione finally pouncing on a small, quite beautiful mirror for Narcissa’s dressing room. It could be hung decoratively, of course, or used as a tray to display some of her small, glass baubles and perfume bottles—but it was a powerful scrying mirror as well, for one who knew how to make use of it. From what Draco had told her and she had observed on her own, Narcissa was one such witch.

Hermione had insisted upon a present for Lucius as well, not wanting to be obviously rude by omission, first and foremost, but also intuiting that it would be the right thing to do. Neither of them could ignore the obvious effort he seemed to be making. The enchanted map on their sitting room wall reminded them of that every day. But just as important, Hermione wanted to show that she could rise above the past and reach out to both the Malfoys, for Draco’s sake. So they had gone into The Bindery, where they’d stumbled upon a rare copy of Farquahr’s Mediaeval Spellcraft, a book very difficult to find because it had gone out of print years earlier.

“That one,” Draco had said decisively. “He’ll love it.”

‘Oh, but…’” Hermione had begun. It was clearly too expensive for them to split the cost evenly.
Draco had shaken his head. Her stubborn insistence on splitting everything fifty-fifty was endearing—truth to tell, he had to respect it, too. Apart from everything else, it told him without a doubt that it wasn’t his money she was in it for, but him. That in itself was refreshing. But there were simply times when his financial wherewithal was the purely pragmatic and sensible solution to a problem. This was one of those times when he could make possible something that would otherwise remain out of reach.

“It’s my father, and I love that you feel it’s important to give him a gift.” *Especially under the circumstances.* He’d understood that even now, going to the Manor couldn’t be entirely easy for her. “But look, Hermione, this book is expensive. If this is what we buy, I certainly don’t expect…”

Well, that was pointless. He’d already known she was far too proud and fiercely independent to go for what he’d been about to propose. He’d decided to switch tactics.

“We don’t have to get him this. We could find something else.” He’d looked carefully at her.

“But… you really think he’d like this one?” she’d asked, in a small voice.

He’d nodded. “Absolutely. Magical history is a passion of his.”

“Okay, then,” she had said firmly. “Let’s buy it. I’ll just… I’ll just give you—”

“Well, that was pointless. He’d already known she was far too proud and fiercely independent to go for what he’d been about to propose. He’d decided to switch tactics.

“We don’t have to get him this. We could find something else.” He’d looked carefully at her.

“But… you really think he’d like this one?” she’d asked, in a small voice.

He’d nodded. “Absolutely. Magical history is a passion of his.”

“Okay, then,” she had said firmly. “Let’s buy it. I’ll just… I’ll just give you—”

“Whatever you can now, and pay me back later for the rest.” They had both known that he would never ask her for it, and that nevertheless, she would pay him back eventually. “It’s fine, Granger, really.” Slipping an arm about her waist, he’d given her a quick squeeze.

Now she looked around at the high ceiling and long, curving staircase with its highly polished wood banister. The elegantly appointed front hall was quiet in this first moment of their arrival, and then suddenly, a door burst open behind the staircase, and a house-elf came bustling out, her hands outstretched. It was Missy, Draco’s wizened, old childhood nurse, and her large, kindly eyes were shining.

“Master Draco! Oh my goodness, I is so happy to see you!”

Even now, it was strange—and heartening—to realise that despite what she knew of the way Lucius Malfoy had abused Dobby years before, there were other house-elves in service to the Malfoys who actually had a very warm relationship with the other two members of the family. Missy was one such.

“Missy, you old thing, it’s good to see you too!” Draco smiled, and took her tiny hands in his. “Where are my—”

“Draco, darling, and Hermione! You’re here!” Narcissa had emerged from the blue drawing room, a vase of assorted flowers in her hands. “I didn’t hear you come in. I’m so pleased you both could come!”

Handing the flowers to Missy, she wound her arms around her son for a warm hug. Her eyes closed momentarily as she held him, seeming almost loathe to let him go, and then she laughed, a light, tinkling sound as she released him.

“Never mind your silly mother, darling. I’ve just missed you, that’s all…” She turned to Hermione then. “I’m so pleased you’re here. May I…?” Tentatively, she opened her arms, and, a little surprised, Hermione stepped into them. Behind his mother, Draco caught Hermione’s eye and winked.
“Oh!” Hermione remembered suddenly. “Here!” She thrust a square box wrapped in iridescent silver paper and finished with a burgundy bow threaded with silver towards Narcissa. “This is for you. Draco and I… We thought you’d enjoy it.”

“Why, thank you. Thank you both,” Narcissa murmured, touched, and then spotted the other wrapped box that Draco held. “Is that…for your father, Draco?”

He nodded.

“Would you mind terribly, then, if I waited to open this until you’ve given him his gift?”

“No, not at all,” Hermione reassured her hastily. Stupid, stupid… Should have waited, not been so over-anxious…

Meanwhile, Narcissa had looped her arms through both of theirs, and was drawing them towards the tall, double doors immediately on their left.

The blue drawing room was bright with early-afternoon sunshine as Narcissa beckoned Draco and Hermione to sit.

“Your father will be with us shortly,” she told them, settling herself on one of the sofas. Hermione sat very close to Draco on the adjacent sofa. Her hand sought his, and now he sandwiched it between his own, patting it reassuringly.

Almost as if on cue, the double doors opened and Lucius appeared, pausing for just a moment before entering the room. Both his son and Hermione stood in place, and he went to them.

“Draco,” he said calmly, offering his hand.

“Father, hello,” Draco replied, briefly accepting Lucius’ handshake, and then turned to glance quickly at Hermione. Apart from seeming a bit paler than usual, she seemed perfectly composed.

“Miss Granger,” Lucius began a bit stiffly, the barest hint of a smile on his face. “Welcome to our home once again.”

“Thank you, Mr. Malfoy.” Hermione stuck her hand out. It looked very small, suddenly, inside Lucius’ much larger one. “We were pleased to receive the invitation.”

An uneasy moment passed as she carefully withdrew her hand, and then everyone sat down again, Lucius by his wife’s side. There followed a minute of awkward silence and finally, Draco cleared his throat. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, Hermione nipped in ahead of him.

“Mr. Malfoy, this is for you. We hope you like it.” Hastily, she handed the wrapped book to Lucius and then sat back, a tiny smile on her face.

Caught off guard, Lucius appeared completely nonplussed for a moment, and then recovered his natural poise. “Thank you… both of you,” he said finally, and then glanced at his wife. She held up her own gift, smiling, and began to unwrap it.

“Oh, children, it’s simply lovely!” she exclaimed, holding up the small, exquisitely detailed mirror. “And… my stars, is this what I think it is?” Gazing intently at the mirror’s surface, her face seemed transformed. Hermione wondered what it was she was seeing in the mirror’s depths.

“How appropriate this is for today,” she murmured to herself, and then smiled brightly at Draco and
Hermione. “It’s wonderful! I shall treasure it. Thank you.”

In the meantime, Lucius had removed the wrapping paper from his own gift, and was now staring in frank fascination at the cover of the book.

“Where ever did you find this, Draco?” he asked, at last. “I have tried to locate this particular volume for years.”


Lucius turned a cool, appraising gaze on his son’s girlfriend, an eyebrow arched slightly. “Did you now?” There was the barest hint of surprised appreciation in his voice.

Hermione coloured slightly. “Yes, well… it’s the sort of book I love to read myself, so naturally, when I saw it… And then Draco told me you were interested in ancient spells, and so… we thought…”

“It was a good choice. I thank you both,” Lucius said rather formally, but his eyes flitted back to the book and Narcissa could see that he was itching to open it and begin perusing the contents. She smiled to herself and settled back comfortably, a small sigh escaping her.

Another of those awkward silences passed and then Draco opened his mouth once again.

“Quite honestly… we’re a bit puzzled. It’s… well, we appreciate the invitation to lunch and all, but why so suddenly? Is anything wrong?” Draco’s eyes travelled over both his parents’ faces and then settled on his mother’s.

“Not at all, dear. It’s just that… surely, you both realise what today is.” She paused, searching both Draco’s and Hermione’s faces for a sign of understanding.

“Samhain,” Hermione murmured. There was a slight, nearly imperceptible flicker in Lucius’ eyes as he sat back, crossing his arms. The Muggleborn was quick with the right answer, even faster than his son, who certainly ought to have come out with it immediately.

“Yes, that’s right. And as both of you know, it’s a very significant date in our calendar. Among other things, it’s a time when we give a good deal of thought to the past, to our ancestors, to our own behaviour, and of course, to the future. We study the tarot, we cast the runes, we throw the bones and read tea leaves, we interpret visions in scrying ponds and mirrors…” She held up the gift with an enigmatic smile. “All these things we do as we contemplate what is to come in our lives. But…”

Here she paused, looking intently at the two of them. “We are not helpless to alter the future. This we know too. What happens is, to some degree, within our own hands to control. For some time now,” and here she looked directly at Draco, “your father and I have been doing a great deal of thinking about the past… about past actions and, frankly, regrets. In the last couple of years, we have been forced by circumstances to consider how we will choose to live from this point on. We also know without reading the tarot or casting a single rune that you have made some very important choices, and one of them is Hermione. Samhain marks the new year, and as such, it is a time to think about new beginnings. So we have asked the two of you here today in order that we might say what needs to be said before things go any further between you.”

Such a pronouncement was the very last thing Draco had expected, and judging by the startled, even apprehensive look on Hermione’s face, he could safely say the same of her. Her fingers tightened around his, although her small, composed smile remained steady. However, neither was prepared for
what Narcissa said next.

“Draco, dear, would you excuse us please? We would like to speak with Hermione alone.”

Now Hermione shot a quick, panicked glance at Draco, willing him to refuse. He gazed at her, feeling the apprehension in her eyes, wanting—trying—hard to reassure her without words. Bugger this helpless feeling! He was on the point of refusing to leave when he caught his mother’s eye.

Gently, she shook her head. Her smile was warm and kind, and suddenly, he knew it would be all right. She would not allow Hermione to be hurt in any way. Reluctantly, he let go of Hermione’s hand and looked down at her.

“It’s okay, love. I’ll be just outside.”

*

Time is a funny thing. We can measure it with a variety of timepieces. We can plot it on a graph. We can know, with the absolute certainty of scientific logic, that there are sixty seconds in a minute, sixty minutes in an hour. And yet, the perception of time is a fickle, capricious creature. It can throw all that logic and knowledge out the window without a care, and then play its whimsical tricks on the mind, dragging minutes into hours, making seconds seem like small eternities.

If Draco had bothered to check his watch when he left the drawing room to wait in the entry hall, he’d have known later that a mere twenty minutes had passed before the door opened again and his mother beckoned him back inside. It had felt like far longer.

Cautious because he didn’t know what he’d find, but intensely curious nevertheless, he went in and sat down beside Hermione, his eyes seeking hers for answers. She winked at him and suddenly, he felt all his muscles go slack with relief.

“Draco, I couldn’t help noticing,” Narcissa began, her smile engaging, “that both you and Hermione are wearing matching rings. I take it this isn’t a coincidence…?”

“No, it isn’t.” Draco took Hermione’s hand and grinned. “We… well… they’re promise rings, actually. We exchanged them in Rome.”

“So the Portkey came in useful, I see,” Lucius remarked. “You did go after all.”

For the most part, Lucius had remained characteristically taciturn, so the suddenness of his comment took Draco by surprise. “Yes, we did. Thank you again, Father. For helping to make it possible.”

Lucius smiled slightly, inclining his head in his son’s direction.

“Ah, Rome…” Narcissa sighed, clasping her hands together. “One of my favourite cities in the world. So romantic!” She smiled warmly at Hermione. “You were celebrating your birthday, were you not, my dear?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, and it was the best birthday I think I’ve ever had, thanks to Draco! I’ll never forget it!”

“And… were those rings a part of the celebration?” Narcissa’s smile had turned mischievous now.
Hermione blushed prettily. “In a way. We were making wishes at the Trevi Fountain, and Draco surprised me with it. He Transfigured a coin, see?” She held out her hand for inspection, allowing Narcissa to examine the ring more closely.

“My goodness, Draco, what a lovely gesture. I assume you did it wandlessly as well? Impressive. And you’re wearing one too, made the same way, I assume?” She glanced quickly at Hermione, and then, pointedly, at her husband. *Talented girl.*

Draco nodded, grinning. “Different, aren’t they!”

His mother laughed. “I should say!”

She thought suddenly of the magpie-like twittering that would go on within their social circles once the news of these promise rings got out. She bit back a laugh, imagining the consternation that would arise because there wasn’t a huge diamond involved, and because it wasn’t an official engagement. Well, her friends would simply have to content themselves with a good wallow in the trough of disapproval and their own rampant speculations, for all she cared. *She* knew—even if nobody else did-- that there would be a wedding in the future, but that it would happen in its own good time. In the meantime, the less said, the better.

“But look, Mother—don’t tell anyone how they were made, yeah? It’s our secret,” Draco added hastily.

“Of course,” Narcissa agreed. “I understand. And now—” She glanced at the mantel clock. “You must tell us all about your trip to Rome over luncheon. Shall we?”

Rising gracefully to her feet, she took Hermione’s arm and the two of them led the way out of the drawing room, Draco and his father bringing up the rear.

*\

Lunch was delicious and far more relaxed now that the official purpose of the visit had been accomplished. Afterwards, Draco and Hermione excused themselves, and he took her up to his room on the pretext of retrieving a couple of books he wanted to bring back to Oxford. Still lingering over second cups of the richly aromatic coffee and helpings of the pear tart, Narcissa and Lucius watched them go. Lucius’ expression was carefully veiled, just what his wife had expected. He was never one to wear his thoughts and emotions on his sleeve, although she knew that he was always thinking, assessing. Her smile was far more openly expressive of the overall relief she was feeling at the moment.

Once she was sure that Draco and Hermione were upstairs, she quietly closed the double doors and turned to Lucius.

“It went well, don’t you think? Although…” Narcissa allowed her voice to trail off provocatively.

“Although?”

She sighed deeply. “I wish you had been a bit more forthcoming, Lucius. You allowed me to do virtually all the talking for both of us.”

“It’s quite simple, my dear. You have more of a rapport with the girl.”
“Oh, come! What you say is true, but the fact is, this is your house and what went on here was the direct result of your involvement with the Dark Lord. What happened to that girl here was dreadful. Frankly, I am amazed that she is able and-- even more to the point -- willing to be under our roof. It is a testament to the love she has for our son that she is here at all. From here on, we must do whatever we can to make her comfortable. She is a part of Draco’s life now, and I’ll wager that eventually, she’ll be a part of this family. You sensed this yourself, months ago. Well… I have said what I needed to say to her.”

She paused to take a sip of her coffee, setting the china cup down in its saucer carefully before gathering herself to continue. “But Lucius… until she hears it from you as well, the painful memories will always intrude on any new ones she and Draco will make together. Surely you must know that.”

Lucius rose from the table, cup and saucer in hand, and crossed to the French windows. Gazing out at the bleak November landscape in the Lady Garden, all of it grey and bare now, shorn of its sumptuous summer beauty, he set his mouth in a grim line. With his back still to his wife, he replied in a voice that was wearily perfunctory.

“Isn’t it enough that I accept the relationship? I have tried to show that I do. I am unfailingly polite, even cordial, to her. When I gave Draco his birthday present, I hoped that he would understand the true import of the gift, that it was meant to be for the both of them in their new home, to demonstrate my acceptance of her.” And then he turned back, frustration cracking the controlled veneer.

“Merlin’s sake, Cissa, what do you expect me to say?”

Narcissa’s eyes flashed, and she, too, rose from her seat at the table. “At the very least, that you regret the pain she suffered here! Lucius…” She sighed, her tone softening again. “I know how difficult it would be for you to offer an actual apology to the girl. But no, it’s not enough that you merely accept the relationship. Not nearly enough! Not anymore. Do you imagine that these sentiments should simply remain tacit, that they needn’t be expressed?”

In a voice heavy with resignation, Lucius answered finally. “No. Not with things as they are now between her and Draco. You are right, of course. But damn it, Cissa… damn it all…”

She was by his side in a flash, reaching for his hands and clasping them tightly. “I know, darling. I know. Please… just think about what I’ve said. You’ll find a way.”

His arm slid around her shoulders as hers wound itself around his waist, and together, they stood silently, watching as scatterings of leaves, brown and fragile, were swept up in a sudden, small maelstrom of wind.

Meanwhile, in the calm and silence of his room, Draco was stretched out in the centre of his generous bed, Hermione curled up alongside him. They lay quietly for a few minutes, until Draco could no longer contain his curiosity.

“Well? What did they say, Granger?”

“It was your mum, really… she’s incredible! She told me how deeply they regretted all of it now, their association with Voldemort… their part in the war. And then… Draco… she apologised for what happened to me here two years ago. For what your aunt did… everything. And she said… she said they wanted to make amends, if I would let them, and hoped I could eventually feel at home here. Can you imagine? I was stunned!”

Suddenly, Draco felt his throat closing. Unable to speak for a few seconds, he swallowed hard, pulling Hermione closer.
And then a fragment of what she’d just said resurfaced. “‘They’? She said ‘they’?”

He could feel her head bobbing up and down against his chest. “Yes. Your father didn’t say much, really. Your mother seemed very anxious that I know she was speaking for both of them, though.”

The bitterness in his voice was unmistakeable. “What a surprise. My father’s silence, I mean. Reckon if you told me he’d actually said something—especially anything remotely resembling an apology—I’d pass out from shock.”

“Not very forthcoming, is he,” Hermione murmured, and then caught his eye. He gave a derisive snort and they both laughed at her little joke.

“No, he is most definitely not that,” Draco sighed at last, and the bitterness was mixed with unbidden regret. “Growing up, I heard very little out of him except what he called ‘constructive criticism.’ Sometimes he didn’t even bother hiding behind the phrase. Fact is, I could never please him. And he was never wrong. Ever. He would never admit he’d made a mistake or say he was sorry for anything.” Looking away, he began idly toying with a lock of her hair, twirling around a finger and then letting it unwind before capturing it once again.

Hermione turned her face up to gaze at him. He seemed to have disappeared inside the circle of his own thoughts, just beyond her reach. Gently, she reached up to trace a finger along his cheek.

“Well, anyway, what your mother said meant a great deal to me. And about your father… you know, I think maybe he wanted to say something, but… well…he looked… I don’t know… like he was struggling with himself… as if a part of him were on the verge of saying something, but he just couldn’t bring himself to do it. There was just something in his eyes, you know? He was holding the book the entire time too. Every once in a while, he would look at it and then at me, with the oddest expression on his face.”

“I do believe he rather likes you, despite himself. That must be absolutely killing him!” There was a certain base pleasure in the idea, and Draco couldn’t help a grudging smirk.

Hermione giggled. “You think?”

“Mmm.” His features relaxed then and he laughed softly, giving her a fond squeeze. “I do. He really doesn’t stand a chance in hell, though. Between my mother working on him and you charming the pants off him, I mean.”

“What about you, then?” she asked softly, tipping his chin in her direction.

“Me?” His voice was quiet. A long moment of silence followed, and she could feel him retreating again. “No. He wrote me off years ago.”

That night—

“Come to bed, Cissa.”
The soft light from the hearth flickered gently, casting long shadows on the walls of the master suite. Narcissa sat at her writing desk, an array of parchments spread out before her. The scratching of her quill stopped momentarily and she turned as she felt her husband’s hands on her shoulders.

“I will soon. I’m just finishing.”

Lucius peered down over her shoulder at her papers, curious about the task that had so consumed her for the last hour. “What’s all this?”

“Oh!” She gave a light, musical laugh. “Menu plans and guest lists for our New Year’s Eve party. Never too early to begin, you know. It’s only two months away, after all.”

A corner of his mouth rose in a wry half-smile. That was his wife, ever the organiser. “Ah, well… I’ll leave you to it then. Don’t stay up too late, my dear. Goodnight.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

A slender hand reached up behind her to find the nape of his neck, holding him close for a moment. “Goodnight, darling.”

Once he’d gone off to bed, she settled herself again and reviewed guest lists saved from previous years. The names were so familiar that she might have recited them in her sleep. She tapped the end of the quill against her bottom lip, a small frown furrowing her brow. And then… Of course. She dipped the quill, quickly adding a pair of new entries. Sitting back, she reviewed her handiwork and nodded, satisfied. There. Perfect.

As she blew out the candle and made her way silently to the large, canopied bed, a curiously secretive smile stole over her face. This would be a New Year’s Eve nobody would soon forget.

TBC
Bare Trees

Bare trees, grey light…
Oh yeah, it was a cold night…
-- “Bare Trees”
Music and lyrics by Danny Kirwan

The meadows and far-sheeted streams
Lie still without a sound;
Like some soft minister of dreams
The snow-fall hoods me round;
In wood and water, earth and air,
A silence everywhere.
-- from “Snow”
Archibald Lampman, 1861-1899

Wednesday, 6 December

Fat snowflakes began to fall in lazy, random swirls at midday. By two o’clock, a light frosting laced the bare, dark tree branches, thinly blanketing the tops of shrubs, lawns and roofs. As darkness fell, the world was silently shrouded in pure, glistening white.

The flat was unnaturally quiet as well. On a whim, Danny and Gemma had taken off for Paris for a few days. She had a friend who was studying there and would give them a place to crash. Hermione was out doing some shopping and she had been vehement about not having any company. Draco
had arched an eyebrow, a faint grin lifting a corner of his mouth, and said nothing more beyond
wishing her a productive afternoon. With a quick kiss and a wave, she had disappeared down the
stairs and out the door.

He sat at the desk by the bedroom window, watching the snow fall as evening stole the light from the
sky. He’d spent the earlier part of the afternoon sprawled on the bed with a novel he’d picked up at
Blackwell’s a few days earlier, a bit of pleasure reading now that Michaelmas term had ended and
their winter vacation had begun. Then he’d closed the book and wandered over to the desk, his eye
falling on the leather-bound journal that Hermione had bought for him at this time a year before.
They’d spent a stolen day and night in Glastonbury, well away from family, friends, and anyone else
who knew them from the wizarding world. Whilst there, they’d exchanged presents to celebrate the
Winter Solstice.

The journal lay open on the desk now, a more discreet and innocuous Biro replacing the quill and
magical inks that had been part of the gift. Those were carefully locked away along with his wand
and other valuables. In a curiously reflective, almost melancholy mood, he’d given in to the urge to
look back to earlier entries, and began reading snatches of thoughts he’d had on random days over
the past year. And then the pages fluttered shut beneath his palms, and he gazed out at the snow. It
was coming down much harder now, sticking to the window screen in large, white, cottony clots.

Hard to believe that it had been exactly a year ago that they’d said goodbye and gone off to their
respective childhood homes, facing an incredibly long six weeks apart. The sharpness of the memory
was powerful enough to sting, even as he recalled it now: standing in the entrance to Staircase 2,
they’d clung to each other as if to reassure themselves that they together were real and wouldn’t
dissolve like smoke in the wind. He remembered the very palpable pressure lodging in his chest as he
watched her climb into her parents’ car and drive away—the uneasy feeling that something much too
precious and fragile to relinquish this soon was now moving out of his grasp and far away, that it
was more than physical miles that would separate them as Hermione returned to the non-magical
world in which she’d grown up, and he went back to the house that was the embodiment of
everything in the wizarding world he’d chosen to leave behind two months earlier. She’d asked him
to write, and that had reassured him, but still…what would these environments and the people in
them do to their resolve, to the very new and lovely thing that was now between them? He’d
determined then and there that nothing would damage it, that he wouldn’t let it—that he would find a
way around the obstacles of six long weeks and one hundred miles and parents and expectations.

And now, amazingly, here they were a year later, and evidence of her was everywhere he looked.
On their bed, an old, worn plush horse in faded brown velveteen had pride of place amongst the
pillows. It was Hermione’s favourite, the one she’d chosen to bring with her from her room at home,
dating from when she was three and her father had surprised her with it one night at bedtime. Sparks,
she’d called it, for the glittery specks that dotted its mane and tail. Atop her chest of drawers, there
were various small bottles and jars—nail varnish, lip gloss, body oils, scents-- a small bunch of dried
flowers hanging by a blue satin ribbon from a corner of the mirror, and the remains, in varying sizes,
of several scented candles he’d bought her in Glastonbury. To his delight, there was also a photo of
the two of them taken by her dad a year before. She’d had it framed and it had travelled with her
from her room in Staircase 2 to their shared bedroom here in number 236, Iffley Road. A book she
was currently immersed in waited alongside it for her return. A pair of her tights hung drying on a
rack in the bathroom.

Altogether, it was a rather remarkable and improbable thing, this road they’d travelled together. Even
now, sometimes, he found it hard to believe that the two of them had actually arrived at this juncture.
Already, they’d been in the flat nearly six months, which was amazing enough in itself. Glancing
down at the journal entry dated 27 December 1999, he smiled a bit wistfully. He could remember
precisely where he’d been and how he’d felt when writing those words.
My first entry. Never kept a journal before. Not sure what to write about, really. Always reckoned this was a rather girly thing to be doing, gushing about feelings and all. But I have to say, I’m dead chuffed. I like that she knows there’s shit that needs sorting, and that she wanted to find a way to help me do that.

It’s been four days. I miss her.

30 December 1999

FUCK. That was a near miss! Bloody stupid of me, leaving that hotel receipt in my pocket. Not sure about Mother, but I know Father didn’t believe a word I said. No great surprise, as the whole thing was complete bollocks. What is surprising is that neither of them called me on it. Bit nerve-wracking, that. I wonder what he’s got up his sleeve?

Ah, who cares? Tomorrow night is going to be bloody brilliant. They’ll never even miss me.

Of course, they had missed him. And they’d demanded an explanation for his disappearance from their New Year’s Eve party in an unforgettable confrontation mixing tension with elements of the absurd and even some rather embarrassing near-slapstick on his own part. He cringed now, remembering how close he’d actually come to accidentally flashing his own parents before they’d made their presence in his room known.

Draco closed the journal and switched off the desk lamp, blinking for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness. In a moment, the room was bathed in shadows shot through with buttery light from the streetlamps outside and the ghostly pallour of the falling snow. It got dark so early now. He glanced quickly at the clock on the desk. It had only just gone five.

He sighed, unconsciously fingering the promise ring he wore on his left hand. So much had happened in the past year.

He was still sitting at the desk in the dark, watching the large snowflakes as they blew nearly sideways, when a key turned in the front door.

A moment later, Hermione was at the bedroom door, her cheeks rosy with the cold.

“Hey,” she began brightly, rubbing reddened hands together, her curls glistening with tiny droplets of melting snow. And then she looked at him quizzically, her voice growing soft as she moved to stand behind him, her hands resting lightly on his shoulders. “What’s up, love? Why are you sitting here in the dark?”

Draco gave a quick laugh, covering her hands with his own. “No reason. I was just... I was reading, and then I started watching the snow. Reckon I lost track of time.” He reached for the lamp switch, but Hermione stayed his hand.

“No, don’t, it’s so pretty like this,” she said softly, leaning over to wrap her arms around him and leaving a light kiss on the lobe of his left ear.

Quickly, Draco pulled her down into his lap, threading his arms securely around her. “Better,” he murmured, sprinkling her face with tiny kisses. “Beautiful.”

“What, me or the snow?” Hermione teased, laughing.

“The snow, of course,” he replied, pulling a wide-eyed, angelic expression. “Isn’t that what we were
talking about?”

“Hmm, you’re lucky I’ve just bought your Solstice presents, brat,” she said fondly. “Otherwise, it would be nothing for you, for such a disloyal and impolitic answer!”

Draco perked up. “Presents? For me?”

“Don’t even think about trying to worm it out of me! I’m not talking!” Hermione said sternly, wagging a finger at him. “And you’d best not go looking, either! A very nasty hex is what you’ll get if you do.”

“I give up!” He threw his arms up in a gesture of surrender. “I promise to restrain my insatiably curious nature and not go poking about in wardrobes or under beds or in whatever other obviously obscure spots you’ve decided would be perfect hiding places. However…” There was a wicked gleam in his eye. ‘I haven’t promised not to extract the information by other means…”

There was a five-second pause in which Hermione froze on Draco’s lap, and he looked back at her with a slow, evil smile, and then she launched into a frantic scramble to get away just as he tightened his grip on her with one hand and began to tickle her mercilessly with the other.

“Stop!” she gasped finally, on the tail-end of a bout of hysterical laughter, her voice high-pitched and quavery. “I mean it, Malfoy, I can’t breathe!”

They’d rolled off the chair onto the floor and he’d got her pinned beneath him. He had both her wrists in a firm grip over her head whilst his other hand was busy torturing her belly and armpits with tickling pinches and jabs.

He knew that particular tone of voice. He’d heard it before when he’d pushed her into such a state. With Hermione, prolonged laughter could turn unaccountably to tears in an instant. Taking one look at her flushed cheeks and heaving chest, he let her go instantly, gathering her close in a protective, calming embrace. A wet stain was already spreading in the centre of his shirt where her face was pressed.

“Okay, okay, calm down, now, love,” he soothed. “Breathe. That’s it.”

Her chest still rose and fell violently against his, but before long, he could feel her breathing becoming more regular. With a small hiccough, she looked up at him with a tear-stained, sheepish grin.

“I feel so silly,” she murmured. “I don’t know why this always happens to me!”

“Doesn’t matter,” he replied philosophically. “And anyway, you’re cute when you’re being silly. I rather like it when you let go. Side of you I never saw when we were at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Hermione sighed, rolling onto her back. “Swotty little know-it-all, no sense of humour or fun… ugh, I hate that everybody saw me that way!”

“Well, yeah… Not everybody, though. Leastways, not your friends. And as for the rest of us… as for me… well, if I’m going to be honest, I must confess that despite what I believed…” He raised himself up to rest his chin on his hand. “I always wondered what you were like behind closed doors.”

“Did you? Really?” she asked quietly.

He nodded. “Mmm. You intrigued me. And now…” He leaned closer, his breath warming her
cheeks, his voice low and sensuous. “Now the truth has been revealed. I know that you can be a very silly little girl indeed, sometimes… and dead sexy, too, d’you know that?”

There it was, that fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach that still flared, even after all this time, whenever Draco gave her that look, or dropped his voice in that silky way he had, or touched her. Just now, his mouth hovered inches over hers and one hand was tracing tantalising, feather-light circles on her breast.

“Am I?” she whispered, staring up at his sensual mouth and those eyes of his, dove-grey and so soft as he gazed at her, his lids beginning to slip shut as he moved closer.

His answering kiss was eloquent in a way that words could never have been.

By the time they finally roused themselves from the warmth of their bed to hunt up some dinner two hours later, the snow had transformed the world into a frozen, hushed fairyland.

Friday afternoon, 8 December

The envelope was a very pale, creamy green, the stock substantial and costly. Draco tossed it onto the kitchen table, where Hermione sat with a mug of cocoa and her book. She looked up, momentarily startled.

"It's for you," he said, sliding into the chair next to hers and folding his arms, a faint, rather enigmatic smile tipping up the corners of his mouth.

"What is it?" she asked, picking the envelope up and turning it over. It definitely had her name on it. There was no return address other than a post box in Castle Combe, and suddenly she knew who must have sent it. Opening it quickly, she pulled out a pair of cards in that same heavy stock, one of which was clearly an invitation and the other a response. The script was elegantly florid and slightly old-fashioned.

You are cordially invited for an evening of dining and dancing
to celebrate the New Year
Malfoy Manor, Castle Hill
Castle Combe, Wiltshire

Thirty-first December, 2000
Eight o’Clock in the Evening

Répondez s'il vous plait
Your hosts: Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione looked up, her eyes round. "Draco!" she breathed. "Did you know?"

Draco was clearly pleased. "Well," he replied, "not exactly. Though I rather suspected she would do
this-- I mean, after Samhain and all. My mother doesn't do anything by halves. I believe this invitation is meant to tell you something, Hermione."

That "something" was all too plain as far as Draco could see. But Hermione looked down at the invitation once again and then back at him, uncertain.

"Draco…" she began. "Does this mean what I think it does? That I'm being invited as--"

"My girlfriend, yes," Draco grinned. "Officially. This is the first time my parents have ever invited a girl for me, y'know. In the past, I expect Mother was always hoping to match me up with one of her friends' daughters, Pansy or Daphne or whoever. And honestly, I never had anyone I even cared to invite to one of my parents' parties anyway. Usually I made an appearance and then tried to get out of as much of it as I could, along with whatever friends happened to be there. Last year," he added, his grin devilish now, "I couldn't get away fast enough—alone!"

Hermione blushed with pleasure at the recollection of last New Year's Eve. It had been special in so many ways, and she cherished the memory of it. "Well," she replied, her cheeks still warm, "then I suppose I do understand what she wants me to know."

"And not just you, of course," he added. "Think about it, Granger. At least two hundred people who are very prominent in the wizarding community will get that same message. And it's not just about you and me being together and what that means. It's about pure bloods and Muggleborns and everything in between, period. I expect it's going to send shock waves in several directions!" He gave a brief bark of laughter. "Mother will have realised that as well. She clearly intends to send that message."

"Your father too?"

Draco paused, frowning briefly. "Well… I don't honestly believe he is quite as ready to support our being together as Mother is, at this point. But at the very least, he's going along. No doubt, your presence by my side at the party is going to reflect on him as well, send a message about both my parents' views, not just my mother's. He's got to be very aware of that. Shit," he muttered, "I'd love to see the rest of the guest list! I wonder if she's got any more surprises up her sleeve!"

A very important part of that question was to be answered not two hours later, when the phone rang.

They were busy making dinner together, Draco chopping vegetables for steaming and Hermione stirring the cheesy, custardy filling for the onion and asparagus quiche they would have. The sudden, jangling sound startled both of them, and then Draco, who was nearer the wall phone, picked it up.

"Hullo? Oh, hi… thanks, it's very nice talking to you as well… sure, yeah, she's right here. Hang on…" He gestured at Hermione with a quick jerk of the head, mouthing your mother.

Dropping the wooden spoon into the fluffy mix of ricotta and parmesan cheeses, eggs, cream, and seasonings, she hurried to take the receiver from Draco, who stepped back to listen with unabashed curiosity. The timing of this particular phone call had started a surprising but not entirely unlikely scenario spinning in his head, and he couldn’t wait to find out if his suspicions were correct.

“Hi, Mum! Thanks, yeah… I know… (giggles)… he is, that's true…”

Draco pointed to himself with a questioning smile, and Hermione nodded, grinning and rolling her eyes.

“Oh sorry, what was that, Mum?... You did?... When? … Us too. Just this afternoon, actually… Quite posh, yeah… Black tie for Daddy, absolutely… Hmm, that’s an idea… When? Next
weekend… um, yeah, I think that would work. I’ll ask Draco if he wants to come along and hang out with Daddy. Right, okay… Love you too, Mummy… Bye!”

Hermione hung up the phone and turned to Draco with an incredulous smile. “You are not going to believe this. They--”

“Got an invitation too, didn’t they,” Draco finished matter-of-factly. “Reckoned as much.”

Hermione sank down into a chair by the table, dumbfounded. “Surely you didn’t expect your mum to invite my parents as well… did you?”

Draco laughed, shaking his head. “Nope, I can’t say that I did. But knowing my mother, I’m not entirely surprised either.” He paused to shake his head once again, in amazement this time. “Now this… this is really going to make one hell of a statement! Fuck, I wish I had a crystal ball!”

“And the skills to use it,” Hermione reminded him, laughing as she recalled her own impatience with Professor Trelawney’s brand of Divination studies. “That is, if you believe in all that rubbish.”

“Just now, I think I’d give it the benefit of the doubt! Anything to get a preview of some of those old windbags’ faces when they catch sight of your parents!”

Hermione blanched suddenly. It was one thing for her parents and the Malfoys to sit down to dinner together in their children’s flat. That was already a big enough step in her book. But to have her parents cast adrift in a vast and rather intimidating sea of wizards and witches… well, she’d just have to stick close to them for as much of the evening as possible, that was all.

Apparently, her thoughts had paraded themselves across her face like an open picture book. Draco reached out and tipped her chin up, forcing her to look him in the eye.

“I know you’re worried. Don’t be. We’ll make sure they’re okay, promise. I have no intention of letting your parents get fed to the sharks! And I expect my mother doesn’t either, if she took the trouble to invite them. If I know her, she’ll be taking them in tow and introducing them to everyone. I bet she’ll even have them sitting at the head table, you wait and see.”

“You think?” Hermione asked in a small, hopeful voice.

Draco wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, planting a kiss on the top of her head. He allowed himself the momentary luxury of a deep sniff of her fragrant hair, smiling as he rested his cheek against the soft curls, and then answered.

“Trust me.”

Now, when he said it, he was more certain than he’d ever allowed himself to be before that, in fact, she really did.

The train to Watford that next Saturday arrived ten minutes late, and Claire Granger was waiting for them at the far end of the car park. The familiar, forest-green car had sheltered her from the flurries that had begun only moments before their train was due to pull into the station, but now she was outside despite the worsening weather, standing rather incongruously under an umbrella and waving cheerfully as they approached.

“Hello, you two,” she beamed, gathering first Hermione and then Draco into warm hugs. “Look, I was thinking—it’s already past one. We really need to get going if we want to make the most of the
afternoon. And Harlequin will be crowded this afternoon, as it’s the weekend and the weather’s
turning nasty, and it’s before the holidays as well. So—” She turned back to glance at Draco, who sat
in the back seat alongside Hermione. “I was thinking that I’d drop you at the house, Draco, and just
go straight on to the shopping centre with Hermione. Richard is expecting you, and I believe I saw
him rattling round the kitchen, making lunch for the two of you.”

“Sounds fine,” Draco said agreeably, and indeed, he found himself rather looking forward to an
afternoon relaxing with Hermione’s dad. There was just something about Richard that put him at his
ease. In diametric opposition, Draco couldn’t help thinking bitterly, to his own father. Well, there
wasn’t much reason for hope in that area. He sighed, turning his attention to the snow-covered
houses and trees that whizzed past the car windows.

The Grangers’ house had a thick fall of snow frosting its roof. Every shrub and tree, as well as the
front lawn and the low brick wall that fronted it, were similarly cloaked in white.

Claire pulled the car into the drive and turned to Draco with an encouraging smile. “I’ll just ring him
on my mobile, shall I, and let him know you’re here. In case he’s in the cellar or something.”

Quickly she punched in the number and held a hurried conversation with her husband. The next
thing they knew, the front door was opening, and there was Richard, smiling and waving and
beckoning Draco to come in.

“See you later, love,” he murmured to Hermione, grabbing her overnight bag along with his own and
shutting the car door behind him. There was a fleeting moment when the natural impulse to kiss her
was upon him, but he quashed it. Not quite ready to be that free in front of her mother. Not yet,
anyway.

Hermione understood immediately. She winked and blew a quick kiss in his direction before waving
goodbye.

The car eased out of the drive, its tyres crunching on the freshly fallen snow, and Draco turned
towards the house where Richard waited.

“Well, well, Draco, come in! I hope you’re hungry. Lunch is ready. Nothing fancy, mind, just
leftovers, but it’s that bouillabaisse you liked so much, and I threw together a small salad as well.”

He gave Draco a warm pat on the back in passing, and once again, the younger man was struck by
the fundamental difference, not only in demeanour, but in any shows of physical affection, between
Richard Granger, a man of allegedly inferior bloodlines, and Lucius Malfoy, his presumed better. It
raised certain unavoidable questions about what it all really meant anyway, to be truly human. Draco
felt pretty certain he knew the answer to that, and it had nothing whatsoever to do with bloodlines. It
was about something far more profound.

That aside, Draco was still not entirely accustomed to such spontaneous shows of affection except
from his mother and, of course, Hermione, but he had decided some time ago that it was something
he could definitely get used to. Something to do with trust, he recognised-- truly believing that the
gestures weren’t simply hollow and for reasons other than true feeling. Over the years, he’d grown
used to automatically looking for self-serving motives hidden behind what seemed to be genuinely
friendly overtures. Often enough, he’d been proved right, and so his circle of real friends had sadly
grown rather small. “Exclusive,” he liked to call it, but that wasn’t it. Nor was it what he’d have
wanted for himself. It was just the way it was.

Those self-imposed barriers were very gradually crumbling now. Hermione, her parents, and their
circle of friends at uni were all steadily chipping away at them, and whilst the loss of the familiar
walls was a bit scary at times, surprisingly, he was mostly finding their erosion a huge relief.

Now he trailed into the house behind Richard, the enticing odour of the fish stew assailing his nostrils. The kitchen was warm and inviting, and he took the stool alongside the centre island that was proffered, watching as Richard set about ladling out generous portions of the stew into large, ceramic bowls. A colourful salad waited in a large wooden bowl alongside the stew, along with bottles of dressing from which to choose.

“If memory serves,” Richard mused, “you are a wine man, yes?”

Draco nodded as he accepted the bowl. “Yes, though I do like a glass of ale too, now and then. Stout, mostly.”

“Well, I haven’t any stout at the moment, but would you like to give something else a go? I’ve a very good Fullers you might enjoy. Hang on a tick.” He disappeared into the cellar for a couple of moments, returning with a pair of bottles in hand. “Try this on for size, then. Their Old Winter Ale. It’s a favourite of mine.”

“Thanks… uh…”

“Richard.” The older man smiled, one eyebrow raised good-humouredly.

“Richard,” Draco repeated, grinning a bit sheepishly.

Before long, both were sitting comfortably with glasses of deep-amber ale and bowls of the steaming fish stew, as succulent and flavourful as Draco remembered from the last time he’d enjoyed it here a year before. They ate and drank in companionable silence for a while, savouring the excellent meal. And then, Richard put down his fork, took a swig of ale, and looked directly at Draco.

“So,” he began. “It’s been… what is it now? Six months? How are you finding living together?”

Hastily, Draco swallowed the bite of stew he’d been chewing. He hadn’t been expecting such a blunt question, nor had Richard wasted any time asking.

“Well,” he replied, wondering just how frank he wanted to be at this point. Richard was great and all, very easy to be around, but he was Hermione’s father after all. It would be easy for an innocent remark to be taken amiss.

“Actually, you know, it’s been really great. Hermione’s wonderful.”

Richard arched an amused eyebrow. “I know she is, and I’d be the first to say so. But I also remember very well what it’s like when you first move in with somebody, all the adjustments and allowances you have to make to get along. I love my daughter very much, but she is a woman, and therefore constitutionally another species altogether. Or…” His eyes twinkled. “Is she the remarkable exception to the rule?”

The reserve that had kept Draco cautious began to relax then, and he grinned. “Well,” he said again, “as I said, she’s great. But … we have had stuff. Actually some rather funny stuff, thinking back on it now.”

“Oh?” The corners of Richard’s mouth twitched as he raised a bite of stew to his mouth. “Such as?”

And so the stories began to come out: difficulties the two of them had had in reconciling his proclivity for late-night hours with hers for being a confirmed morning person; Hermione’s concentrated campaign to get him to pick up his dirty laundry (Richard nearly choked with laughter at Draco’s description of the various signs she’d made and put up, the last in particular. “That’s my girl,” he chortled. “Enterprising and stubborn. Just like her mum!”); the time she’d finagled him into
cleaning the entire bathroom without magic; the way she was patiently teaching him to cook, despite the time he’d utterly incinerated the potatoes in the microwave; her natural tendency at times to be just a bit… bossy.

Richard nodded empathetically. “Claire can be like that too. How have you handled it? Bit tiresome at times, I know.”

“Um… mostly by nodding my head and then doing what I want anyway,” Draco confessed with a short, embarrassed laugh.

That earned him a fresh snort of mirth from Richard. “Excellent! Just what I do myself. It’s the only way!”

“I bet,” Richard sighed, still chuckling. “Look, I know my daughter. You want to watch that temper of hers. When she gets her teeth into an issue, she doesn’t let up. Her mum’s the same. Tenacious. Remarkable, how alike they really are at times. It’s definitely manageable though.” He gazed at Draco with a canny little smile. “Somehow, I do believe our Hermione has met her match in you.”

Draco glanced away, flushing a bit, but he couldn’t help feeling pleased. He knew it to be true, but he was happy that it was obvious to others, especially somebody like Hermione’s dad. There was a feeling of having been let into an exclusive club of male confidences, a sort of universal fraternity in which the wisdom of the elders was continuously passed down to the next generation when the right time came to share the knowledge. He was moved that Richard would speak to him so frankly, and more to the point, that he believed Hermione had chosen well.

Besides, tenacity, creativity, and ingenuity were ultimately positive traits, and he knew that just as sometimes Hermione turned them to situations that brassed him off, they could also be the driving force behind projects that she got done and brilliantly so, intellectual arguments that really kept him on his toes, and the incredible well of loyalty and love she never failed to show him. All things considered, he was fairly sure he had got the better end of the deal, though he wasn’t about to say so to Richard. Somehow, judging from the easy smile on the older man’s face as he regarded his daughter’s boyfriend, such a sentiment wouldn’t have been believed anyway, and that warmed Draco enormously.

The afternoon passed in easy companionship as the two men relaxed together in the sitting room, watching sport on the telly. There was a hair-raising ski competition on, the ferocity and exhilaration of which had Draco glued to the set. He’d never seen anything quite like it, a Muggle sport that actually approached flying for sheer, raw nerve and insane bursts of speed. One glass of ale led to another, and before long, Draco was sprawled, loose-limbed, on the sofa with Richard in the arm chair, their feet on the coffee table, shoes off. Richard’s head had eventually flopped backwards, and now he was sound asleep, a soft snore escaping him from time to time.

Draco glanced over at him with a smirk, and turned his attention back to the skiers. The latest one had quite literally flown down the treacherous downhill course, its sharp twists and turns seeming to lie insidiously in wait for the lithe athlete who hurtled down the mountainside at breakneck speeds.

The whole thing was amazing, a revelation, and by Merlin, he wanted to try it! Resolved to discuss the possibility of a ski holiday with Hermione, Draco tossed back the last of his ale, his eyes fixed on the screen but his mind racing. They could go to France, or Italy, or the Swiss Alps. He’d heard Danny and Gemma talking about it recently. Maybe the four of them could even go together sometime during this vac. He would pay, if nobody else could afford it. All sorts of plans and ideas began swirling excitedly around his head. At that moment, a key turned in the front door lock and
Claire and Hermione came in, stomping their snowy boots on the mat and then slipping out of them, leaving them on a boot rack by the closet door.

Claire took in the scene and smiled archly. “Well, this is a familiar sight, at least half of it anyway!” At Draco’s questioning look, Hermione jumped in to explain.

“My dad. He regularly falls asleep in front of the telly on Saturday afternoons, watching some sport or other. What’s on this time?” She poked her head around to catch a glimpse of the television screen. “Right. Skiing. Dad loves that. They ski, you know. My parents. They’ve taken me lots of times over the years.”

Draco snapped to attention instantly. “Then… you know how? Are you any good?”

Hermione grinned smugly as she slipped out of her jacket and hung it up. “Not too shabby. Why?”

“Well, see, I was thinking… What about us going skiing sometime this vac? It looks brilliant, and I’d love to learn. You could teach me! Just for a few days, maybe even with Danny and Gemma? What d’you reckon?”

“First of all, no way would I even attempt to teach you—I’m not that good! I wouldn’t want your broken neck on my head!” She giggled at the look on his face. “That didn’t come out quite right, but you know what I mean! I could show you some things, give you pointers, but you’d have to take a class first. Would you be willing?”

Draco thought quickly. He knew he would much prefer Hermione’s instruction, as he felt a bit shy and uncomfortable about finding himself in a class of unfamiliar Muggles with whom he probably had only complete ineptness in common. But he knew that agreeing to the class would be the only way he’d get her to say yes.

“Yes, ‘course,” he smiled. “Whatever it takes. We could go right after the New Year—that still gives us nearly two weeks till the start of term.”

“Sounds like fun! But… won’t it be rather expensive?” Hermione frowned briefly, considering.

“Don’t worry about that. It can be my treat. You know I can easily afford it, and if it’s the only way (I can get to go) everybody can manage it, I’m happy to pay.” He wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her face, rubbing his nose against hers and giving her a quick kiss now that her mother was out of the room. “We can start planning it tomorrow, when we get back home. Gemma and Danny will be back by then, I think.”

“Oh, a ski holiday!” Hermione clapped her hands, suddenly elated. “I haven’t gone in ages! I’m afraid I’m a bit rusty!” She laughed ruefully. “You won’t be the only one taking a class. But oh, it’ll be great!”

Dancing lightly out of his embrace, she scooped up the shopping bags she’d dropped in the middle of the floor. Then she turned back to him with a naughty smile.

“Wait till you see my new frock for the party…” she said, her voice suddenly sultry. He made to pull the box out of the bag, but she stopped him. “Ah ah! You really will have to wait, I’m afraid. It’s a surprise! A very nice surprise.”

With a last slyly naughty smile, she flounced away toward the staircase and disappeared upstairs. He heard her door shut decisively. A surprise, was it? His mouth began to water in sweet anticipation as his imagination took over, thoughts of skiing and snow vanishing in favour of creamy, bare shoulders, plunging necklines, and silken material that clung enticingly. He could hope, anyway!
The remainder of their visit passed uneventfully. Dinner that night was a take-away Indian meal that had Draco frantically downing far more water, even, than wine, until Hermione whispered that a bit of the naan bread would go a lot further to put out the fire that raged in his mouth from all the spices. Gratefully, he tore a wedge off the large, round flat bread, chewing and swallowing quickly, and after that, the rest of the meal was much more enjoyable.

The talk began with the odd bit of family news, and then Richard and Claire questioned them about the term that had just concluded, genuinely interested in both Hermione’s and Draco’s academic experiences. No longer shy about sharing his, Draco was glad, rather, to talk about what he’d got out of his tutorials and all the essays he’d done. Once or twice he caught a secret, knowing glance passing between Hermione’s parents as they listened. He rather liked the accompanying hint of a smile he spotted on both their faces. Apparently, Hermione noticed too, for each time it happened, he felt a quick squeeze of his hand under the table.

“‘You know, Draco,’” Claire said presently, after she’d set out some cake and coffee, “Hermione told us all about your birthday surprise for her. What a lovely and very special thing to have done!”

Draco flushed, smiling shyly. “Well, I knew she’d wanted to go for some time. I’d been planning it for months, actually!”

Hermione swiveled her head round to look at him, askance. “Is that true? Really?” Her eyes narrowed a bit. “I’ve been meaning to ask-- how did you know, anyway? We hadn’t talked about it, I don’t think.”

Draco gave her a Cheshire-cat sort of grin. “No. We hadn’t. That’s true. But remember that big snowball fight we had last winter, Hertford against the other colleges? We went to the KA after for drinks, the lot of us, remember? And you mentioned you’d always wanted to go to Rome. So…” He trailed off, folding his arms smugly.

“Oh my gosh, you actually remembered that? I’m… that’s just… I can’t believe it!” Hermione sat back in her chair, looking alternately astonished and ready to launch herself into his lap. Instead, she settled for a really hard squeeze of his hand and a special smile that spoke volumes about what he might expect once they got back home.

“And…” Claire added, after a delicate pause, “what beautiful rings you are both wearing now. Hermione explained how they came about. Very creative! I love the idea of promise rings. Such a lovely old custom! I wish more young people would invest in it.” She gave a quick chuckle before continuing. “Though I seriously doubt others come by their rings in quite the unique way that the two of you did! Is it common practice to exchange promise rings in the wizarding community?”

Draco considered briefly. “Yes, from what I’ve heard. But even there, I expect it’s really just the pure-bloods who are hanging on to it.”

“Well, I like it. I think it’s wonderful,” Hermione said softly, looking at him with lambent eyes as, unconsciously, she patted the ring gleaming on her left hand.

A moment passed, during which everyone focused their attention on the remains of their sweets and coffee. And then Claire broke the reflective silence.

“Draco dear, before I forget—you’ll find your things in Hermione’s room. I’ve left extra pillows for you, and fresh towels for both of you in the bathroom.” Claire looked at the two of them with a calm, quite matter-of-fact detachment, though it was obvious that a smile and a wink lurked just beneath
the surface.

Startled, Hermione and Draco looked at each other and then nodded, their expressions as deliberately nonchalant as Claire’s words had been a moment before.

“Right, thanks, Mum,” Hermione replied. “Look, let us do the washing-up tonight, yeah? You and Daddy go and relax.”

Claire sighed. “That sounds wonderful, actually! My feet haven’t quite recovered from the miles we must have walked in that shopping centre today! I’m ready for a nice sit-down and some ‘Doctor Who!’”

She got up, pulling her husband from his chair, and the two of them disappeared into the sitting room, followed by the sound of the television.

Shortly afterwards—

“So… I’ll admit—I’m gobsmacked! Did you have any idea your parents were going to do that?” Draco whispered, handing Hermione a newly rinsed plate to be fitted into the dishwasher.

“Uh-uh! I was as surprised as you were, at first! But y’know, it makes sense, really—I mean, after all, we do live together. And my parents are very cool about most things. I sort of expected they would be about this, too, now that they see we’re serious. They realise things are different now.”

He shook his head in wonderment. “I cannot imagine my parents doing something like this, even knowing how things are between us now. It’s just not done in their circles. We’d have to be…”

“Married,” she finished softly, a slow blush creeping into her cheeks.

“Yes. That.” Draco turned and looked directly into her eyes. Hermione met and held his gaze with a clear-eyed one of her own, pink cheeks notwithstanding, and then she took his hand, twining her fingers through his.

“We’ve about finished here. I’m feeling rather tired, yeah? Let’s go upstairs.” She smiled and winked. “Come on.”

No persuasion was necessary.

* *

Thursday, near dawn
21 December
Winter Solstice

Struggling up out of a deep sleep wrapped in the comfortably warm depths of their duvet, Draco groaned. Something was prodding the centre of his back, an annoying poking that wouldn’t stop. Now it moved to his shoulder, jiggling him mercilessly.

With a growl, he rolled over and opened one eye balefully in the darkened room. “Granger, what the fuck?!”

“Wake up, Malfoy! It’s almost sunrise!” Her face was a blurry haze, but he could still see the excitement in her eyes.
“And I should care because…?”

“It’s the Solstice, silly! We have to mark the day! Come on!” There was a pause, and then her voice turned provocatively sing-song. “I’ve got presents…”

It took a moment, granted, but that last word did have the desired effect. The other eye popped open, he rubbed them both, and sat up. “Okay, woman, now that you’ve dragged me out of a perfectly good sleep in which I was dreaming about you, mind…” He grabbed her hand, pressing it to his rather prominent morning stiffy for proof and arching an eyebrow as if to say See? “Let’s have those presents! And they better be good!”

Hermione giggled, reaching under the bed to pull out a large, festively wrapped box.

“Just one?” He pulled his lower lip between his teeth, pouting playfully. And then he laughed. “Is that where it was all this time?”

Smacking his chest lightly, she giggled. “Yes, Greedy! Most obvious hiding place! I knew you’d never look there because of that. And no, as a matter of fact, there are two. One’s inside the other. Here!”

Well, this was certainly worth having one’s sleep messed with. Sitting up with an irrepressible grin that reminded Hermione of a little boy on his birthday, Draco happily took the box into his lap and began tearing at the ribbons and wrapping paper.

Inside, beneath layers of fragile tissue paper, lay an elegant set of dress robes in a deep midnight blue, the colour of the night sky just before it reaches its darkest, most unfathomable point.

“Hermione!” he breathed, lifting the robes partway out of their wrappings. “They’re magnificent! But how did you know I’d be needing them? Because I do, y’know!”

She grinned, obviously pleased with herself. “Well, I remembered about that big bash your parents give every New Year’s Eve, and… okay, I confess, I was snooping round your room when we were at your parents’ house last time, and… well… I peeked into your wardrobe.”

One eyebrow rose in amusement, but Draco kept silent.

“Anyway,” Hermione rushed on, “I noticed that your old dress robes were looking just a tiny bit… tatty… Thought you could do with some new ones.”

“But… you had no idea you’d be invited when you bought them!”

Hermione nodded. “That’s true. I hoped I would be, though. And honestly, after spending time with your mother that day, I wondered if maybe she might invite me this year. But anyway, I knew you’d have to make an appearance, at least. So I thought…”

“They’re brilliant! I love them!” He drew her into a tight hug, squeezing until she began to splutter with laughter, and then he let her go and looked at her seriously. “I… I don’t mean to be indelicate, but… however did you afford them?”

“Well, if you must know, they were having a big sale at Portia Gregory! And I’d been saving for your present for a while anyway. Anyway, let’s not talk about money. There’s still another present, y’know. The small box.”

Releasing her, Draco looked back into the large box and spotted a small, square box, wrapped identically and garnished with a bright, curly ribbon.
The wrappings were off in a trice, and he opened the lid. There, on a bed of cotton, was an elegant tie clip, meant to be worn together with the dress robes. It was in the shape of a tiny dragon with a gleaming sapphire eye, whose highly polished silver body seemed as fluid as a molten star.

Draco was speechless for a moment, and then he found his tongue. “This is amazing, Granger,” he whispered. “Wherever did you find it?”

“That’s my secret!” she laughed, shaking her head. “I’m so glad you like it though!”

“I do! It’s… they’re the most special presents I’ve ever had! Thank you, love!” He leaned over and caught her mouth in a lingering kiss, and then both of them drew back, wrinkling their noses.

“Morning breath!”

“Ew!”

“Come on, let’s brush our teeth, because I’ll want a proper kiss when I give you yours!” Draco grabbed her hand, and the two of them tiptoed down the hallway, biting back laughter as they hit a particularly loud creak in the floor near Danny and Gemma’s closed door.

Back in their room once more, he rummaged around amongst his clothing in the wardrobe, digging deep into the pocket of a pair of jeans he’d hung way in the back. Extracting a pair of small boxes, he turned triumphantly and handed them to Hermione with a flourish.

Eagerly, she tore open the wrapping on the slightly larger one first, and then drew in a sharp breath. Inside was a necklace, a delicate heart made of rose quartz wrapped in silver and suspended from a beautifully worked silver chain.

“Will it go with your new frock?” Draco looked at her with a hopeful smile.

There was a warm spot growing in the center of Hermione’s chest, and she swallowed hard against the tears that began to puddle. “Oh yes! It’s perfect, actually! You still don’t get to see, though!” she added with a shaky laugh. “Not till New Year’s!”

“Oh, okay, can’t blame a bloke for trying!” he groused, giving her a playful poke. “Anyway, here’s the other one. I couldn’t resist. And anyway…” He winked slyly. “Snowe’s was having a sale as well.”

“Ahh!” Hermione nodded sagely as she ripped the wrapping off the second box. “Excellent. I love sales.” And then, “Oh, Draco!”

They were long drop earrings, silver like the necklace, with tiny rose quartz hearts fitted into silvery double crescents that would gleam brilliantly against her chestnut curls, casting sparkling lights on the tawny skin of her throat.

“Gods! I don’t know what to say, except… they’re perfect! Thank you so much!”

And now the tears did come, in earnest, and she buried her face in his shoulder, pressing and rubbing her eyes against his bare skin. Finally, he lifted her up and away, using the hem of her sleep shirt to wipe her face and then his shoulder dry.

“Getting a bit sloppy there, love,” he teased. “Don’t exactly relish a load of bogeys stuck to me this early in the day!”

“Prat!” she giggled, smacking him on the arm. “I didn’t leave any…”
“Merlin, Granger, that’s what I love about you! You’re still so gullible!” Draco grinned and pulled her close again. “Now, let’s have that proper kiss you owe me and we’ll call it even!”

“I think I can manage that,” she murmured, lifting her face to his. “Pucker up, Malfoy!”

The sunrise, which arrived precisely at 8:04 am, went completely unnoticed. They had elected to burrow back into the cosy warmth and seclusion of their bed and each other’s arms, prolonging the sheltering darkness as the dawn of the shortest day finally broke. They would remark on its pale show of light on the snowy garden later… much later. Just now, there were other, more pleasurable things to do.

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The song “Bare Trees” is the title track from the 1972 album of the same name, by Fleetwood Mac.

The song “Snow,” by Loreena McKennitt, can be found on the CD “To Drive the Cold Winter Away” (1987). The lyrics come from the poem of the same title, by Archibald Lampman:

White are the far-off plains, and white
The fading forests grow;
The wind dies out along the height,
And denser still the snow,
A gathering weight on roof and tree,
Falls down scarce audibly.
The road before me smooths and fills
Apace, and all about
The fences dwindle, and the hills
Are blotted slowly out;
The naked trees loom spectrally
Into the dim white sky.

The meadows and far-sheeted streams
Lie still without a sound;
Like some soft minister of dreams
The snow-fall hoods me round;
In wood and water, earth and air,
A silence everywhere.

Save when at lonely intervals
Some farmer's sleigh, urged on,
With rustling runners and sharp bells
Swings by me and is gone;
Or from the empty waste I hear
A sound remote and clear.

The barking of a dog, or call
To cattle, sharply pealed,
Borne echoing from some wayside stall
Or barnyard far afield;

Then all is silent and the snow falls
Settling soft and slow
The evening deepens and the grey
Folds closer earth and sky
The world seems shrouded, far away.

Its noises sleep, and I as secret as
Yon buried stream plod dumbly on and dream.
Resolutions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Sunday, 31 December 2000

Tibby scurried along the vaulted, stone-sided passages of the Manor, muttering to himself crossly. The little house-elf was seriously perturbed. *Everything* had been thrown off schedule this morning, and he didn’t like it one bit.

For one thing, *none* of the crystal had been properly polished, not to his satisfaction at least, and the flowers from the conservatory were still waiting to be arranged on the tables in the Great Hall and the Grand Ballroom. And if he weren’t vigilant, chances were that the ones meant for the smaller cocktail tables in the Great Hall would wind up on the dinner tables in the ballroom and vice versa. He couldn’t understand why the staff were becoming so muddle-headed. A choice word or two was needed with the rest of them, or he would have the wrath of his mistress on his head, and following hers, the Master’s as well. Not a particularly happy prospect.

He stopped by a low wooden table in the Groined Passage and gave a quick tweak to the arrangement of dried herbs that sat in a large, carven trencher there. A beam of sunshine from the nearby casement window poured in, looking almost solid surrounded by the shadows of the passageway, thousands of motes of light mixing with stone dust that went back centuries.

Satisfied, he nodded briefly and hurried off down the corridor in search of his staff, for whom he had a terse but emphatic message already planned and rehearsed. However, he had only just traversed the entry hall, turning towards the stairs that would lead down to the cavernous lower levels and the vast kitchen, when the front door unexpectedly opened.

Tibby froze momentarily. What in the world was going on this day? Mistress hadn’t informed him that Master Draco and his young lady would be arriving *now*. He clucked his tongue and shook his bald head. He really did not like surprises. On the contrary, the keys to a household running smoothly were order and predictability. He made a mental note to be sure the young Master’s room
had been properly aired and fresh linens put on the bed, and that an equal degree of attention had been paid to the nearby guest room.

“Young Master,” he said now, smiling widely as he hastened to the door. “And Miss Hermione! Welcome!”

Draco had pushed the heavy door open and now he held it for Hermione, who slipped inside with a small overnight bag in hand. As he closed the door behind him, he made to heft the garment bag he carried over his shoulder until Tibby reached for it.

“Allow me, Master,” the diminutive old house-elf said, smiling graciously.

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Tibby,” Draco replied, smiling with some embarrassment. He’d grown so used to doing for himself that it was rather strange, in a way, to be back once again in the privileged environment in which he’d grown up, his every whim catered to almost before he’d even formed the thought. A certain residual response was still there, however, he found. Like Pavlov’s dog, he thought wryly. He supposed it always would be.

In the meantime, both overnight bags and the garment bag had disappeared along with Tibby up the grand, curving staircase and into their respective rooms. Hermione looked around, marvelling once again at the quiet grandeur of the generously proportioned entry hall, its sweep and tasteful elegance. Narcissa Malfoy’s stamp was everywhere to be seen, from the priceless antique furnishings to the rich Turkey rugs to the gilt-framed paintings that graced the walls. Doors opening onto the rooms that adjoined the entry hall invited relaxation in utter comfort before generous hearth fires. Hermione knew that the Great Hall and Grand Ballroom were amongst them, and she felt a sudden, small frisson of excitement laced with apprehension, knowing that they must surely be dressed in their opulent holiday finery by this time. The party was a mere five hours away.

Admittedly, she had been curious about the party last year, when Draco had had to put in an appearance as the dutiful Malfoy scion before escaping to celebrate the New Year with her afterwards. But she’d never seriously entertained a desire to be there herself. The very idea of being inside the Manor had still been so disturbing then, so full of nightmarish memories, that it was impossible to imagine celebrating in that same place a mere eighteen months after the horrors she’d both witnessed and experienced.

But another full year had passed since then, one containing events she never could have imagined, much less foreseen. And now here she was, standing with the young man she was crazy in love with in the entry hall of his family’s imposing ancestral home, an invited guest. A rather important one, in fact. All eyes would be on her in a way that suddenly made her rather uneasy. Apprehension became outright anxiety, and she clutched Draco’s hand, giving it a hard squeeze.

He looked at her with a mix of surprise and concern. “All right there, Granger?”

Shaking her head, she laughed uncertainly. “Not really. Bit scared, to be honest.”

Draco opened his mouth and then closed it again, swallowing the glib comment that had been on the verge of popping out. That would have been all too easy. But facile remarks were not what Hermione needed just now. Instead, he slipped an arm about her waist, pulling her close, and made an admission.

“I know. Me too, actually.” And suddenly, in the saying, he realised that it was so. He’d been ignoring the niggling prickles all day, but the truth was, he was a bit apprehensive himself about his and Hermione’s debut as a couple before a sizeable chunk of wizarding’s elite. Not for himself—he didn’t give a toss what any of them thought!—but for her. Because people could be so unpredictable,
so thoughtless and cruel.

A hard little smile lifted the corners of his mouth faintly, and he looked away. He was well acquainted with *that* particular side of human nature.

“Look,” he said finally, “I can’t pretend to know that it’s all going to be okay. Honestly, though, I expect the worst we’ll have to put up with is some whispering.” He gave a wry bark of laughter. “Despite what they might think to the contrary, my parents’ friends and acquaintances are not exactly known for their subtlety. But come on, Granger, we can handle that, can’t we? We’ll be together all the time. In fact,” he joked, “if anything, it might be me needing a bit of that famous Gryffindor courage of *yours*.”

Somehow, put all together, those were the magic words, precisely what she’d needed to hear at that moment. She smiled genuinely then, even laughed a little, looping her arm about his waist and giving him a quick squeeze. “I’ll protect you, Malfoy! Now…” She paused, looking up at him brightly. “Hadn’t we better find your mum?”

*Cheeks flushed with excitement and anticipation and eyes that were almost too bright met Hermione’s gaze as she looked at herself in the large mirror in the guest bedroom. An undeniable twinge of nerves was part of the mix as well.*

The reflection behind her was that of a lovely, comfortable room—spacious and beautifully appointed, not surprisingly, and decorated in restful tones of cream and pale, mint green. As in Draco’s room, down the hall and a twin in terms of overall layout, there was a large window that opened, casement-style, onto a view of the sculpted Lady Garden below. This window was dressed in heavy, cream brocade draperies that matched the spread on the large canopied bed, along with sheer, gauzy curtains in ivory that allowed light to filter in gently.

Just now, though, it wasn’t the way the setting sun fired the sheer curtains with late-afternoon light that was occupying Hermione’s attention. It was the way her new frock clung to her body. Granted, it clung very nicely indeed—like a second skin, in fact, and in all the right, curvy places. A rich, rose silk, it had a barely off-the-shoulder, sweetheart neckline that showed the flawless skin of her neck and shoulders to perfection and a healthy amount of creamy cleavage as well. The bodice was fitted, and the pencil-slim, mid-calf-length skirt hugged her bum nicely, its back slit revealing a generous flash of long, slender leg each time she moved. It was a sensual dress, the fabric a light caress against her skin, and it had made her feel both sexy and empowered. Yet it was tasteful as well—not too much for an occasion such as this, where an awful lot of people would be ready and eager to judge. At least this was what both she and Claire had concluded at the time, as they stood in the dressing room, Hermione turning this way and that before the triple mirrors, pursing her lips and eying her reflection critically before finally turning a dazzling smile to her mother.

“This is it!” she’d proclaimed, delighted, relieved, and completely satisfied.

Now she wondered if she’d been hasty, buying a frock that clung so… well… *intimately* to virtually every softly rounded curve she possessed. And Merlin, when had her bum got so huge anyway? She twisted around to stare at the way the frock moulded itself to the rounded flesh and was suddenly horrified. And her breasts—the fitted bodice pushed them high, so that a generous bit of cleavage was inevitable. Was all this too much? And if so, what could she possibly do about it now… other than try to magically alter the dress somehow?

Yes, that was it! Raise the neckline a bit, no bare shoulders, the skirt could be a little bit fuller, no revealing slit… Must work quickly, Draco would be here soon, it was very nearly time…
She was just closing her fingers around her wand when it literally shot out of her hand, streaking through the air behind her. Whirling around, she saw Draco lounging in the doorway, looking positively marvellous in his new midnight-blue dress robes, the tiny, beautifully wrought silver dragon gleaming above the silk tie. One relaxed hand reached up to snag her wand effortlessly in mid-air and then he waved it at her in gentle, teasing reproach.

“Tsk, Granger,” he said softly, shaking his head. “That simply won’t do. Not at all.” He cast a knowing eye on her, grinning smugly.

Caught in the act. Turning away, she could feel a hot blush stealing over her cheeks.

“Hah! Thought as much!” He crossed the room to stand directly behind her before the mirror, resting his fingertips on her arms and tracing a light, meandering path up and down their bare flesh.

“How long have you been standing there, anyway?” she demanded, her chin up in a failed attempt at bravado.

“Long enough,” he replied mildly. “You were about to do something to your frock, weren’t you. I saw the way you were frowning at yourself in the mirror and pulling at it. But why? That’s what I don’t understand!”

“Because… because… I mean, don’t you think it’s just a bit… I don’t know, Draco…” She cast about weakly for a moment, at a loss. “… a bit tight?”

There was a shift in his eyes as he looked at her from over her shoulder, a softening.

“No. You look fucking amazing,” he said quietly. “The frock is perfect just as it is. I don’t think I have ever seen you look more beautiful than right now.”

“But…”

“No buts.” He shook his head firmly. “If you’re worried that it’s too much for my parents’ crowd, don’t be. Just wait till you see what some of those hags turn up in, thinking they’re the height of fashion! Merlin, it’s enough to put a man right off! Tits down to their bloody waists, some of them, all propped up and pushed in till they look like they can’t even breathe. Or crack a smile either, for that matter—I think at least half my mother’s friends have used that really nasty wrinkle-preventing potion. You know, the one that paralyses the nerves. Their faces look like masks!

“On the other hand, you, darling, are going to be the envy of every woman in the place tonight, and the desire of every man. I bet I’ll have to beat them off with a stick! But I won’t mind, because I know…” He slipped his hands from her bare arms to her breasts. “… who these luscious tits belong to…” Now he commenced a light caress through the silken material. “… and who’ll be…” Her nipples hardened immediately, and now he sucked in a surprised breath. “Gods, Hermione… you’re not wearing a bra, are you…”

She shook her head slightly, her eyes slipping shut as her head lolled back on his chest. What his fingers were doing just felt so good…

“Can’t,” she said faintly, licking her lips and shifting slightly to press her legs together. “Not with this dress. Too thin. It’s got a built-in thingy in the bodice anyway…”

And then suddenly, the marvellous sensations stopped, replaced by the feeling of something cool and metallic dropping between her breasts and snaking itself around her neck. Hermione opened her eyes to find Draco fastening the rose quartz necklace at the nape of her neck, a tiny, satisfied smile on his face.
The very sight of his pleasure warmed her. When he looked up, finally, to meet her reflected gaze, he found that she was smiling back at him, eyes shining.

“It’s perfect,” she murmured. “I love it! Can you help me with the earrings too, please?”

Nodding, Draco reached for one, threading it gently through the opening in her ear lobe. Then he put the other on for her, standing back to admire the way they sparkled against her tawny skin, like tiny stars backlit by the first rosy light of dawn.

Nodding happily, Hermione pulled his arms firmly about her waist, draping her own over them. “Now I’m ready, I think,” she said firmly. “For anything.”

* 

“Elspeth.” Narcissa greeted her friend with a gracious smile. “And Max,” she added, noticing Elspeth Parkinson’s husband following in her wake. “Lovely to see you both.”

Hundreds of floating candles cast pools of glittering light onto the gilt and silver and mirrored surfaces of the Great Hall, where damask-covered tables adorned with tall flower arrangements were set for the consumption of drinks and canapes. In the centre of it all, Narcissa Malfoy shone, garnering attention as naturally as the brightest constellation in the brilliant, late-December night sky.

The other woman’s gaze swept about the room, where so many of these soirees had been held over the years. Judging from the lavish display, this party promised to be as elegant and sumptuous as its predecessors. She smiled at her friend, holding out a well-manicured hand.

“Narcissa, darling,” she purred. “What a perfectly marvellous party. I do believe you’ve outdone yourself this year.”

“Thank you, my dear, how kind of you to say so,” Narcissa replied coolly.

Elspeth Parkinson had not yet ventured ten feet into the room, much less enjoyed a single hors d’oeuvre or drink or the company of other guests, but she was well-versed in the art of ingratiating and didn’t hesitate to employ it when necessary. Unbeknownst to her, however, Narcissa Malfoy had decided, some time before, that such empty phrases and posturings were a game she was no longer very much interested in playing nor had she much patience for in others. Premature compliments were particularly irritating to her now. Her smile in Elspeth’s direction was just the tiniest bit brittle.

“Do excuse me,” she said with a light laugh, moving smoothly in the direction of newly arrived guests who had just Apparated into the front entry hall. “Duty calls.”

From their rather secluded spot in a corner not far from the open bar, from which Draco had just procured glasses of champagne for himself and Hermione, they surveyed the proceedings as more and more guests arrived. Most turned up with a sudden pop, but some came by Floo, via the massive stone fireplace in the entry hall.

Cloaks and warm winter hats were whisked away by the house-elves, who were on high alert and doing their various jobs with admirable efficiency and speed. They’d been properly sorted by Tibby earlier in the day, and now he was smiling with satisfaction at the obvious effectiveness of his words, reflecting that a bit of slacking was to be expected every now and then. It was simply his job to nip it in the bud. This he had done.

“Well, so far so good, what d’you reckon?” Draco said under his breath, his glass raised to his lips for a sip. “Nobody’s fainted dead away at the sight of us yet.”
Hermione snorted. “That’s because we’re practically hiding in this corner, Malfoy!”

He chuckled and took a generous swig of his drink. “Too right we are. S’pose we’ll have to surface eventually. At the very least, Mother will be looking for us before too long.”

As if on cue, Narcissa appeared, a slight frown of irritation gradually easing as first she spotted incoming guests and then her son and his girlfriend. She gave Draco and Hermione a wink, and then turned to her guests with a dazzling smile.

“It’s Millie and her parents,” Draco whispered, his warm breath tickling the tendrils of hair around Hermione’s ear. In turn, she nodded to Millicent Bulstrode, who had just caught her eye with a look of utter astonishment.

“She’s about to have heart failure!” Hermione hissed, swallowing a nervous giggle as she returned the tall girl’s shocked expression with a jaunty little smile and a wave that were far more bluff than anything else.

“Hortensia, Claude,” Narcissa was saying. “I’m so pleased you could come. How have you been? It’s been absolute ages.”

The Bulstrodes shrugged out of their cloaks, which disappeared almost instantly into the hands of one of the house-elves. His wife’s insistent request for a drink had a hapless Claude Bulstrode excusing himself almost immediately and disappearing in the direction of the bar, for which, truth be told, he was rather grateful.

“Narcissa dear,” Hortensia Bulstrode smiled. “It really has been far too long. I hear Draco continues to acquit himself admirably at that Muggle university he’s been attending. Is that so?” Her eyes flicked around the room quickly, not waiting for Narcissa’s affirmation. “Where is he, by the way? I would love to say hello, and I’m certain Millie would, too, as they haven’t seen each other in a year. I always think it nice when old school chums keep up over the years, don’t you?”

“He’s there.” Millicent pointed rather gracelessly, her voice flat with lingering surprise.

Hortensia’s head turned in the direction of her daughter’s extended finger, her own eyes widening in a version of Millicent’s expression that was only marginally more contained.

“Isn’t that…” she began, her eyebrows furrowing.

“Granger. Hermione Granger,” Millicent supplied helpfully. “She was--”

“Oh, do hush, Millicent!” her mother snapped, causing the ungainly girl to shrink back for a moment. “I remember perfectly well who she was at Hogwarts. You needn’t remind me. But my dear…” Hortensia turned now to Narcissa, a faintly incredulous smile still on her lips and her voice smooth as cream. “Whatever is she doing here, with Draco?”

Narcissa was spared the immediate necessity of replying, because in the several seconds that had elapsed between Millicent’s last comment and her mother’s, Draco had taken Hermione firmly by the arm and marched to his mother’s side. There was no question but that he and Hermione had heard every word of the conversation. There was a dangerous gleam in his eye.

“Mrs. Bulstrode,” he said, a perfectly composed, faintly glacial smile on his face, looking for all the world like his father’s. “May I present my girlfriend, Hermione Granger?”

Extending her hand, Hermione gave Millicent’s mother a polite if tentative smile. “How do you do,
Mrs. Bulstrode?”

Still gaping at Draco’s effrontery—what very bad manners, barging into a private conversation with the express intent of embarrassing one’s elder! She really would have to have a word with Narcissa! - the tall woman ignored the polite gesture, managing only a perfunctory echo of Hermione’s words.

Anger flickered in Draco’s eyes and he gritted his teeth. Bitch. “Millie,” he said with forced cordiality, turning to the younger Bulstrode. He had never really liked the girl, finding her abrasive and overbearing at school. Dominated by her mother, she would become more and more like her as time passed. “Good to see you. You remember Hermione, don’t you?”

Millicent nodded dumbly.

“Hello, Millicent,” Hermione said politely, this time keeping her hand to herself. “How have you been?”

There was no immediate reply, Millicent having temporarily misplaced both her tongue and her wits. Just then, the arrival of a clutch of new guests captured everyone’s attention.

Sylvia and Zacharias Goyle, along with Gregory and Eliza, had appeared in the expansive hearth in a burst of green flames, followed almost instantly by Roland and Emmaline Nott and their children, Theo and Portia. They emerged, the four females of the group dusting themselves down and patting their hair.

As Narcissa, Draco, Hermione and the two Bulstrodes stood almost directly in their path, the reaction to the sight of them amongst the eight newcomers was singular.

Zacharias Goyle, a portly man who bore an unsettling resemblance to his son, stepped out of the hearth alongside Roland Nott, a tall, lanky man with a neatly trimmed goatee. The two of them had just spotted Lucius, who was emerging from the Great Hall where he had been ensconced with some important clients. Both raised a hand in silent greeting as he approached and then stopped to say hello to Narcissa. The sight of Draco with Hermione seemed not to resonate at all, most likely because they really had no immediate recollection of who she was. And even if they had remembered their sons’ passing references to “Mudblood Granger” years earlier, such associations would not have melded with the image of the vibrantly beautiful and poised young woman they now saw on Draco’s arm.

On the other hand, their daughters remembered all too well, and lost no time informing their mothers. Emmaline Nott and Sylvia Goyle approached more slowly with Portia and Eliza, all four of them clearly disturbed by the sight of Draco’s arm wound so firmly and proprietarily about Hermione’s waist. Last year’s New Year’s Eve party had been coloured with some hope, at least, of a possible Malfoy alliance for one of the girls, even though Draco had essentially ignored them and then mysteriously disappeared halfway through the festivities.

Meanwhile, Theo and Greg strode towards Draco and Hermione, their voices boisterous.

“Malfoy, old cock!” Theo exulted, clapping him on the back and looking at Hermione with a mixture of frank appreciation and surprise. “Grown a pair, I see!”

“Piss off, Nott!” Draco laughed, knowing full well what Theo was referring to.

“How’d you do it, though?” a new voice chimed in. Draco turned his head to find Blaise grinning at him over his shoulder.

“I didn’t,” Draco shrugged, as Hermione said her hellos to his friends. He noticed with happy relief
that she was more at ease with them now, after a year and a pair of shared social occasions, the last being their summer barbecue several months earlier. “I mean, I didn’t have to do anything. My mother did it. Very graciously, too, I might add.”

Hermione nodded. “It’s true. She made a point of inviting me.” She paused, a single beat of dramatic silence, and then she added, “And my parents.”

It was as if a small bomb had been dropped. Three jaws dropped as well.

“Your…?”

“Bloody hell…”

“Malfoy, what…?”

Draco nodded briefly. “No joke.”

“But,” Blaise said slowly, “that would mean…”

“Yep,” Draco replied, nodding again with a rueful laugh. “You have no idea what’s been going on here.”

“Shit, Draco, what the hell has been going on?” Theo exclaimed. “The day Lucius Malfoy has a pair of—”

Oi! Watch it,” Draco cut in sternly, glancing quickly at Hermione. She shook her head, waving away his concern.

“Sorry, mate, no offence meant. Apologies, Gr—uh… Hermione,” Theo continued. “But fuck—this is…”

“Yeah, well…” Draco sighed, relaxing finally. “It was my mother’s doing, I expect, but my father had to have agreed. Reckon it’s a good move for him politically, of course. Makes him look good with the Ministry. He has to be aware of that.”

Suddenly there was a small squeeze of his hand and he looked down at Hermione, who had a curiously enigmatic smile on her face.

“I think it might be more than that,” she told him quietly.

At that precise moment, a loud knock sounded at the front door. Everyone in the near vicinity froze in momentary surprise, as tonight, it was understood that guests would either avail themselves of the Floo network or Apparate within the entry hall, the night air being exceedingly frigid.

By this time, the entry hall was choked with newcomers. A number of the new arrivals were part of the Malfoys’ close social circle, there along with their offspring. Adolphus and Desdemona Parmentier had come with their daughter Angeline, who was now eyeing Theo with frankly predatory interest. Ardith and Rollo Farnsworth stood near the bar at the entrance to the Great Hall, busy ing themselves with glasses of punch while their daughter Lydia sulked, arms folded, because she’d been made to come at all. Quintus and Nelda Cathcart were in the process of nudging their daughter Penelope towards a cluster of guests where Nelda had spotted a couple of eligible younger men, fresh blood now that Draco was apparently out of the running. She had remarked to Quintus on that very likelihood not ten minutes earlier. Lucius and Narcissa’s son was behaving like a young man completely besotted. It was clear he had eyes only for the very pretty girl by his side. Penelope’s sullen reply to her mother’s inquiry about the girl’s identity had left Nelda very nearly open-mouthed
in astonishment, but such a display would have been bad form.

To Elspeth and Maximilian Parkinson’s surprise and consternation, their daughter Pansy had finally turned up—late as usual, Elspeth muttered to her husband—on the arm of a distinctly uncomfortable-looking Ron Weasley, who appeared ready and quite willing to flee at any moment. Dressed in probably the finest and most expensive dress robes he’d ever owned, he looked as if he were choking on a fish bone—or as if he were the fish itself, very definitely out of water. The Parkinsons were not the only ones taken aback by Pansy’s choice of date, however. None of the former Slytherins had had a clue that the two had been actively seeing each other, not even Draco, and Hermione’s usual sources had failed her too. Apparently, Ron and Pansy had decided to keep their budding relationship very quiet indeed. Now, Pansy waved across the room excitedly, hooked her arm through Ron’s, and practically began to drag him through the crowd to where their friends stood, drinks in hand, just as somebody plied the heavy iron door knocker.

At the sound, Tibby was there in a trice, pulling the heavy oaken door open and looking up at the couple who stood just outside, their breaths steaming in the frosty air. He knew who they were immediately. The lady bore a striking resemblance to Miss Hermione, her brown eyes just as warm and kind. He gestured for them to enter and held out his arms for their coats.

Richard and Claire Granger stepped over the threshold in an almost gingerly fashion, looking about with a mix of curiosity and awe. Hermione had tried to prepare them for the reality of Malfoy Manor, and certainly, as lovers of history and antiques, they’d visited their share of some of the grandest ancestral homes and castles of Britain that were open periodically to the public. However, this was the first time they were invited guests and not merely walking along roped off, designated routes set aside for public viewing. Here was a living house, a home, no part of it a museum. It was huge, opulent, and five hundred years old if it were a day.

Their entrance triggered two distinct sets of responses from the company gathered in the entry hall. The first was of a passive variety, running the gamut from openly frank, rather rude stares to covert glances that attempted at least a semblance of discretion. These were quite obviously Muggles, their presence here no accident: it was common knowledge, had been for centuries, that Malfoy Manor was Glamoured so as to render it invisible to Muggle eyes. Only wizards and witches could see anything more than a ruin at the top of Castle Hill. Or—and here the mind simply boggled—a non-Magical individual for whom the wards and glamours had been set aside. In other words, somebody from outside the wizarding world who had been expressly invited. The obvious question was, why were these Muggles here? More to the point, what in Merlin’s name were Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy thinking in inviting them?

The second response galvanised four individuals into motion, all of them heading towards the Grangers at the same time. Ron and Pansy forgotten for the moment, Hermione began walking towards her parents instinctively, happy to see them and also seized, suddenly, by the desire to shield them somehow from the stares she could see they were receiving. Without realising it, she’d latched onto Draco’s arm, and now she tugged him along in her wake. He’d been ready to go anyway, his own fond feeling for Richard and Claire sufficient impetus.

Narcissa approached from the other direction, her instincts as a hostess propelling her forward. Besides, she’d expressly invited Hermione’s parents for a reason—or rather, several very important ones. And she was not about to have her very good intentions circumvented.

However, before she, Hermione or Draco could reach the Grangers, somebody else got there first.

“Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Granger.” Lucius Malfoy’s mild tone was cordiality itself, his lips turning up in a faint smile.
“Claire and Richard, please,” Hermione’s mother said warmly, holding out her hand.

Lucius held it briefly, inclining his head in acquiescence. “Of course. Please forgive me. It is a pleasure to see you again. I trust you found your way without incident?”

Richard nodded. “Bit tricky towards the end, though, with those last couple of turns. Road’s quite icy in spots.”

“Ah yes, of course.” Lucius considered, frowning momentarily. Such issues had never before been a concern. “By the time you leave tomorrow, it will be cleared. Will you have a drink?”

Guiding towards the Great Hall, he led the way, the Grangers falling in behind. Meanwhile, Narcissa, Draco and Hermione had caught them up at last, and now they moved as a pack behind Lucius in the direction of the bar. Once the other guests caught sight of Hermione next to her mother, certain pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place—and then tongues began to wag in earnest. Ignoring it all, the Malfoys, Grangers, and their children pressed on intrepidly towards the bar through a sea of guests that parted to either side of them, agog.

“Mum, Dad! I can’t believe you’re actually here!” Laughing delightedly, Hermione shook her head, feeling as if she had suddenly been thrust into an alternate reality. Strange enough to find herself here as an invited guest, given her past history both in this house and with Draco, but to find her parents here, all dressed up and ready to celebrate the New Year in a house filled wall to wall with wizards and witches—well, it couldn’t have been easy for them, she felt sure. But they had done it for her and Draco, and she could have hugged them for their bravery. Looping an arm through her father’s, she walked with him alongside Lucius, as Draco dropped back to walk with Claire, Narcissa on her other side.

“I’m so pleased you could come,” Narcissa said. “I know it means a great deal to Hermione that you and Richard are here.”

And to me, Draco thought, surprising himself a little.

“Well,” Claire said slowly, looking from Draco to his mother, “yes, I’m sure it does. And of course, we are happy to celebrate the holiday with you in your lovely home, and we thank you for the invitation. But somehow I suspect there is more to this than simply pleasing my daughter.” She slanted a knowing smile at Narcissa. “People are talking.”

“Let them,” Narcissa replied offhandedly.

“Indeed,” Claire murmured, lifting a brow with a slight smile. “Indeed.”

Narcissa merely smiled back, and then looked ahead to her husband. His carriage was erect and graceful, his long, silvery hair sweeping his shoulders above the swirl of his smart, black dress robes. What he had already done, unsolicited, had been more, even, than she had hoped for from him. Now she turned her attention back to Claire.

“Come, let me introduce you to some friends of mine.” She grinned wickedly, handing Claire a glass of punch. “I’m quite certain they are dying to meet you.”

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It wasn’t all that much different to being with Hermione in the crowded lanes and shops of Diagon Alley before a new term. It was just… more.

A lot more.
Richard Granger glanced about, attempting to affect a decidedly casual interest in everything around him. From where he and Claire had been seated for dinner—the head table, no less, in the company of their hosts, their respective children, and several others—he had a central view of the proceedings. It was rather like being in the middle of a very grand fishbowl.

For as much as he found his surroundings and everybody in them a source of continuous fascination, he and his wife were themselves the objects of intense curiosity and ongoing scrutiny from all quarters. Narcissa Malfoy might as well have hired somebody to do a floor show during dinner. The Muggle couple, sitting in a place of honour and respect alongside the lord and lady of the house, were practically as entertaining in their own right, just by virtue of being.

The speculation and innuendo flying about were endless, varied, and often quite absurd. However, certain conclusions seemed inescapable: the Muggles had, simply by (a) having been invited, (b) having been personally welcomed and feted first by Lucius and then Narcissa, and (c) obviously being the parents of the girl who was constantly at Draco Malfoy’s side, a singularly intimate connexion to the Malfoy family. Chances were, something quite serious was now in the wind.

The shocking thing was that this liaison could somehow have developed with a Muggleborn witch. Because, of course, the majority of the company had eventually got wind of who the mystery girl was—either they recognised her firsthand from her close and well-publicised relationship with Harry Potter, were informed of her identity by their children, or discovered who she was via the pure-blood grapevine, faster for the dissemination of information than a game of Chinese Whispers, and, in this case at least, far more reliable.

Apparently Narcissa herself had successfully managed to fend off all her friends’ attempts to ferret out specific information about her son’s love interest over the past year. Her obdurate silence had been discussed and examined from all angles until finally, all her friends, even Elspeth, had admitted defeat and backed off. Baffled and frustrated over the lack of information, everybody lost interest and became bored, and the subject was eventually dropped altogether. Thus, thanks both to his mother’s obstinacy and the discretion of Draco’s close friends, his relationship with Hermione had remained a secret from the larger wizarding community.

Until now.

The revelation was, of course, precisely what Narcissa had intended. But it would be a chance for so much more besides: not only a very public show of support for their son’s choice, it would be, by extension, a means to demonstrate both an acceptance of her non-wizarding roots through the very visible inclusion of the Grangers, and their newfound position of tolerance for halfbloods, Muggleborns, and Muggles themselves.

It was a quite perfect idea—utterly brilliant, really—and Narcissa had been eminently pleased with herself when she realised just how many goals she could accomplish all at once with two simple invitations. She could help both her son and her husband at the same time, and on several levels simultaneously. At first, Lucius might resist the idea of making such a public display of Draco’s relationship with Hermione Granger and in particular, having her parents as guests at such an important and well-attended pure-blood social occasion, but eventually he would see the sense of it, though he would probably rationalise the move to himself by focusing on its political expediency. His wife was counting on his eventual admission of the larger truth of things, even if only in the privacy of his own ruminations. Despite himself, he had grown to like Hermione—more and more as he’d come to know her better. And he couldn’t deny how happy she had made his son. This Narcissa knew. She was banking on it.

Now, surveying the animated faces around the table as everyone ate and drank, she caught Richard’s
eye and smiled with satisfaction. It was all going according to plan.

The dishes from the main course had been cleared and most people were sitting back, digesting and chatting with their neighbours as they waited for the spectacular selection of sweets that always characterised a Malfoy dinner party.

Claire glanced over at Hermione, studying her covertly for a moment or two. Her daughter was leaning forward, her chin resting in the palm of one hand, listening intently to something Draco was telling her. Suddenly, she rolled her eyes and began to laugh, reaching to give his hand a light slap, a rather pretty blush flooding her cheeks. Draco chuckled, holding his injured hand to his lips in mock pain and then ducking his head to steal a quick kiss.

She could feel Richard’s gaze on her, and she turned, then, to see him quirk a grin as he inclined his head towards their daughter and then nodded. Yes, this was very right. What they’d sensed between Hermione and this young man a year before—could it really be an entire year already!—had come to fruition. The relationship had deepened in very significant ways in the last twelve months. They were young yet, it was true—but what they had between them was very real. That much was clear.

Just then, a familiar voice broke into her thoughts and she looked up to see Ron Weasley leaning familiarly over Hermione’s shoulder. An attractive girl with black hair cut in a bouncy bob accompanied him. She was currently pulling out the chair that Lucius had just vacated a moment earlier and settling herself next to Draco.

“Bloody hell, Hermione! Can you believe all this!” Ron muttered into Hermione’s ear and got a quick nudge in the ribs from her elbow.

He looked up and then grinned a bit sheepishly, remembering his manners. “Oh, hullo Mrs. Granger, Mr. Granger! Nice to see you again.”

“Hello, Ron,” both Grangers replied in unison, and then Claire added, “Lovely to see you too. It’s been a long time. How have you been?”

“Oh, well, you know…” Ron began a bit lamely. He always felt slightly awkward when making polite chitchat with his friends’ parents. “Busy. Learning the trade, as it were.”

At Claire’s questioning look, he hastened to explain. “Dad’s got me helping out at the Ministry. Sort of an internship thing. Well, I call it that. It’s not really an official one. Mostly pretty boring stuff, but Dad says it can lead to a good job if I stick it.”

“Oh, Ron,” Hermione enthused, “that’s great! I’m really proud of you!”

Ron blushed to the roots of his hair and made a face. “It’s no big deal. All that ‘hero’ stuff from seventh year helped, I reckon, when Dad got round to suggesting the job to the Minister.”

“Well, you were a hero! That deserves recognition!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Yeah… eventually. Took me long enough, though, didn’t it.” Ron snorted.

Hermione shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. What counts is what you actually did when it came down to it. And you did a lot. You did everything you could to protect me when—”

She stopped short suddenly, the words dying in her throat. There was an intensely awkward pause, during which Ron, Hermione and Draco all withdrew into uncomfortable silence as the painful memory of that day two and half years earlier came back to each of them. The irony of its mention escaped none of them as they considered where they were.
“I’m so sorry,” Hermione whispered, stricken, grabbing Draco’s hand under the table. “Please forgive me! I didn’t mean to—”

He shook his head, swallowing hard. “S’okay. I know you didn’t. And what you said is true, anyway. He helped save your life.” *Whilst I just stood there and watched.*

“You would have done, if you could!” she muttered furiously, leaving small marks on his hand from the pressure of her fingers as she clutched at him. “I know that. But your hands were tied! No more of this now, I mean it, Malfoy!”

“Yes, ma’am.” Chastened, he gave her a small, crooked smile. “Whinge over.”

“That wasn’t a whinge,” Hermione said generously and then grinned. “But it came pretty damned close.”

Draco laughed genuinely and then murmured, “I love you, Hermione,” staring at a point in his lap as he felt himself getting far more emotional than he was comfortable with in front of others.

“You’d better,” she replied, and then, with a quick, reassuring squeeze of his hand, she looked brightly at Pansy and Ron, who had pulled another empty chair over and seated himself. “So, you two—what’s up? I take it tonight isn’t exactly a one-off.”

“Hardly!” Pansy giggled. “You might as well know, both of you, we’ve been seeing each other for months. Ever since your barbecue, actually.”

“Hang on, Pans, are you serious?” Draco demanded, frowning in mock affront.

“No, I did not, Draco Malfoy!” Pansy retorted airily. “You’d have shown no mercy whatsoever, and I didn’t want to deal with all that evil teasing!”

“Me?” Draco sat up straight, his hand over his heart. “Never!” Then he grinned wickedly. “Yeah, okay, s’pose I’d have taken the piss out of you every chance I got.”

“Too right you would have!” Pansy nodded vigorously. “I just wanted Ronald and me to have some time to ourselves.” She threw Ron a fond look. “Get to know each other a bit.”

“And have you?” Hermione asked, unable to stop smiling now.

“Yeah, ‘course,” Ron said matter-of-factly. “It’s been great! D’you know, there’s about forty theatres in the West End of London? We’ve gone five times. Pans has got a—what d’you call it?” He thought for a moment. “Subscription. Yeah, that’s it.”

Ron going to the theatre in Muggle London with Pansy…now who was taking the mickey out of whom? And then Hermione had another thought: Arthur Weasley would be fascinated with the idea, if he knew—and envious!

Meanwhile, Pansy was nodding enthusiastically. “I love the theatre. I go whenever I can. Mum and Dad don’t approve, but I don’t care. I’m of age now and I can do as I please. Anyway,” she continued, “we’ve been seeing a lot of each other the last few months, haven’t we, Ron? Though I practically had to kidnap him to get him here tonight!”

Ron made a face. “I hate all this posh rubbish, big crowds and formal clothes and food I can’t even identify half the time, much less pronounce!” He squirmed a bit inside the dress robes that looked as if they’d only just come out of the box and perhaps been given a bit too much starch. “No offence,
“None taken,” Draco replied mildly, a snarkier rejoinder swallowed back down. Some habits died awfully hard, he was finding, and goading the Weasel... er, Ron... was one of them. He picked up his wine glass and had a sip just as music from the quartet in the corner began again. Hermione was looking at him expectantly, and he grinned. “Dance?” he asked her, holding out his hand.

“Mmm,” she nodded, and stood gracefully, placing her hand in his.

He led her to the centre of the dance floor and drew her close, sliding his arm about her waist and holding her hand firmly over his heart.

Gods, she smelled marvellous! Her scent shimmered from pulse points in her throat and wrists in small, intoxicating waves of vanilla and apricot, and he bent his head to draw the perfume in more deeply, nuzzling her neck and allowing his lips to linger at a point just below her right ear.

She moved in his arms as if she were made for him, all silken curves, fragrant warmth and softness. He tightened the arm that circled her waist, drawing her even closer.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, resting his cheek against the cloud of her hair and closing his eyes.

“Still rubbish at dancing!” he muttered, shrugging and giving Hermione an apologetic grin. “Look, sorry about cutting in, but... well, I haven’t seen you in a long time and I just wanted a chance to talk to you. Alone. You know, catch up, like.”

Hermione moved her head back so that she could see his face fully. “Is everything all right?”

“Oh yeah, more than all right, actually. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” He paused and then seemed to change his mind. “Weird, all this, isn’t it! I mean, you and me being here.”

Hermione chuckled. “Too right! What about my parents being here! Think how strange that is for me!”
“Shite, yeah, must be!” He imagined his own parents all dressed up and moving about the dance floor at a party hosted by Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, of all unlikely people, and the absurdity of the idea was almost too much. He chortled, rolling his eyes.

“I mean,” he went on under his breath, “how d’you do it? Everybody knows what Lucius Malfoy is. Has he really changed, like people say he has? Hell, Hermione, I can’t picture you and him having so much as a civil conversation!”

Hermione considered briefly. “Well,” she began, “I didn’t even see the Malfoys until Draco and I had been together for three months. They didn’t know about us before that, and then they only found out by accident.”

Ron raised a questioning eyebrow and waited.

Hermione giggled. “It was New Year’s Day last year. Right before we all got together at the pub. They caught Draco coming home after staying overnight at my house. That’s when everything came out.”

Ron let out a low whistle. “Then what happened?”

“Well, basically, Draco gave them an ultimatum.” Hermione paused, slanting a sidelong glance at Ron.

His reaction was immediate. Eyebrows shooting up nearly into his hairline, he released a pent-up breath. “Bloody hell, you’re joking! Malfoy? What did they do?”

She grinned. “Actually, they told Draco to bring me to tea for a proper introduction.”

“Merlin… did you go?”

Hermione turned her head and caught Draco watching her as he danced with Pansy a short distance away. Throwing him a wink, she continued with her story. “I did.”

“And you lived to tell the tale.”

“Ha ha. I was kind of scared at first. Just being in this house again, not to mention the whole ‘meeting the parents’ thing, and it was the Malfoys, after all. But in the end, it wasn’t so bad, really. Mr. Malfoy was rather formal and a bit forbidding, but never actually unkind. From the questions he asked me, though, I had the feeling I was having to pass some sort of test.”

“And did you?”

“Draco seemed to think so, afterwards. And his mum—well, once we really got talking, she turned out to be quite nice. And now… well, I really like her. Very much.”

Ron nodded pensively. He looked somewhat distant, as if his thoughts were already elsewhere.

“Ron?” Hermione gave his arm a small jab. “Earth to Ron!”

“Wha—? Oh, yeah, sorry! I was just…” Ron swallowed. “Bugger. Look, Hermione… there’s something I…”

Hermione smiled gently. “It’s Pansy, isn’t it.”

Ron sighed explosively. “Yeah. I’m… well… I think you know I’ve fancied her from the off. Since we all met up last January at the Pestle and Mortar, remember?”
“But I left it, yeah?” he continued, “because… well… I just kept thinking it was daft, the whole idea of me and her.”

Hermione nodded. There was something very familiar in that sentiment. She remembered feeling the same a year before, whenever she’d allow her head to drown out her heart and her instincts. Different worlds, a history of intense animosity or at best, mutual indifference, everything that took place during the war…it hadn’t seemed to make sense. And yet, of course, it made perfect sense.

“Then you lot had that barbecue, and seeing her again—well, that was it. I decided, don’t be an arse, just go for it. And… and she was interested.”

“I know. I remember.” Hermione nodded again. “You like her a lot, don’t you, Ron?”

“Yeah. I really do. And that’s not about to change either. But the whole parents thing… we haven’t told any of them yet. Did you see the Parkinsons when we walked in? Reckon her mum was about to keel over.”

“What does Pansy say?”

“Oh, she’s not fussed. She just does what she wants. And she’s very confident. Isn’t bothered about meeting my parents, either, because she’s so sure they’ll like her.”

“What about you, then?”

“Me?” Ron laughed faintly. “I think they will too, but I’m not so sure about her parents and me. Expect they’ll think I’m a right tosser who’s not good enough for their daughter. Probably have the same crap attitude towards my family that the Malfoys have always had as well.”

Very likely, he was right, Hermione knew. He now faced a set of ingrained prejudices to do with class that were nearly as daunting in their own way as the racist ones she was having to overcome. Suddenly, she knew what she had to say to him.

“Ron… what’s most important to you? Is it Pansy now?”

He nodded vigorously.

“Well, then, it’s simple. You have to put her first. That means facing her parents and yours, too, of course, and then just getting on with it. It won’t be so bad. You’ll see.”

Ron didn’t look convinced, but he smiled faintly. “Yeah, ’course. You’re right, I know you are. Just have to… just have to do it, is all. Thanks, Hermione!”

“My pleasure. Come on, let’s dance!” And then, a moment later, “Ow! Ronald!”

Draco and Pansy were not far away on the dance floor, and periodically, even as Pansy was talking animatedly to him, Draco would crane his neck to locate Hermione in the crush and then eye her and Weasley balefully as they danced.

“What’s the matter, Draco? You’re scowling, you know!” Pansy asked finally. “I realise I’m not your first choice of a partner, but for fuck’s sake, at least pretend you’re not completely bored and wishing you were anywhere else!”

Embarrassed, Draco yanked his gaze back to Pansy. “Sorry, Pans. It’s just…”
Pansy giggled, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation. “No worries, you’ll have her back before long! Try to manage just a few more minutes without her, yeah?”

He nodded, grinning ruefully. “Point taken. So—you and Weasley, eh? Happy?”

Pansy’s face had lit up at the mention of Ron. “Very. He’s… different to the blokes I’ve always gone out with. Not smooth or polished, like they are.”

No kidding. “Right. Go on.”

“But he’s… I don’t know, Draco… He’s sweet. And more real, somehow. Down to earth. He says exactly what he’s thinking.”

Draco stifled a laugh. That was certainly one way to put it. Ron Weasley had never exactly been known for his subtlety. Some of his gaffes from their days at Hogwarts were legend. Now… where was Hermione…?

“It’s refreshing,” Pansy was saying, and Draco forcibly returned his attention to her. “And you know, he enjoys everything we do together. He really likes the new things I’ve introduced him to. And…” Her voice dropped shyly. “And he thinks I’m beautiful.”

Draco looked at his childhood friend warmly. “You are, Pans.”

“Thanks,” she said quietly, and when she looked up at him again, her eyes were shining. “Ron makes me feel as if I’m the most beautiful woman on earth. Inside and out. He makes me feel cherished.”

“Well, if he does that, he can’t be all bad,” Draco teased, snickering and then ducking as Pansy took a mock swing at him. “Seriously, though… I’m really glad to see you so happy. It’s great. Met his family yet, have you?”

Pansy shook her head, waving her arm breezily. “Not yet. ‘Course, I already know four of them from school, sort of. Then there are two older brothers I’ve never met, and of course, his parents. I’m not worried, though. They’ll love me. I’ll make sure of it.”

Her confidence, the natural by-product of a life of privilege, was rather remarkable and quite possibly over-inflated, but in this instance, quite useful. More power to her, Draco thought to himself. With an attitude like that, she could probably pull off just about anything. Except, possibly…

“What about dear old Elspeth and Max?” he asked pointedly. “I saw them when the two of you walked in before. They weren’t exactly pleased.”

“No,” Pansy giggled again, “and I didn’t expect them to be. By now, I’m sure they’ve got it pretty well sussed, though. If they don’t like it, they’ll just have to deal with it. I’m not giving Ron up. I don’t care what they say.”

Brave words. But Draco wasn’t surprised. From earliest childhood, Pansy had always been scrappy, willing to fight for what she wanted or believed. He still had a tiny scar on his chin to prove it.

“Reckon you’ll make the big introduction tonight, then?” he asked.

Pansy shrugged airily and laughed. “Might as well do. We’re all here, and this way, they can’t make too much of a scene. They’ll have to be civil, won’t they!”

Draco nodded sagely. “Excellent plan. You do our house proud. Good luck!”
“Thanks,” she chuckled, looking around for Ron as the music stopped and everyone came to a gradual halt. She spotted him and Hermione coming their way and grinned. “Well, off to beard a couple of hippogriffs. Catch you later!”

Hermione slipped an arm around Draco as they watched their friends head bravely off in the direction of the Parkinsons’ table, where Pansy’s parents were enjoying coffee and helpings of chocolate trifle with apricots and raspberries.

“Who would have thought…” she said softly. “It’s actually happened for them. I’m so glad.”

Draco wrapped his own arm securely about Hermione’s waist, pulling her in close and dropping a kiss on the top of her head. “Me too. If anybody can make this work, it’s Pansy.”

“Poor Ron, though,” she laughed, noting the expression on her old friend’s face as he allowed Pansy to lead him along. “He looks like he’s off to his own beheading!”

“They haven’t beheaded wizards in centuries,” Draco deadpanned, and then, after a teasing little punch in the arm from Hermione, he pulled an affronted expression. “You’ve got violent tendencies, Granger, d’you know that? I think I’m developing a permanent bruise on this arm! My wand arm and all!”

“I promise I’ll kiss it all better… later,” Hermione whispered in his ear and then gave it a tiny nip. “Am I forgiven?”

“Hmm, I suppose,” he sighed, and then flashed her a grin, firmly taking her arm as the music started up again. “Come on, you, we still haven’t had a proper dance!”

They were the only couple on the dance floor for five solid minutes, but, utterly wrapped up in each other, they were completely oblivious to that fact. However, the fresh round of gossip they engendered promised to keep all the wags deliriously happy for the remainder of the party.

* *

At precisely 11:58, every champagne glass in the Grand Ballroom instantly filled itself to the brim with the finest pale-gold, sparkling vintage, and the majority of candles floating overhead moved of their own accord, regrouping themselves into a giant number: 2001.

At 11:59, the music ceased, and those couples still on the dance floor found their way back to their places at the tables, raising their glasses in anticipation. Hermione and Draco moved into a discreet, shadowy corner.

“Accio champagne!” he commanded, and instantly, a pair of champagne flutes appeared in their hands. “Excellent!”

Backing her up against the wall, he placed a hand there just above her right shoulder, holding the champagne glass in his other hand and closing the space between them just as the countdown began.

"Ten!"

“Nine!”

The entire company had joined in the chant.

"Eight!”
"Seven!"

"Nearly there, love," Draco said softly, pressing against Hermione. "I have the feeling this is going to be a very good year, what d'you reckon?"

"Six!"

"Five!"

"Four!"

She nodded, unable to catch her breath suddenly. Then he leaned in and whispered something in her ear. Her eyes widened and one hand flew to her mouth.

"Three!"

"Two!"

"One!"

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

All peripheral candles extinguished themselves, plunging the room into dramatic semi-darkness, so that now only the ones forming the huge number high overhead illuminated the room. And then fireworks burst high overhead, exploding in ribbons of scarlet, blue, gold, green and silver beneath a ceiling that had transformed itself into the deep, black velvet of the night sky.

Under constellations that winked overhead and brilliant streamers of effervescent colour that fizzed and smoked and popped in a series of deafening bangs, he kissed her, and as he did, the world around them disappeared.

The commotion died down gradually. Guests who had been embracing broke apart, flushed and excited and full of high spirits as everyone wished his or her table companions a happy new year. Lucius and Narcissa stood with their glasses of champagne and began to make their way to the centre of the dance floor, from which vantage point they could be seen by the entire company.

Once there, Narcissa’s sharp eyes scanned the room until she spotted Draco and Hermione still partially hidden in the shadows of their private corner. Smiling, she beckoned Lucius closer and, slipping her arm through his, she whispered something in his ear. He looked briefly in the direction she’d indicated, as if to confirm their whereabouts, and then cleared his throat.

"The New Year is traditionally a time when people look back on the year just ended and evaluate past actions. This we also do at Samhain, of course, as we honour and observe the Old Ways. This year, I find myself looking a bit further back, in fact—back more than two years, to a time when our world was caught up in a terrible war.

"For years, many of us here tonight chose to ally ourselves with a power that embodied and advanced our most fervent beliefs and that we were convinced served our best interests. We can agree in retrospect, I think, that this was a huge mistake. Given choices many of us made then, we are truly fortunate to be here tonight to celebrate the coming of the New Year. Many others were not so lucky. And some of those who survived themselves lost loved ones... children…"

Here, Lucius halted momentarily, remembering the dreadful day when, for agonising hours, he and Narcissa couldn’t be sure if Draco were dead or alive. He closed his eyes for a moment against the memory.
"My wife and I were… most fortunate in that regard as well," he went on at last. "Two and a half years ago, terrible things took place in this house. In the interval since that time, I have come to regret those things and my part in them. The New Year is a time when we not only look back, but look ahead as well, and make resolutions, too often not kept. I should like to make one now that I intend to keep: that this house shall never again be used for ill, but only for occasions such as we celebrate together tonight, now and hereafter a place only of comfort and welcome."

He paused, glass in hand, his gaze lighting for just a moment on Draco and Hermione before he concluded, "To the New Year!" Leaning down, he kissed a smiling Narcissa soundly and then quaffed his glass of champagne.

"The New Year!" everybody echoed, and downed their champagne in one go.

From their place in the shadows, Draco gazed at his father in pure amazement. Here, in essence, was the apology he had never expected Lucius to offer Hermione, the first step towards making amends that had seemed too much to hope for from a man who could never admit he was wrong about anything… and the revelation that his son mattered to him far more than he had ever been able to admit.

Suddenly feeling a bit fraught with all of it, Draco darted a glance at Hermione, not sure what he would find. She turned to him with a curiously serene expression on her face.

Then she slipped her hand into his. "Come on," she smiled. "Let's go wish everybody a happy New Year."

They would celebrate late into the night and see the dawn in together, standing with arms around each other and a celebratory bottle between them, at a quiet window overlooking the Lady Garden. As dawn’s first light gave over to the golden rays of early morning, the world was transformed, thin banks of snow and ice encrusting the garden and its surrounding wall and the vast grounds beyond, all of it glittering in the sunshine like masses of rough-hewn diamonds.
Malfoy Manor grounds on an early winter’s morning

More views of the extensive grounds, a fairyland of glittering ice and snow
Malfoy Manor itself, in the early morning light of the New Year

TBC

Chapter End Notes

To the best betas ever, kazfeist and mister_otter, bottles of chilled Krug Brut Rose and my endless thanks!
27 January 2001
Saturday

The small, blonde girl had peered up at Draco, shading her eyes against the bright, snow-dazzled sunlight, her expression quizzical.

“You mean… you mean you never?” she’d asked, scrunching up her face into an incredulous question mark. “Really?”

“Really,” he had assured her solemnly. “Never.”

“Gosh,” she’d replied. “I been skiing since I was three.”

Stretching out gratefully on the generous bed as the late-afternoon sun illuminated the nearby picture window, his stiffening muscles aching in protest, Draco recalled the conversation that had taken place that morning. It was their first full day at the ski resort in Kitzbühel, and after a hearty breakfast of eggs and bacon, buttered croissants slathered in strawberry jam, and pots of hot chocolate, they had split up, Gemma and Danny going off in the direction of the intermediate slopes. Hermione had
lingered, her eyes sparkling and her smile impish as she gave him a final good-luck kiss.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay with you this morning? I’d be happy to,” she’d said once again, her face suddenly serious. “I could probably do with a bit of brushing up—it’s been ages, really.”

Draco had been adamant. “I’ll be fine, Granger, honestly.” He grinned at her affectionately. “Leave off, woman! How will I ever learn with you hovering over me? You reckon I want you to see me arse over tip?”

Hermione had giggled, smacking his arm lightly, and then headed off in the direction Danny and Gemma had taken, leaving Draco to wait for his instructor and a handful of other rank novices on the beginner’s slope. A moment later, a small voice had piped up from somewhere around the middle of his left thigh.

She couldn’t have been more than about six, with a distinctly elfin look about her. Hair as pale as his own framed a small, heart-shaped face. A pair of large, bright eyes gazed up at him.

She was here with her family. He’d noticed them at breakfast, as they’d been sitting at the next table and a brief but noisy squabble had erupted between her and her brother. He remembered feeling slightly irritated at the time.

Now it seemed she’d decided to befriend him. Discovering this was his very first time on the slopes, she’d been genuinely amazed, and then, like the veteran she was, she took it upon herself to reassure him.

“Easy peasy, see?” she’d told him gravely. “You just hafta go.”

Turning to join her brother and sister on the kiddie slopes, she’d paused to regard Draco for just a moment longer. Then, with a smile and a jaunty little wave, she pushed off with her ski poles and glided away. For a few seconds, there was an odd sensation of recognition, somehow, like a fleeting glimpse—though of what, he didn’t know. He found himself wondering if perhaps one day… And then his instructor had arrived, along with several others in the group, and the first lesson had begun.

Somehow it had all looked so effortless on the telly. He’d imagined himself flying along, his skis barely touching the snow-packed ground. Instead of which, he had only just managed to learn how to stop himself pitching forward into a helpless slide down the bunny slope. Who would have guessed that merely stopping would take such concentration and that so much lesson time would be devoted to it? He was impatient—they had only one more day at the resort and he had envisioned himself really…well…skiing. Not this stop-and-start bollocks, all this arsing about, being so bloody cautious.

Ah, shit, he might as well face it. He needed all that stop-and-start bollocks. He was stiff as a board and would probably have several spectacular bruises by the morning. Gingerly he probed the tender flesh of his lower right calf. A bruise was already beginning to bloom there, the muscle horribly sore. Well, it served him right, being so careless as to let the tip of his own left ski stab into his right leg one of the several times he’d wound up rather unceremoniously on his bum. Apparently, there was more to this Muggle sport than he’d reckoned, his ego as black and blue as the rest of him.

Dropping his head back on the pillow, he closed his eyes, all of his tired muscles melting into the softness of the white duvet. He was dozing gently when Hermione slipped into the bedroom, shrugged off her outer clothes, and very quietly lay down beside him.

The sensation of fingers at the waistband of his pants, gently tugging them down over his hips and
then tickling lightly along the length of his cock, woke him abruptly.

“Mmm, nice,” he murmured languorously, his eyes half closed as he wriggled a bit closer to her questing hand, the recipient of her ministrations beginning to come to attention. “Don’t stop.”

Hermione grinned cheerfully. “No intention of stopping, love.” Idly she walked a finger up his penis, now stiffly erect. “Gods, I’m knackered! Feels wonderful to lie down! Have you missed me? I feel like I hardly saw you today.”

“You hardly did,” Draco agreed. He shifted slightly and sighed with pleasure. “That’s it… just there…”

She began a tantalisingly slow exploration with her mouth, sliding her tongue along the silken skin of his member and then curling it over the tip, delicately licking up droplets of pre-cum. The sigh that he let out now was much deeper, verging on a groan, and he gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to grab her head and just push her down on him all the way until he hit the back of her throat.

His cock popped out of her mouth with a loud, smacking sound as suddenly, her head came up and she grinned at him. “You did really well for your first time, you know. I was watching you when I came off a run at one point.”

“Huh!” he snorted. “Don’t be daft. I was horizontal most of the time. But thanks, love,” he added with a grin. “You’re a good liar. Now if you could just carry on where you left off… brilliant…”

#

After time to rest and change for dinner, the four of them left the apartment-style suite they shared and wandered down to the hotel’s bar. A cosy, fire-lit room with a beamed ceiling and scattered groupings of black leather armchairs, it was bordered by large windows and opened onto a balcony that offered a spectacular view of the mountains beyond.

“Don’t know about you, mate, but I am ready for a drink!” Danny exclaimed as the four of them pulled out stools at the long bar. “Gem, love, what d’you fancy?”

Gemma had plopped herself down alongside Danny and now she expelled a sigh as she considered. Before she had a chance to reply, however, the bartender appeared with a knowing smile.

“English?” he asked.

They nodded.

“May I recommend the Glühwein? Specialty of the house at this time of year. Mulled wine with a shot of brandy.”

The two couples looked at each other and shrugged, and then Draco gave the bartender an offhand grin. “Why not, yeah? Sounds good.”

The bartender nodded, indicating a grouping of chairs by the fireside. “Make yourselves comfortable. I will be along with your drinks directly.”

That sounded very good indeed. Before long, each of them was relaxing in a comfortable armchair, a
glass of hot, spiced wine in hand, its rich, ruby colour set aflame by the glow of the hearth fire.

“So, Malfoy,” Danny began conversationally, the corners of his mouth raised in a lazy smile. “What d’you think of skiing, then? I see you’ve managed to survive your first day.”

Draco shook his head and laughed, easing back in the comfortable chair and swirling the cinnamon stick around in the steaming drink. “Not so sure I have done, really. Reckon by tomorrow I’ll be one big bruise.”

“I can attest to that,” Hermione piped up, and then her hands flew up to her face, flushed a sudden pink.

“Really?” Gemma teased. “Had a look, did you, Doctor Granger?”

“She’s got talented hands,” Draco nodded solemnly. “It’s a gift. Seriously, Granger, you ought to consider a career in Healing.”

“Is that what they’re calling it nowadays?” Danny drawled, arching an amused eyebrow. “I rather thought—”

“Piss off, Danny!” Hermione giggled, and then darted a split-second, Meaningful Look at Draco before adding, “And you too, Malfoy! Or I’ll just keep my ‘talented hands’ to myself!”

She could see that he’d realised the slip he’d made. Sorry, he mouthed over Danny’s head, and then gave her a wink. “Methinks the lady hath failed to recognise a true compliment!” he went on smoothly. “However, I defer to her more discreet sensibilities!”

Hermione rolled her eyes but she couldn’t help smiling. He could natter on from the Encyclopaedia Britannica for all she cared, as long as Gemma and Danny hadn’t paid too close attention to that one small word from a moment before…

Apparently, they hadn’t. Neither had batted an eye—owing, most likely, to the almost immediate effect of the Glühwein—and now both were happily working on glass number two as they waited to be seated for dinner.

Bright flames licked the large, dry logs in the nearby fireplace, shooting tiny sparks that popped and crackled on the hearth floor. The mulled wine sent a warming trail down the gullet, where it pooled in the stomach. Limbs were comfortably relaxed, and brains were beginning to fog quite pleasantly over. As time passed, conversation dropped off as heads began to nod ever so slightly.

“Look at us—this is ridiculous!” Gemma said suddenly, sitting up straight in her chair. “What are we, a bunch of pensioners? Wake up, you lot! Surely we can keep our eyes open past—” She checked her watch. “—eight o’clock!”

Fortunately, their table was ready just then, and they moved to the dining room, a warm, wood-panelled room with a beamed ceiling and wide-planked flooring. It, too, was graced with a large, wood-burning fireplace, and small, white tea lights winked in a line along the mantel and in clusters on each table. They were shown to a comfortable, secluded booth.

“This is nice,” Hermione murmured, smiling happily as she took up the menu to peruse the evening’s choices. “I’m glad we decided to do this. The weekend, I mean.”

“Me too.”

“Definitely a good idea.”
Draco couldn’t help a smug grin. “Yeah, it was, if I do say so myself.”

“What, would I do that and spoil everybody’s weekend?” Draco pretended affront, turning a wounded face towards his own bread and buttering it vigorously.

“Right, Danny, apologise to Draco, you’ve hurt his feelings!” Gemma ordered, straight-faced.

“Yeah, Kirman, or your sorry arse will be on the next plane to London!” Draco muttered. “I’ll have you know…”

Just then, the waiter appeared to take their dinner orders, and any further retort was set aside.

“Change of subject!” Gemma sang out, once he’d left. “How was that New Year’s party, anyway? I mean really. We haven’t had much chance to talk the past two weeks since the start of term.”

Hermione and Draco looked at each other for a moment as if deciding silently who should begin. Finally, Hermione took a breath.

“Well, actually, it was… surprising. That’s really the best word for it, wouldn’t you say?” She turned to Draco, and he gave a decisive nod, rolling his eyes.

Intriguing. Gemma laughed and waggled a finger. “Oh no, Hermione Granger, you’re not getting off that easily! I want details! Surprising how, exactly?”

“I remember Applegate and Spencer talking about meeting your parents,” Danny remarked a few minutes later.

He and Gemma had been given the heavily abridged version of the party, any mention of magic excised completely and only the outcome of snobbish-blueblood-society-versus-hitherto-unacceptable-middle class-guests offered, with emphasis on the Malfoys’ unexpectedly decisive part in that regarding Hermione’s parents. Plus, of course, the additional surprise of two unlikely old school friends seriously hooking up.

“Yeah,” Danny went on. “Tony made a complete pillock of himself in front of them, to hear him tell it. Said your parents looked at him like he had the Plague. Seemed to him they were afraid to touch anything in case it had germs.”

Draco laughed. “Reckon my room did seem a bit manky to them, my mother especially! And yeah, they wouldn’t have known what to make of somebody bursting through the door, hung over and raving in some pretty choice language about too much noise on the landing!”

“Mark said something about pots of old money,” Danny added, still chuckling along with the girls at the image Draco had presented. “Always thought he was exaggerating. Is it true?”

Draco nodded.
“Shit…” Danny muttered eventually. “I mean, I knew your family were really well off, but I never realised…”

“Yep.” With a queer little smile, Draco tossed back the remains of his drink, setting the glass down hard on the table. What the hell. “We’re fucking loaded.”

In the silence that had grown suddenly cavernous, Gemma looked askance at Danny while Hermione gazed down at her lap and then darted a fleeting glance of concern in Draco’s direction. Just then, their dinner arrived, a bubbling pot of three-cheese fondue laced generously with white wine, balanced over a sterno flame and surrounded by cubes of chewy sourdough bread and chunks of vegetables, plus dipping skewers.

“Wine, yeah?” Draco looked around the table. Everyone nodded vigorously, as if that were the best idea they’d heard all night. “Bottle of Riesling,” he told the waiter as plates and fondue things were being set out around the table. “Thanks.”

Nodding, the waiter hurried off.

“So… sounds like your mum and dad went out of their way to sort of… flaunt Hermione’s parents in their friends’ faces? Is that right?” Gemma plunged her skewer into the pot, swirled it around, and then popped a bit of cheese-drenched broccoli into her mouth. She looked at Draco expectantly.

Danny turned a curious gaze his way as well, as he sipped his wine. Only Hermione averted her eyes, uneasy on Draco’s behalf with the direction the conversation was taking.

Draco reflected for a minute, and his smile betrayed a residue of amazement. “Yes. There’s not much that can stop my mother when she has her mind set on something.”

“Your father was part of it as well,” Hermione reminded him quietly. “Remember how he welcomed my parents personally, got them drinks? He didn’t have to do any of that. And then, that New Year’s toast he made… Draco…”

Draco thought back to that night nearly a month earlier. His mother’s actions hadn’t been a surprise, not really, not after the invitations had gone out. Her intentions were fairly easy to deduce. At the time, Draco had been positive that his father had had very little if anything to do with Hermione and her parents being invited. But Lucius Malfoy extending himself in such an obvious fashion at the party itself, going out of his way quite publicly to demonstrate that, even more than the relationship between his son and the Muggleborn witch—already enough of a shock within pure-blood circles—there were also quite cordial relations between her Muggle parents and the Malfoys… well, that had been cataclysmic, and not only for his guests. And then, yes… that completely unexpected New Year’s toast… getting his mind round that had been even harder.

“I know,” he admitted. “I was knocked for six. Still am.”

“Why d’you reckon he did it, then?” Danny wanted to know. “Pressure from your mum, maybe?”

“Y’know,” Draco mused, “at first, I did think that.” He glanced at Hermione, who was shaking her head, her eyes averted once again. “Now… I’m not so sure. I… well, it seems he…”

“Seems he was telling you something, mate,” Danny finished.

But am I ready to hear it? “I suppose…” he said finally, the acknowledgement trailing off into uncertainty and confusion and residual disbelief.
Once again, his father had snatched the familiar ground out from under him, changing the rules of engagement without warning. Much as he detested and resented the stiffly formal, cold manner with which Lucius had always treated him from earliest childhood, at least it was the devil he knew. When his parents had visited Oxford nearly a year before, he hadn’t been prepared for the agreeable demeanour his father had displayed towards him and even towards Hermione. He’d wanted to pinch himself, not quite able to believe his eyes and ears.

Since then, he had seen for himself tiny bits of evidence every now and then that a very gradual sea change had begun to take place under the tightly controlled exterior he knew so well. It wasn’t until New Year’s Eve, however, that there had been another, even more blatant display, making it that much harder to simply dismiss the changes out of hand. Even Hermione believed—Hermione more than he. For some time now, she’d had a curious faith in behaviour that Draco himself found difficult to trust. Perhaps it was her essential optimism, or perhaps a powerful desire to find some good in a man who was, despite everything, such a central part of Draco’s life. Whatever the reason, she hadn’t been completely surprised when his father had made that startling, and for Lucius, very revealing New Year’s toast—perhaps she and Narcissa alone, out of everyone.

“What about your parents, Hermione?” Gemma wondered. “I mean, what was all that like for them? Did you have a chance to talk about it with them afterwards?”

Hermione held her glass out to Draco, who was sharing out the last of the wine, and then she leaned back in her chair. “Mmm. Spoke to my mum on the phone a couple of days after. She said… Well, I know it must have been a bit like running the gauntlet. She didn’t say that, though. In fact, she was great about it. The only thing I kept hearing was what wonderful hosts the Malfoys were, how welcome she and my dad had been made to feel, what a lovely party it was. But I saw the looks they were getting from some of those—”

“Insufferable snobs,” Draco muttered. “Puffed-up, shallow, self-absorbed…”

Hermione laid a calming hand on his arm. “It’s okay, love,” she whispered. “It’s not worth it.” She looked at Danny and Gemma again. “I think it was probably a bit uncomfortable for them at times, but you know… honestly, from what my mother said, it was all rather fascinating as well.”

“Like finding yourself surrounded by an alien species?” Danny joked.

“Not so far from the truth, mate,” Draco said darkly.

“Oh, I disagree!” Hermione exclaimed. “The point that a lot of pure-- I mean, a lot of the upper crust don’t always understand is that people are people. When you get past all the money and the lifestyle, they’re not so different to anybody else. We’re all just people, under the skin. They’ll get it eventually.”

“Noble sentiment, Hermione, but you don’t know that sort like I do.” Draco tossed back the dregs of his wine and folded his arms. “I think you’re giving them too much credit.”

“Well, if your parents--” Hermione began, beginning to rise to the argument, and then fell silent, her cheeks flushing.

“Too right,” Draco agreed, but his smile was just a little bit grim around the edges. What she’d been about to say was true. If his parents, of all people, could turn themselves around, then it was possible for anyone—his parents having been the epitome of pure-blood racism and elitist snobbery that were deep in the bone. Not that he needed reminding.

In the meantime, Hermione had shrunk back in her chair, looking positively stricken at the
unintended inference behind what she’d been about to say. Moving his chair a bit closer, Draco slung an arm around her and bent his head to her ear.

“I know you didn’t mean it that way,” he said quietly. “It’s okay. Honestly.”

He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and then settled back to regard their friends, who were looking at the two of them, eyebrows raised.


“Right, we’ll just leave you two to get that one sorted,” Gemma grinned. “Moving on…”

* *

“This. Is. Heavenly.” Hermione sank down into the swirling, massaging waters of the jacuzzi with a blissful sigh. “What would you say to the idea of Spelling our tub at home sometimes, so it can do this?”

“Brilliant. Why didn’t we ever think of that before? This is nearly as good as--”

“The tub in the third-floor Prefects’ bathroom. Yes, I remember!” she laughed, wiggling her toes in the foaming water.

Draco leaned back, resting his head on the pillowed edge of the tub and closing his eyes. Now this was what his strained muscles so desperately needed. He imagined stiff, sore skiers all over the hotel, sinking gratefully into hot tubs and whirlpool baths like this one.

Several minutes passed in peaceful silence, the only sound being the churning water bubbling steadily.

Then, “I really am sorry, you know. I didn’t mean--” Hermione’s voice was very small.

“I told you before, Granger, it’s okay. You don’t need to apologise. Besides, you were right. In what you were about to say and… all the rest as well. And…” he sighed, “I suppose change is possible, even for some of my parents’ crowd. Not holding my breath, though. Hey, enough about all that…” His voice dropped to a thrilling whisper. “Come here, you.”

He pulled her into his lap, drawing her legs about his waist as the water sloshed around them.

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“Hermione,” he said softly, his breath tickling her face. “Kiss me.”

His voice raised a trail of goose bumps along her skin under the warm water and she shivered slightly.

Taking his face gently between her hands, she pressed a feathery kiss to the corner of his mouth, and then another and another, ranging over his soft lips. Sighing with pleasure, he returned her kisses slowly and deliberately and with great sweetness, and it seemed as if time and breath and coherent thought had all fallen away.

She could go on kissing him like this forever, Hermione decided dreamily. The water rushed in her ears, its soothing heat and the force of the bubbling jets relaxing every part of her body, and all she could see and taste and smell and feel was Draco. It-- he --was intoxicating.
Hermione wrapped her arms more firmly about him and began to kiss the sensitive skin at the juncture of his neck and shoulder. All the while, she could feel his fingertips on her back, a gentle tickling that travelled from her shoulder blades down her spine to her waist, and then down even further to cup and squeeze her buttocks before moving back up again.

“Let me look at you,” he whispered, his hands now sliding up from her waist to find her breasts.

He held her away from him, then, just enough to see. In the soft glow of the candle-lit en-suite, her skin glistened with droplets of warm water. They beaded on her breasts, tawny and flushed with the heat of the water, their nipples erect and wine-dark with arousal.

“You are so lovely,” he murmured, dipping his head to take one of her nipples into his mouth to suckle, one hand threaded into the tangle of wet hair at the nape of her neck and the other pressed against the small of her back.

The sensations his tongue was producing were electrifying, igniting a burning between her legs that demanded to be quenched. Pressing herself relentlessly against Draco, she heard a low whimper that dimly, she recognised she’d made herself.

He smiled against her breast, kissing its pebbled tip lightly. He knew what she wanted so desperately. One hand came around from behind her and dropped down between her legs, beginning an exploratory caress of her most private place. So soft it was, so slick inside with its own special moisture.

She ground herself against his hand as his long fingers moved to pleasure her. Back and forth they went, in and out, bringing her to greater and more intense heights as he varied his touches, all the while murmuring endearments and raining kisses on her mouth, her throat, her collarbone and shoulders, her breasts.

There was a moment just before she climaxed, when the lights from the candles seemed to flicker powerfully and the rushing in her ears grew deafening.

Slumping down against Draco, feeling his arms firmly around her as he supported her weight, Hermione laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. Her whole body thrummed with the intensity of the orgasm she’d just experienced, and she felt completely limp, drained.

“That was… it was…” she began. “Oh gods…”

She could feel him pressing a kiss to the top of her head and there was a smile in his voice.

“I aim to please, darling,” he drawled.

She turned her head to look up at him and he gave her a cheeky, self-satisfied grin and a wink. Hermione’s smile was innocent. “Oh, and you have. Most thoroughly. Now…” She paused, her smile turning naughty. “What can I do for you in return, hmm?”

Without waiting for a reply, she sat back slightly to appraise him as earlier, he had her. In the candlelight, she found him breathtaking. He leaned back against the side of the tub, the water foaming at his hips, and watched her with a faint smile as she looked her fill. The pale, smooth skin of his upper body was cast in gold and cream from the flickering light, whilst shadows threw the taut planes and lean musculature of his chest, abdomen and upper arms into sharp relief, and darkened the small well of his navel. The narrow trail of soft, golden hair that led down from there clung to his lower belly, curling damply in the spray of water.
She couldn’t see what was waiting below the bubbling water line, but she could certainly feel it bobbing gently against her stomach. Slicking back the wet curls from her face, she smiled and moved closer.

“I’m not going to last long, I’m afraid,” he told her, grinning wryly.

“We’ll see about that,” she teased, and commenced a small reconnaissance mission of her own, beginning with the lobe of his right ear, which was especially sensitive to the touch.

He was a study in delightful contrasts. Everywhere her hands and mouth explored was firm and yet silken, the terrain of his body so familiar and yet so deliciously new once again. He was all muscle and bone and smooth, unblemished skin. His ribcage rippled beneath, each rib receiving a kiss of its own. Below the long line of his back, his round, firm buttocks filled her questing hands. The hard, smooth chest with its responsive, little nipples and then the flat, taut belly below it were territory she knew by heart and yet yearned to map again. Finally, jutting hip bones led down to the soft nest of dark-gold hair surrounding his penis, which was rock-hard in her hand now, as she stroked it.

“I see you’ve managed to last after all,” Hermione observed slyly, giving him a firm squeeze. Draco groaned at her touch, fixing her with a look of consternation. “Merlin knows how, you evil girl! I think you like torturing me!”

Hermione giggled, giving his cock a final tweak, and then moved closer, twining herself around him. “Well, then, there’s just one thing to be done.”

“And what is that?”

She bent her head to his ear, whispering. His eyes flew open, a surprised smile on his face.

“My, my, Granger, I’m shocked! Such a filthy mouth! Of course…” he added, with a wicked smile, “I am quite happy to oblige.”

“Thought you might be,” she smirked, and then there was a pause. One eyebrow lifted slightly. “Well?”

He didn’t need to be told twice. Laughing delightedly, he grabbed her, flipping them around so that her back was to the wall of the tub, pulled her legs over his shoulders and then impaled her, keeping up a relentless, pounding rhythm as water splashed over the sides of the jacuzzi.

At last, they were spent, and lay panting in each other’s arms against the pillowed edge of the tub.

“Wow,” Hermione breathed, when she was finally able to speak. “Just… wow…”

Draco looked down at the girl who was nestled in his arms, the silver promise ring he’d given her glinting on the fourth finger of her left hand. Its twin was on his own finger. She was his. Really his. Because she truly wanted him. Shaking his head incredulously, he smiled. It felt like several complete lifetimes since those early, horribly contentious school days together—hell, sometimes it seemed like forever just since the day he’d first noticed her, sitting alone and dreaming on that bench in Old Quad, autumn leaves strewn all about her feet. Forever, and yet, it had been a mere sixteen months. So much had happened in their lives since then.

“Come on, love, up you get,” he said at last, giving her curls an affectionate tug and pulling her up out of the water to wrap them both in fluffy, white towels. “We’re turning all pruney. We can ring room service for a bottle of something, and sit by the fire for a bit.”
Eight hundred miles away, stars covered the blackened night sky above the sleepy village of Castle Combe in Wiltshire. At the top of a thickly wooded, winding hill road that led out of the village, set well back, there lay the remains of an ancient castle. Old, broken stones stuck up out of the thin covering of snow like scattered, upended grave markers. In the centre of it all was the shell of the old structure, some of it still intact as parts of walls and spaces where windows had once been, but most of it lying in ruins.

Or so people believed.

Because if one knew how to look, there would instead be a magnificent old manor house rising like a phantom from the thin, white ground cover.

If one had magic.

In the spacious Blue Drawing Room, Lucius Malfoy sat before the fire, lost in thought and swirling a glass of brandy absently. The house was eerily quiet at this late hour. The house-elves had long since Vanished and cleaned the dinner things and retired to their own quarters, although they were always on call. And Narcissa—she’d disappeared upstairs shortly after dinner and he hadn’t seen her since.

The fire was sputtering now, and Lucius poked at the bottom log without much enthusiasm, watching the flames leap higher momentarily before settling down once again to a steady, slow burn. With a resigned grunt, he heaved himself up from the chair once again, and put another log on, settling back to watch the way the fire caught the dry bark that covered it and flared quickly along its length.

Lucius Malfoy did not like change. He found it disconcerting, to say the least, and often inconvenient, uncomfortable, and damned annoying to boot. Yet, change was precisely what had been forced upon him, massive amounts of it in the last two and a half years.

There had been changes from without, in the form of Ministry directives regarding Muggleborns, Muggles, and everyone in between; one could no longer avoid them or buy one’s way out of them. Like it or not, everyone had had to adhere to them or face the strictest penalties. Well and good. Lucius was a pragmatist above all else, and no matter what he might feel personally about the policies, he knew when something could be fought and when it was pointless to expend the effort when there were other, more profitable avenues to explore.

He and Narcissa had eventually fallen into line along with all the other pure-blood families, becoming models of tolerance in the new, post-war wizarding world. He might not like it, but he had to live in that world.

Then, there were the changes from within, chief amongst them his own feelings regarding the war and the part he’d played for so very long, to support a leader who had turned out to be a madman. He had been used, and as time passed, the anger he felt at the realisation turned to bitter ashes in his mouth.

The other change from within was far closer to home, though no less difficult for him to swallow. It involved his son and several quite startling, even outrageous, situations that he would never have predicted would confront him. Classic case of rebellion, though a bit late in the game, he’d thought at
first, when Draco had announced that he planned to participate in a Ministry program to send young wizards and witches to Muggle universities. And really, how completely inappropriate in any case, to defy one’s parents and step outside of tradition in such an outlandish manner. It simply was not done.

And yet Draco had done it. Quite thoroughly too. Lucius had not known what to make of the steely strength—pure, pigheaded obstinacy, he’d called it at the time—his son had displayed in his determination to study at Oxford. He had not wavered once, and in fact, had had the perspicacity to marshal all his resources, financial and otherwise, so that he could hand his father a fait accompli. Secretly, Lucius had had to admire the move, much as it had angered him at the time.

And then there was the girl. And not just any girl, but a Muggleborn. Moreover, if that weren’t already enough, it was Hermione Granger, whom his son had ostensibly detested for so many years of his childhood; Hermione Granger, who consistently bested his son in classes and in her magical abilities, putting the lie to so much of what pure-blood theories dictated as truth about so-called “mudbloods”; Hermione Granger, who was a best friend of Harry Potter and who, as a result, had been tortured in this very house by his sister-in-law.

His son had fallen in love with this girl, and subsequently, just over a year ago, had given his parents the second ultimatum of his young life in only a few months. Either they would accept her or they would lose him, plain and simple. Both Lucius and Narcissa had had no doubt that he meant every word. For the second time, they had been forced into a corner. And yet, again there was that show of strength that took Lucius by surprise.

Draco wasn’t the only one to show such strength, Lucius was discovering. Narcissa, too, was finding her own inner reserves and asserting herself, far more than ever she had in the past, both with her husband and her friends. This was, at times, a Narcissa he hardly recognised, but one he was forced to accept if he wanted the loyalty and love she still offered him.

And the girl, this Hermione Granger—in some ways, she had turned out to be most surprising of all. Bright and quick-witted—certainly a match intellectually for Draco—and quite gifted magically, far more than the average witch, just as her reputation had suggested she would be, but there was more. She loved his son. And she was good for Draco. He was clearly happier with her than Lucius could ever remember seeing him. Narcissa often remarked on it, not that she really needed to. He had eyes, even when the very idea of Draco with this Muggleborn had repelled him. But he no longer felt that way, hadn’t for some time, and if he were going to be honest with himself, he had to admit that, and even more besides.

And so. Muggles as welcome guests in his home for all the wizarding world to see, and a Muggleborn as his probable future daughter-in-law, if he had to lay a wager on it. Lucius Malfoy was not a betting man, unless it was a sure thing. This bet, he knew in his bones, would be safe as houses.

All these thoughts were drifting through his mind like leaves floating on the current of a brook. Sometimes a thought would snag as on a stone, and he would find himself thinking on it more, and then he would let it go and it would be replaced by another. He tossed back the remains of his brandy and sighed, watching the top logs give way as their undersides, charred and fragmented, crumbled to ash.

“Knut for your thoughts, darling.”

Lucius turned to see Narcissa standing in the shadows just beyond the circle of flickering light from the hearth, smiling. He patted his lap, and she came and sat down, sliding an arm around him.

“Is everything all right? You seem a bit… I don’t know… broody tonight,” she said.
“Oh yes, I’m all right. Not to worry.” Lucius sighed once again. “Just thinking.”

“About?” Narcissa followed his gaze to the hearth, where the blackened remains of the logs were glowing bright orange, their last hurrah.

“How so often, things don’t turn out the way we’d anticipated, or planned. How people aren’t always what they seem, are they, and often not at all what we expect.”

“Ah.” Narcissa smiled philosophically as she stroked back a lock of her husband’s long, silvery hair. “I understand. Feeling a bit at sea?”

“A bit, I suppose. Regarding certain things.” Lucius shifted in the chair, positioning his wife more comfortably, and then cleared his throat.

“Where do we go from here, Cissa?”

She twisted in his lap so that she could have a clear view of his face before answering. “We go forward, my love. There is no going back. Not for any of us. You yourself made a wonderful start in that very direction at the party. I was so proud of you.”

Lucius fell silent as he considered her words.

“And Draco…” she continued. “I saw his face as he listened to what you said.”

“Shocked, was he?” The bitter irony was rife in his tone.

“Well, yes, of course he was, darling, as I would expect him to be. But you said things that he really needed to hear from you, finally, although I would guess that even now, he might be having some difficulty believing them. It wasn’t only shock I saw on his face, though. It was a sort of… yearning. He needs you, Lucius, even after all the years of estrangement between the two of you. You mustn’t give up on him. Hermione understood right away. She will be there to help Draco understand. I feel certain of it.”

They sat quietly for a time following her words, listening to the occasional sparks pop and crackle as the fire burned low, its waning light illuminating the hearth and throwing long shadows. At last, Lucius spoke.

“If I could…”

“Yes? If you could?”

“If I could, I… Oh, damnation, Cissa, does it matter? What’s done is done! Jean-Luc Malfoi had it right four hundred years ago!” Lucius tilted his head slightly in the direction of the intricately carved interior “porch” to the side of the fireplace, with its ornate cartouche at the top bearing the Latin inscription, “Quod olim fuit meminisse minime iuvat.” It had stood in its place in the Blue Drawing Room through many generations of Malfoys.

“‘There is no pleasure in the memory of the past,’ ” Narcissa murmured, gazing at the gilded words that were a double-edged sword, both a caution against dwelling on the past and, at the same time, a grim reminder of regrets that could not be undone.

“There is none for me, I can assure you,” Lucius said quietly.

“But there can be, in what lies ahead. That is what we must look to now. Please, Lucius, promise me that you will. For your own sake as well as our son’s.” Narcissa’s eyes searched his with a silent,
fervent plea.

Lucius said nothing, only continuing to gaze intensely into the burning embers as slowly they disintegrated to ashes, his mouth a grim line. But his hand covered hers, and she saw him nod slightly.

For now, it was enough.

The interior porch with the cartouche on top that bears the inscription
“Quod olim fuit meminisse minime iuvat” which means “There is no pleasure in the memory of the past.”

Kitzbühel photos
Their hotel, the Kitzhof in Kitzbühel
The bar at the hotel

The shared sitting room in their apartment-style accommodations
Hermione and Draco’s bedroom at the hotel. Danny and Gemma’s is the same. This room was “borrowed” from the Appartement–Hotel Almhof, in nearby Kirchberg

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: Only the original characters and plot belong to me. I make no money from this story.

A/N: Thanks and hugs to mister_otter and kazfeist, my trusty and wonderful betas, who have been there for me throughout. I seriously depend on you guys for your always-valuable feedback, and I really appreciate the way you listen when I need advice or just want to knock ideas around a bit.

The history of the inscription on the cartouche is very interesting. The speculation is that it might have been placed there by William, eighth Lord Saye and Sele, at the time of the Restoration in the mid-seventeenth century, referring to all the strife in Britain during the twenty years that preceded Charles II’s accession to the throne.

In talking over the inscription with my friend Robin, he had this to add: “It is a deliberate misquotation of a line from Vergil's ‘Aeneid’: ‘Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit’ (Book 1, line 213), which means ‘Perhaps one day we will take pleasure in the memory of these things.’ The line is spoken by Aeneas to his companions, to cheer them up after they have undergone all kinds of storms, shipwrecks and other trials in their long journey to find a new homeland, after the destruction of their native city of Troy by the Greeks.” Thank you, Robin!
The early-morning sunlight shining on his face was enough to make Draco a bit grumpy, for starters. And then, of course, there were the birds. A veritable choir persisted in serenading him from the branches outside the tall bedroom window. Fuck’s sake, he thought muzzily, what self-respecting student properly hung over from the night before was already awake by seven on a Sunday morning?

He flung an arm out and discovered, to his disappointment, the absence of the warm female body he’d expected to find. Where the hell was Granger at this absurdly early hour? Raising himself up on one elbow, he peered blearily around the room.

It was still fairly dim, the drawn curtains lifting gently from time to time in the light breeze that came through the open window. Soft, dappled light and the shadowed outlines of leaves fluttered in patterns on the walls and ceiling. He was alone. Now the question became whether to leave the cosy comfort of the bed to find her or just go back to sleep, trusting she’d turn up eventually. He was half-
tempted to haul himself out of the warm nest of blankets and go look for her, but then opted for the latter, flopping back down and turning over with a small sigh to burrow back under the covers.

The next time he awoke, three hours later, it was to a sensory assault of a much more delightful sort. Coffee. And bacon. The rich, inviting scents wafted into his nostrils and for a moment or two, he simply lay there, sniffing appreciatively. This time he wasn’t at all surprised or disappointed that the bed was empty. He knew exactly where she was now.

And indeed, standing by the cooker with her back to him, in the middle of a pool of bright sunshine that cast red-gold highlights in her hair, Hermione was industriously stirring cheese into partially cooked scrambled eggs in the large skillet. Bacon, mushroom bits and slices of tomato sizzled in a separate pan. Draco stole closer until he was right behind her, and then swiftly grabbed her by the waist.

She let out a tiny shriek and then dissolved into giggles as he slipped his arms about her, nuzzling his face into her neck and pressing a big kiss there.

“You’re lucky I didn’t turn around and let you have it with this pan!” she laughed. “You’d have been all over runny eggs and bits of cheese!”

“Mmm.” Draco licked his lips. “Love the idea of wearing my breakfast. I’d look good in eggs and cheese. That is for me, too, I hope?”

“Oh, I don’t know…” she sighed airily. “What makes you think you deserve it, eh? I’ve been up for the past three hours, being productive and studying, whilst you’ve just been lying about unconscious!”

“The better to generate healthy, new brain cells,” Draco told her matter-of-factly, leaning in over Hermione’s shoulder to spoon up a bit of the nearly cooked egg and cheese mixture and then popping it into his mouth.

She gave his hand a smart little slap and snatched away the spoon. “Hey, none of that! You could give yourself Salmonella poisoning, y’ know!”

Now that was a real conversation stopper. “What the fuck is Salmonella?”

Hermione waved her hand impatiently. “Oh, it’s… you know… it’s a type of bacteria that causes food poisoning! You can get it from eating eggs that aren’t properly cooked.” She turned back to the cooking momentarily and then she remembered something. “And anyway, don’t you mean regenerate brain cells? I expect you lost a few hundred last night!”

“Too right, I probably did,” Draco chuckled. He had drunk rather a lot, it was true. But then, so had Kirman, Applegate, and Spencer. They were in training, they’d insisted as they headed out the door and across the road to the Magdalen, for the traditional marathon drink fest that lay ahead two nights away, the eve of May Day. Today and part of tomorrow, at least, would be devoted to studying, because the day after that—the first of May—would surely be a complete wash. He fully expected he’d be quite seriously pissed and spend most of the day sleeping it off.

May Morning. A venerable Oxford tradition dating back five hundred years, and the first they would share, although it was actually his second. Their first year, Hermione had elected to skip it, choosing instead to work on an essay she’d felt pressed to finish. Despite everybody around her begging and cajoling her to come along, she’d refused, turning resolutely to her work as all her friends from Staircase 2 had clattered down the stairs and out the door the evening of 30th April, heading to the Turf to start celebrating. They hadn’t returned until ten the following morning, utterly wasted and
bursting with stories of a night-long party and then watching the sunrise from Magdalen Bridge. Squeezed into the packed crowds, they’d listened to the sweet sounds of the choir at the top of Magdalen Tower, singing their welcoming ode to summer at precisely six a.m. And then, amidst the general revelry in the streets, they’d trooped to a local pub for a champagne breakfast.

Draco had gone along with his own friends after countless efforts to persuade Hermione to join him had failed. She hadn’t seen him again till the following afternoon, when she’d found him in his room, nursing a massive hangover and feeling terribly sorry for herself. However, she hadn’t been able to find it in her heart to disapprove, because he was in considerably large company. It seemed everybody was horribly hung over that day-- and completely, cheerfully unrepentant about it.

This year, she would go. Especially as the annual Hertford Ball, a formal affair not to be missed, was the night before. They would dance and party the night away at the ball and then hie themselves over to the bridge before sunrise. To hell with the essay for her Shakespeare tutorial. She’d regretted not going with Draco and the rest of them a mere ten minutes after they’d reluctantly left her behind last year. Of course, in order to do this with a modicum of guilt, she would use all of today and as much of tomorrow as possible to get work done.

“You know,” she mused, as she spooned eggs into two plates already waiting at the table. “I’m surprised you’re as alert and as hungry as you are, considering you came home fairly stonkered last night.”

“Malfoy men can hold their drink,” Draco informed her, his tone lofty. “We never get sloppy or stupid with it. Or lose our appetites.”

Apparently, Malfoy men—this one, anyway—had selective memories as well. Hermione raised an eyebrow but wisely said nothing. Instead she flipped servings of bacon strips and vegetables onto their plates.

Draco nodded, and then forked up some eggs and a bit of bacon. Mid-chew, he stopped with a decidedly puzzled expression on his face, finished chewing, and swallowed.

“Uh… Granger…. what is this?” he asked, indicating the bacon.

“Oh, it’s veggie bacon!” she replied with a cheerful grin. “Much healthier than real bacon!”

“But I like real bacon!” Draco said plaintively. “You bought this on purpose?”

Hermione nodded. “Much better for our hearts.”

He took another bite of his eggs, and then, casting a doubtful look in the direction of the imposter on his plate, he poked at it as if it might bite him back, and then tentatively put a tiny morsel into his mouth.

Hermione carefully avoided looking directly at him, busying herself with her own breakfast while casting furtive glances from beneath her lashes. He’d swallowed that second bite and then had a third and fourth, along with his eggs. She bit back a triumphant smile.

“Toast?” she asked sweetly.

Draco eyed her for a moment, fully aware of what she was doing, and with a grudging grin, took a piece of toast from the plate she held out to him.

“I s’pose it’s not bad, really,” he grumbled. “Actually does taste a bit bacon-y. Bloody weird-looking though. Like pink and white cardboard.” Smirking, he abruptly waved a slice of toast at her. “Is this
real? Anything else I should know whilst we’re about it?”

“No.” Hermione grinned. “Though I was thinking, when I was in the supermarket the other day…”

“Enough, woman! Sunday breakfast is sacred. No more messing about with it! I’d rather die happy, thanks very much!” And with that, Draco tucked into his food with vigour, shovelling an especially large bite into his mouth and chewing with pronounced pleasure.

Hermione merely smiled and took a bite of her toast. Good thing Draco wasn’t terribly observant about certain small details, such as the full carton of eggs that had been in the fridge yesterday, now reduced by two thirds. The many telltale shells and nearly all their yolks were now in the rubbish bin. If he didn’t notice on his own, she wasn’t about to tell him that his sacred Sunday morning fry-up would never be quite the same again as long as she was the one cooking it.

After several minutes of dedicated eating, Draco laid down his fork.

“Collected my dinner suit from the dry cleaners yesterday,” he remarked offhandedly, eyeing Hermione.

“I noticed,” she smiled. “I can’t wait to see you in it!”

Silence again.

Then, “What time are we leaving for the ball anyway?”

Hermione thought for a moment. “Eight, I believe, isn’t it? We’re meeting everybody at Town Hall. Well, except for Danny and Gemma, of course.”

“Right,” Draco murmured. They would be going together, naturally. “Of course.” He fiddled about briefly with the scant remains of his breakfast, and then cleared his throat.

“So… you okay with what we’ve decided, then?”

“Oh… you mean…” Hermione began, and then smiled, understanding. “Uh-huh. You?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Yeah, ‘course. They’re going to be all over us, you do know that, don’t you?” Our parents especially.

She nodded calmly. “Expect so.” Oddly enough, she realised that she almost looked forward to that. She’d been bursting to tell someone.

Granger was an enigma, Draco decided. Just when he thought he had her sussed, she would surprise him once again. This thing, for instance. The past few months, she hadn’t said a word, so he’d concluded that she really wanted to keep the whole thing quiet. He’d agonised at times, though, worrying that maybe she was having second thoughts. Maybe she was in denial about all of it, and in not acknowledging it, she could pretend it hadn’t happened, that it wasn’t real. But it was real… wasn’t it?

Shit.

And so he hadn’t brought it up, largely because of his own fears. But when the final term of the year had begun the week before, there had been a casual conversation over coffee and their favourite lemon raspberry cake at the Rose one day, and somehow The Topic had found its way in. With a shy, little smile, she’d confessed that she thought it about time they shared the news with everyone, and then he finally admitted to having felt the same for some time. They’d begin with their close
friends the night of the ball.

“Come on, though, nobody’s going to be all that surprised, not really,” Hermione continued. “You know that.”

“True.” Draco stood up with his plate and reached for hers as she nursed the last of her coffee. The washing-up waited, and after that, his books, and he began to walk towards the sink with some of the dirty dishes. Then he paused, flashing her a wicked smile over his shoulder. “So… do we tell them whilst we’re sober or wait till we’re all completely shitfaced?”

Turning back towards the sink, he heard a curious eruption of sound behind him, a giggle that morphed into a choked cough. Smirking, he dearly hoped she hadn’t been drinking coffee just then. He’d already been witness to the spectacle of some liquid or other leaking out of her nose when he’d made her laugh unexpectedly in the past. One time, it had been milk mixed with specks of chocolate biscuit (truly nasty!), Coke another time (poor thing, she’d wailed that the fizz had felt really weird), and a third time, a small fountain of water. Remembering all this, it was all he could do not to lose it himself now.

* 

30 April
Monday, 5 pm

Fascinating stuff, Philip Henslowe’s diary-- a quite revealing documentation of the theatrical world of Elizabethan London by a prominent impresario of the day. Draco was making his way through it in preparation for an essay he had to write for his next tutorial, one of two papers he was currently taking entitled “Representing the City: 1558-1640.”

For the past hour, though, he’d found it increasingly difficult to focus, as he lay stretched out on the bed in a patch of warm, late-afternoon sunshine. A small whirlwind of activity was blowing back and forth past him, and if anything, Hermione was even busier and a bit more frantic now than she had been earlier.

Women. Why was getting dressed such a huge, worrisome deal anyway? It wasn’t like that for men. They just got on with it, no fuss or bother. The worst they encountered might be battling with a recalcitrant tie or a bloody nick from shaving.

She rushed past him yet again, muttering to herself about her hair, fingers buried in it and pulling at it agitatedly. It was still damp from her shower, hanging in rippling waves that seemed to amplify as they dried. With a deep, resigned sigh, he gave up, shutting the book and letting it drop to his lap. Stretching luxuriantly, his head now pillowed on his folded arms, he watched, amused, as Hermione flew about the room.

“Merlin’s balls, Granger! Just put the frock on and have done with it!” he laughed.

She stopped dead at that, hands on her hips, astounded. “Is that all you think we women do to get ready for a special occasion?”

“’Course,” Draco shrugged. “Fuck’s sake, what else is necessary? I mean,” he added slyly, “you’re
already bloody gorgeous. It’s just the change of clothes, yeah?”

Very slick. But calculated though it obviously was to sugar-coat Draco’s slight impatience, it was really rather sweet as well, and Hermione couldn’t help smiling.

“Well,” she replied, “I hate to burst your bubble, Malfoy, but it really does take a bit more than that. Especially with this bloody hair of mine! Ugh!” She tugged at it in frustration, and then gave him a warning glare. “Don’t you dare say a word!”

“Who, me?” Draco turned a round-eyed, innocent gaze in her direction. “I quite fancy your hair, especially when it’s… you know… wild like this. It’s your inner goddess showing.”

“‘Inner goddess’ my arse!” Hermione snorted. “Well, at least that’s a big improvement over ‘bushy-haired’ and ‘rat’s nest,’ and ‘I suppose you do know what a hair brush is, Granger’!”

Ouch. He’d definitely deserved that one. All those old insults came flooding back, the taunts he’d subjected her to for so many years when they were growing up. It still pained him now to think about them. He had been so cruel. And yet, she was able to maintain a sense of humour, amazingly.

Immediately, he bounded off the bed and took her in his arms, burying his own hands and face in her thick, soft curls. “Seriously, Hermione, I do love your hair. It’s absolutely beautiful and I wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s you. I hope you believe me. I was just a stupid, immature little git back then. I didn’t know what I was saying. I just wanted to get at you any way I could. I hope I’ve grown up since then!”

Smiling against his shoulder, Hermione nodded, her throat tight all of a sudden. “You’re only a bit of a wanker once in a while now,” she teased, her light tone belied by the catch in her voice.

Pressing several kisses to her hair, so fragrant and soft, he grinned. “Just let it go natural. It’ll look amazing. Really.” He looked down at her then, holding her at arm’s length, one eyebrow quirking up roguishly. “When’re you going to let me see what’s beneath that dressing gown, anyway?”

“Uh-uh, not this time, Malfoy! I’m not getting sidetracked!” As he tried to tighten his grip on her, the better to see down the opening of the gown, she twisted out of his hands with a giggle, dancing lightly away towards the bathroom. “Must do my makeup! Gemma’s waiting for a turn next!”

Ah well. There would always be later—much later-- if they weren’t too knackered or just plain sozzled to manage it.

Propping his book back up on his chest, he tried to concentrate, and actually managed a couple of paragraphs before the peripheral noise in the hallway broke in again. He could hear Danny and Gemma in the bedroom next door, their voices rising and falling with the slight tiff in which they seemed to be caught up, though he couldn’t tell what it was about. There was the sound of doors opening and shutting too, and the intermittent sound of water running and footfalls in the corridor and calling back and forth.

Sod it. There was no way Philip Henslowe could compete with all that, even if Draco barricaded himself in the small study, the room farthest away from the bedrooms and the bathroom. Throwing down the book once and for all, he got up and went to the wardrobe, pulling out his dinner suit, now freshly pressed.

Pulling up the plastic cover, he eyed it critically. Crisply pressed, looking quite smart—excellent. Shoes—oh shit, he’d nearly forgotten! Diving down into the bottom of the wardrobe, he plucked up his dress shoes and then searched for the shoe-shine kit he thought he’d left in the back somewhere.
Groping about blindly, he came up empty.

Well, this would not do at all. He studied the shoes, which suddenly looked distinctly dull and scuffed. With a furtive look round, he directed a finger at the shoes with a softly muttered *Scourgify*, adding a hasty *Fulgeo* as an afterthought. There. Done.

Satisfied, he straightened. All he had to do was hop into the shower, as soon as he could wangle a spot in the growing queue. Too bad he hadn’t managed one together with Hermione; that would have accomplished two goals at once and very nicely too. *Bloody Henslowe.* Glancing over his shoulder, he checked the time on the bedside clock. Quarter past six. They still had better than an hour before they had to leave.

Flopping down to wait in the butterfly chair that Hermione had moved into the house from her room at Hertford, Draco pondered the upcoming conversations that they’d decided to broach, first with their friends tonight and then, with both sets of parents. He wondered how that last would play out. They hadn’t yet decided how they’d go about it, precisely. Both sets of parents together or one set at a time, and if together, when and where, exactly?

Together would probably be best, he decided. Get it all over with at once. And if either pair of parents had any objections, the fact that they were in company would act as a restraint, holding any gut reactions to a minimum—at least, he hoped so, anyway! Quite honestly, he didn’t anticipate anything more overt than initial shock and then a lot of hugs and excitement. The tug of war over when exactly, and where, and all the other rubbish that inevitably followed such an announcement would just have to sort itself out later on.

*  

An hour later, bathed and dressed, Draco was struggling with his tie in front of the smallish mirror hanging in the hallway.

“Granger, come out here and give us a hand, would you?” he called, frustrated.

Hermione had banished him from the bedroom whilst she dressed in order to preserve the surprise factor. Now the door opened slowly, and she stood framed in the doorway, backlit from the fading sunlight streaming in from the window on the far side of the room.

She was a vision.

Dropping the two ends of the tie, Draco merely stared, his eyes widening appreciatively, and then let out a low whistle.

“Gods, darling… you’ve outdone yourself,” he said softly. “Let me look at you! Turn around. No, no--*slowly!*”

She stood there smiling shyly as she pivoted in a gradual arc before him. In the dimmer light of the hallway, he could practically *feel* her blushing with pleasure. Her frock, a strapless cocktail dress of black, pleated silk, hugged her slender form with criss-cross detailing across the top and a flirty little skirt that swung as she moved. Around her neck was a single strand of pearls with tiny matching earrings gleaming against her tawny skin. It was altogether simple, elegant, and perfect.

Sighing, he pulled her to him for a kiss. He could taste raspberries as his mouth moved sinuously...
over hers.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all day, y’know,” he whispered into her ear, catching her earring between his teeth and tugging it very gently. “Missed you today. Been so busy swotting, haven’t we, and now all this— we haven’t taken a breath!”

Hermione pressed her forehead to his and let out a long breath. “No, we haven’t. I’ve missed you too, love. Let me have a look at you now!”

Preening a bit, Draco stepped back and opened his arms. “Well? Do I pass muster, then?”

She eyed him critically, walking around him and taking him in from every angle. The stylish black dinner suit he wore fit him beautifully, its jacket accentuating his well-made shoulders, the white dress shirt crisp, the small, silver cufflinks, round with jet-black onyx centres, gleaming against the snowy white linen of the cuffs. His hair, a bit shaggy, brushed his collar in a moon-pale, silken fringe. The tiny diamond sparkled from his left earlobe.


“Thanks! I’m all thumbs tonight!” he said, relieved. “Where’d you learn to do this, anyway?”

“My dad,” she grinned. “Useful skill, he said. You never know when you might need to help a man who’s all thumbs with a bow tie.”

“Always did like your dad.” Draco nodded his approval.

“I don’t exactly think he had you in mind when he said that. This was years ago! I was probably about twelve!”

“Oh, well, that’s all right, then, ‘cos I’m the man in your life now. And--” He glanced down as her deft fingers drew the ends of the tie together neatly and then patted the tie with satisfaction. “It looks brilliant. Thanks, love!”

Just then, Danny and Gemma emerged from their room, looking just as wonderfully festive in their evening clothes.

“Ready, then?” Danny piped up. “Reckon the taxi should be here about now. Let’s go downstairs and wait outside.”

The two girls lagged behind, laughing and trading compliments whilst Draco and Danny clattered down the stairs ahead of them, grinning broadly. It was going to be a wonderful night.

*\

Town Hall was resplendent, ablaze with lights when the taxi pulled up in front. As often as the two couples had walked past this very spot on their everyday travels around the city, they’d never seen it quite like this.

Clusters of students-- the girls in either floor-length ball gowns or shorter, fashionable cocktail frocks in a rainbow of colours, and the young men in elegant black tie-- moved slowly about the ground-
floor reception area, small knots of them heading towards the stairs leading to the main hall where the ball would be held.

As they entered, there were waves and shouted greetings back and forth, and before long, they had found Mark, Maggie, Tony and Susan, who had arrived together. As they tramped up the stairs, they were hailed by Steve and Gillian, Chris and Fiona in tow just behind them.

The twelve of them stopped short in the entryway to the main hall, taking in the spectacle before them: a large, rectangular room with highly polished wood floor and a magnificent, ornately carved, arched ceiling and glittering chandeliers. A gallery ran around the room on three sides, and on the fourth, at one end, was the stage, where a DJ was set up with all his equipment and the music was already playing. Directly in front of the stage was the spacious dance floor, beyond which stood the elegantly decorated tables in long lines. Along the length of the room on one side were the buffet tables, groaning with platters of beautifully presented foods. Nearby was the open bar, where drinks of all sorts were being served. Crowning the buffet tables at one end was a fountain of chocolate fondue that flowed in an aromatic river surrounded by chunks of cakes and fruits for dipping, and at the other end, an equally elaborate fountain of sparkling, pale-gold champagne. At the far end of the long room, opposite the stage, there was a casino replete with all sorts of gaming tables.

“Oh-h-h!”

“Wow!”

“This is amazing!”

Moving in a pack towards the tables, they claimed one and began filtering towards the bar.

Priorities. Naturally.

“What are you drinking, Malfoy?”

“Oh, pint of bitter, I think. Thanks, Kirman.”

“Ladies?”

“Pimm’s for me, please.”

“And me.”

“Glass of white wine, please. Some of that fruity stuff, the Chardonnay.”

“Fancy some cider, I think.”

“Ooh, no, let’s have some of that lovely champagne! Doesn’t it look pretty rushing down in a waterfall like that!”

After a first round, amidst the chatter and laughter, the party moved en masse from the bar back to their table, where they’d left some of their things draped over chair backs. Centrally located between the dance floor and the casino, it faced the row of buffet tables, from which tantalising aromas rose to tempt the palate.

Music welled up from speakers strategically placed on either side of the stage and Hermione grabbed Draco’s hand.

“Dance with me!” she enthused.
The music was slow and lush, and he folded her securely into his arms, his lips skimming the soft, fragrant clouds of hair at the top of her head. His arms were strong and sure, holding her, and in that moment, time might have stopped completely for all either of them knew or cared. Resting her head against his shoulder with a small sigh, Hermione swayed in tandem with Draco, and for a time, neither said a word.

Finally, she looked up. Draco’s eyes were still closed and he had a dreamy little smile on his face. She almost hated to say a word, he looked so peaceful.

“This is nice,” she murmured at last.

“Mmm.” The reply was a contented hum deep in his throat.

She laid her cheek against his shoulder again. “I love you, you know.”

“Mmm. I know.”

Her head snapped back at that and she opened her mouth, ready to launch into an indignant retort, when she caught the amusement in his eyes.

“I see. Pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?” she huffed, biting back a grin.

Draco’s expression was serene. “Yep.”

“Hmm! I don’t think I like you anymore, Draco Malfoy,” she decided airily. “You’re completely lacking in chivalry. Don’t you know that--”

The rest of that sentiment was never voiced, silenced as it was with a resounding kiss that took her breath away.

“I’ve always believed,” he whispered afterward, his mouth moving softly over the pulse point in her throat, “that actions speak much louder than words ever could. Don’t you agree?”

A simple nod was all Hermione could manage at that point. She was suddenly feeling quite weak in the knees. The champagne, no doubt.

Danny and Gemma danced past them, waving gaily, and Draco grinned.

“When are we going to tell everybody?” he asked, tipping Hermione’s chin up. She had a slightly unfocused look in her eyes, and he nearly laughed out loud. Well, this was a rather inauspicious beginning, but he wasn’t entirely surprised. He felt fairly confident that at least some part of it was his doing. Then, too, she was such a little thing, it had never taken much to get her quite thoroughly pissed. And from the looks of things, she was well on her way already after only two glasses. Perhaps sooner rather than later would be a wise move.

And yet, somehow, the right time never seemed to present itself. There was all that lovely food at the buffet tables, for starters (“Oysters! Try one, Granger! Like this!” “Um… not so sure about this, Malfoy…” “Nonsense, they’re delicious! Here, I insist!” “Ew… it’s like eating flobber--” “DON’T say it”). And then there were the dancing and the casino, both of which beckoned with their own particular siren songs. Time spent actually sitting at the table was rare, mostly just a few minutes here or there. It seemed that the opportunity to get everyone together at once for even five minutes never seemed to arise. Not to mention the inescapable fact that as the evening wore on, the degree of inebriation amongst the twelve of them grew to rather astonishing proportions.

Dawn found the six couples lurching along the High Street on their way to Magdalen Bridge. Half
an hour until the official May Morning celebrations kicked off with the choir singing from atop Magdalen Tower. Thirty minutes seemed more than sufficient time to make their way from one end of the High to the other.

“Oi! Hold up, you lot! We’ve lost Spencer!”

Laughter.

“No, we haven’t, he’s over there in the alley… No, don’t look! Oh… ugh… bloody disgusting!”

“And another one bites the dust…”

“Ha ha, very funny…”

“Ooh, look, it’s getting all light!”

(affectionately) “That is generally what happens when the sun comes up, you silly cow!”

“I beg your pardon, Daniel, I am an art historian, not a weather presenter!”

Chorus of archly reproving guffaws and catcalls.

And then, “Weather presenter?” and a fresh round of laughter.

By this time, they’d nearly reached the bridge, where countless numbers were already gathering. Many were in formal dress, as they were, some with bottles triumphantly in tow, while others were more casually dressed. Families with small children and other people of all ages were there along with the students, crowding the area approaching the bridge and jostling to get a bit closer to the vicinity of the tower.

All at once, a shushing hiss reverberated through the ranks and silence fell over the massive crowd in a rippling wave. All eyes turned skyward, trained on the top of Magdalen Tower, where the first, pure strains of the Hymnus Eucharisticus rang out in the clear May morning air just as the sun broke through in a dazzling shower of light.

As tradition had dictated for five hundred years, the singing lasted for precisely seven minutes and then ceased. A mighty cheer rose up from the thousands gathered, and toasts were offered and drunk with happy abandon.

“What say,” Steve slurred, “we get some grub? I’m starved!”

“You’re always starved!” Gillian giggled, poking him fondly.

“Good idea—where shall we go?”

“What about the KA? That’s always good. Or the Turf. I could do with one of their burgers right about now!”

“No way, it’s too far!”

“Lazy sod!”

“Pathetic!”

The clamorous debate rose all around them until Draco raised his hands in the air and waved them for attention.
“Oi! Look, what about the Quod? It’s not far, and they do a really decent breakfast. Good drinks too.” He glanced at Hermione, who caught on immediately and nodded. The Quod was perhaps slightly pricier than some spots, it was true. But it was a favourite of theirs and therefore special, just the right place for what they had in mind.

Ten minutes later, the group had squeezed their way through the crowds of revellers, past a colourful group of Morris dancers performing in the street, and arrived at the restaurant, a large, airy place with elegant, minimalist décor and original paintings by young British artists on the walls. Adjacent to the main dining room, there was a lovely outdoor terrace with additional tables under large, canvas umbrellas.

“Where’ve you lot been, anyway? Besides the bridge, I mean,” the waitress asked, in a voice that suddenly seemed entirely too chipper for some of the company.

“Hertford Ball.”

“Ah,” she smiled and nodded. “We’ve got quite a few Hertford people here at the moment. What can I get you then?”

Orders were taken, ranging from the full English to simple bacon rolls, continental breakfast and several types of egg dishes, along with requests for Pimms, Buck’s Fizz and Bloody Marys.

The drinks arrived first and everybody fell to.

“Toast!”

“Right, Applegate, let’s have it then!”

“To… May Morning!”

Groans. “Original!”

“Fuck’s sake, Applegate, you can do better than that, surely!”

“Piss off, Kirman! I think it’s entirely appropriate and very meaningful!” Mark looked around the large table with supreme confidence, nodding and smiling self-righteously. Somebody flipped a small, buttered roll at his head and he ducked with a laugh.

“To… old friends,” somebody else offered, to a chorus of groans and gagging noises and clutchings of the heart.

“To us,” Draco said quietly, threading his fingers through Hermione’s and giving her hand a squeeze.

“We’ve just done that one, cock.”

“No—I mean, to Hermione and me.”

Whatever chatter still bubbled between the various friends died in their throats and all eyes were on the two of them.

“What are you on about?” Danny asked carefully, studying his friend.

“Are the two of you… you’re not… are you?” Maggie demanded, her eyes narrowing with dawning awareness.
“Oh my God, they ARE!” Gemma crowed, noting identical grins on Hermione and Draco’s faces. She clapped her hands gleefully, and then stopped dead. “You are-- aren’t you?”

With a tremulous smile, Hermione nodded, giving Draco’s hand a firm squeeze in return.

Shrieks broke out amongst the girls and all of them converged on Hermione at once. She disappeared beneath a flurry of rustling silks and taffetas, all of them laughing as they hugged her in turn. A hand popped up eventually, waving weakly for help.

Draco grinned. “Right, come on, let the girl breathe!”

“Malfoy, you bastard, you never let on!” Danny dropped his voice, still incredulous. “Not even to me!”

“Thought you’d have twigged to it before this,” Draco chuckled under his breath. “We haven’t exactly tried to hide anything. You knew about the rings, what they were really about.”

“Yeah, but… I didn’t… Reckon I didn’t realise you’d taken it a step further. I mean…”

“Details!” Susan interrupted excitedly. “Tell us everything!”

“There’s not that much to tell, really,” Hermione began, her cheeks still pink. “It’s unofficially official, you could say. Because our parents don’t know yet. But we decided at the New Year.”

“You mean to say…” Gemma’s words tumbled out in slow motion as a delighted grin spread over her face. “You mean to say that you’ve been engaged for four whole months?” She fixed Hermione with a round-eyed look that spoke volumes. “When are you getting married?”

“After finals next year,” Draco replied for both of them. “In the summer sometime, I reckon.”

“Oh… more than a whole year from now,” Gemma sighed, slightly deflated, and then she perked up. “Oh, but that’s good, isn’t it, because there will be lots of time to plan! We can have a Leaving do and a pre-wedding party all at once! To Draco and Hermione! Cheers!”

“Draco and Hermione!” echoed round the table as glasses came together with a clink.

Amidst all the commotion, Hermione turned away. Suddenly she felt rather overwhelmed. They had some pretty wonderful friends. And trust Gemma to make sure no stone would be left unturned. She’d have some pretty stiff competition from both Draco’s mother and her own, though. No doubt both Narcissa and Claire would have lots to say—once they’d got over the shock of the news.

Talking of which.

“Draco,” she hissed, ducking her head down. “We still haven’t decided when we’re going to—”

He groaned softly. “I know. I love my mother dearly, but I dread what’s going to happen once she finds out. Merlin help us!” he added in a whisper.

Hermione fixed him with a stern look that was limned in sudden panic. “Look, just promise you won’t leave me in this all by myself! Please! I don’t know how much I can stand of all that rubbish!”

She had a point. He couldn’t imagine Hermione, of all people, twittering over floral arrangements and choices of canapés. He knew it would drive her completely to distraction, especially—Merlin above!—whilst they were trying to write essays and study for exams, finals in particular. The very idea of it, knowing Hermione, was ludicrous in the extreme. If it weren’t already absurd, the scenario
would be almost funny as well.

“No worries,” he told her, trying hard not to smile. “I promise not to abandon you to my mother’s machinations. Right,” he said more loudly, “who’s up for a punt on the river after breakfast?”

It had been a stupid accident, really. They’d hired two punts—six in one and four in the other, Steve and Gillian having elected to go back to their rooms and collapse— and stocked them with bottles of pre-mixed Pimm’s and Lemonade for fortification. Chris had manned the pole in the first punt, setting off purposefully down the river, singing sea chanteys in a distinctly Gilbert and Sullivan-esque style as he pushed. With him were Fiona, Mark, Maggie, Tony and Susan.

Danny took charge of the second punt, full of bravado owing to his previous experience with punting, consisting of twice manning the pole partway down the river and then being a passenger. Whole chunks of the experience were now a bit foggy, however, as a fair bit of wine had been consumed at the time.

Things were rolling along nicely, occasional grunts from Chris and Danny notwithstanding. The bottles of Pimm’s had been passed around and now everybody sprawled contentedly in a pleasantly soporific haze as the boats glided along under the canopy of trees and sky. Suddenly, there was a shudder as Danny’s pole came down on a large rock invisible from the surface. Pushing away hard, the punt lurched across a short span of water and rammed its companion broadside. Within seconds, one punt tipped precariously but then righted itself. The other was not so fortunate. The water was deep and muddy, and the four passengers were left gasping and clutching at the side of the overturned punt, thoroughly drenched and suddenly freezing in the May sunshine.

Danny watched dolefully as his pole drifted away downstream.

“Oi!” he called half-heartedly to Chris, who, along with the other inhabitants of the upright punt, were watching in silent horror. “Grab that thing, will you?”

“Fucking hell, now what?” Draco sputtered, pushing lank, wet hair out of his eyes. And then he looked around. Hermione, Gemma, and Danny resembled nothing so much as three poshly dressed, drowned rats, leaves and muddy detritus clinging to their clothes. He knew he looked just the same.

He couldn’t help himself.

He began to laugh.

For several seconds, his was the only voice echoing from the banks of the river. Hermione stared at him, wide-eyed, as if he’d lost his mind completely. And then he reached out and plucked a clump of soggy leaves from her décolletage, where they’d got snagged. She looked down between her breasts, up at his laughing eyes, and it was all over. Before long, all ten of them were helpless with laughter, heaving and clutching their sides.

“Best get this thing to shore,” Danny gasped. Treading water with one hand and holding the punt with the other, the four of them kicked off. In the meantime, Chris had manoeuvred the other punt to the river bank, where everybody hopped out. He held the pole out so that those in the water could grasp it and haul themselves ashore one at a time, and then the errant punt itself was brought to the bank.
Fortunately, they hadn’t gone far and so it wasn’t too much of a walk back to the point of hire. Once they’d returned the punts, the ten of them stood together briefly.

“Well, I’d say we’ve done May Morning justice, what d’you reckon?” Draco grinned ruefully.

“Go home, you lot, and get cleaned up. Then have a good, long kip!” Mark instructed firmly. “That’s what I’m going to do. Come on, Mags, old girl!”

“Excellent idea.” Ruefully, Danny flicked some mud from the sodden shoulder of his dinner jacket. “Think I might just have to bin this thing. Bound to stink forever after this.”

“Eau de Cherwell.” Gemma’s giggle became a wail. “I know! And I love this frock too!”

“Maybe not,” Hermione said hopefully. “You really don’t think they can be salvaged?”

Danny shrugged, shaking his head in uncertainty.

The walk home down Iffley Road was… uncomfortable. The four of them squelched along, shivering in the cool air. The two boys tried their best to keep the girls warm, but there was really very little an arm over the shoulder could do. And there was the fact of all that river mud, now in tiny, grainy particles that had found their way inside sleeves, beneath armpits, behind collars, into socks, and worst of all, inside underwear.

“What’s that quote about all the world in a grain of sand?” Gemma grumbled. “I think I’ve got at least half of it down my tights!”

“ ‘To see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower, hold…’” Hermione began.

“… infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.’ William Blake.” Draco sent a small stone flying out of his path with a disgruntled kick. “And I’ve got the other half in my pants.”

By the time they reached their own front door at number 236, everybody knew it was going to be a race to see who could claim the bathroom first. As four sets of shoulders pushed into the entranceway, cramming them all rather comically together as they tried to squeeze through, Hermione held up a slender arm and yelled, “Stop!”

“Look, we all want to take a shower as soon as possible. But short of doing a group thing—wipe those leers off your faces, you two!—we’re going to have to take it in turn. I suggest we do it in pairs, anyway. That’ll save time. We can flip a coin to see who goes first.”

As ever, Hermione had the most practical and workable idea, and the other three agreed immediately, though the two boys pulled disappointed faces at the “no group bathing” edict about which both girls were quite adamant.

“You sure about that, ladies? Ecologically, it’s a much more sensible idea. We’d be saving loads of water, y’know. And what’s a shared shower amongst friends?” The innocence of Draco’s expression was belied utterly by the rather wicked gleam in his eye.

“Perfectly natural,” Danny nodded, straight-faced. “I mean, we’re all adults, aren’t we?”
“That’s what we’re afraid of!” Gemma snorted.

Laughing, the two girls gave Draco and Danny a small push in unison, Hermione adding, “Okay, you lot—get your over-excited little libidos up the stairs so we can toss that coin finally. I’m dying to get these clothes off!”

This remark set off a fresh round of lascivious glances, Danny and Draco winking and wagging their eyebrows suggestively. With an exasperated giggle, Hermione swatted Draco on the bum. “Stop! Come on!”

“They’ll never stop, you may as well face it,” Gemma laughed. “And do you really want them to?”

“No, s’pose not,” Hermione conceded with a wry grin, as they trailed up the stairs behind the boys. “Come to think of it,” she mused, watching the taut muscles of a pair of very nice behinds rippling beneath the sodden fabric of their trousers several steps ahead, “I begin to see their point.”

“Oh yes,” Gemma murmured, “so do I, in theory. I mean, the two of them are quite delicious, let’s face it. But the last time I was in the bath with friends, I was four. Don’t really fancy sharing at this point.”

Hermione chuckled. “Agreed. Right,” she said briskly when the four of them had got inside the flat. “Who’s got a coin to hand?”

The two boys dug into soggy pockets, pulling disgusted expressions, and then Draco fished out a single 50-p coin. “I must have lost the rest of my change in the river,” he muttered. “Reckon I’m lucky I even have this.”

He looked around and nodded to the other three, who nodded their readiness back.

“Heads!” Danny called swiftly.

The coin spiralled overhead and then dropped neatly into Draco’s hand, whereupon he closed one hand over the other with a small slap. Lifting his hand, he peered down at the coin that rested in his other palm and then showed it around.

It was heads.

Danny whooped and grabbed Gemma, strong-arming her away in the direction of their bedroom. Draco turned back to Hermione, his grin suddenly wolfish. “Come here, you.”

A sudden, hot blush crept over her cheeks. “What have you got in mind? I’m filthy and I must stink!”

Snagging her by the arm, he pulled her flush up against him and, despite her attempts to get away, plunged his nose into the skin at the base of her neck.

“Yep. You do. Like something that died. S’all right, though, ‘cos so do I.” He pressed her face to his dinner jacket, chuckling as she pulled away, her nose wrinkling. “See? I’m not bothered. We both stink. And there’s something I’ve been wanting to do ever since breakfast.”

“Oh?” Hermione echoed, faintly nettled, the embarrassed flush still colouring her cheeks. “And what is that?”

“This,” he murmured, tipping her chin up as he bent his head. His mouth moved slowly and
deliberately over hers, exploring with almost unbearable tenderness, as if he were kissing her for the very first time or after a very long time apart. Hermione relaxed into sensations that were intense and intoxicating. His mouth was so very sweet.

And there it was again, that overwhelming weak-in-the-knees feeling. It really was amazing-- and even sort of scary-- that he still had this effect on her after all this time.

“Now,” he whispered when they finally broke the kiss, “I feel much better.”

Her eyes were still closed and she swayed in the cradle of his arms slightly before she opened them and shook herself.

He grinned down at her. “Let’s get out of these wet things, yeah? Come on.”

Taking her hand, he led her to their room, where they stripped quickly and rather unceremoniously. Hermione pulled on an oversized t-shirt and then picked up her dress from the floor where it had fallen as she’d wriggled out of it. She looked at it ruefully.

“I do love this frock,” she sighed, and then her expression went from regret to frustration. “Damn it, Malfoy, we can clean these things in a trice, you know we can! Come on, let’s just do it! They’ll be good as new!”

“But won’t it look just a bit odd if our things are fine whilst Danny’s and Gemma’s are ruined?” Draco was stretched out on the bed comfortably naked, leaning back on the plump pillows and eyeing Hermione sceptically.

“We’ll do theirs too! I can say that I’ve taken everything to the cleaner’s. They’ll never know! Quick, let’s go into their room whilst they’re still in the shower and grab their stuff!”

Draco rolled his eyes, his mouth quirked in a wry half-smile. There would be no talking Hermione out of this and well he knew it. Once that girl got an idea into her head, it generally required a bomb to dislodge it.

“All right!” He heaved a dramatic sigh and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He had been so enjoying lying there deliciously bare-arsed and utterly relaxed…

Hermione stood at the door, waving frantically at him. “Come on, Malfoy! They could come out any second!”

“Okay, okay!” Jumping up in defeat, he snagged a pair of brightly patterned boardshorts from the top drawer and hopped into them clumsily, nearly tripping as both feet went into one leg opening in his haste. And then, hurriedly thrusting his right leg through the proper opening, he stubbed his baby toe hard on the leg of the chest.

“Bloody fucking HELL!” he hissed, hopping on the good foot and holding the other one tightly to stem the painful throbbing. “I think I broke it!”

Rushing to have a look, Hermione gave him a grim smile. “You’ll live. It’s not broken. Look, I’ll heal it, I promise!” Gods, he was acting like such a baby! “Please… let’s just get in and get out before they come out of the bathroom!”

He was fucking injured, for Merlin’s sake! He might never walk properly on that foot again! Couldn’t she see how badly he was hurt? Hell, the nail would probably come off! Wouldn’t that be a pretty sight! The things one learns in a moment of crisis about the person they thought they knew… He’d never have expected it. At the very least, she might have—
In the middle of this longwinded pity fest, a hand grabbed his arm and yanked him unceremoniously into the corridor.

The door to Gemma and Danny’s bedroom was partially ajar, and they could see the muddy dinner suit and dress hanging forlornly on the wardrobe door. Towels had been laid out on the floor beneath, to catch anything that hadn’t already been wrung out.

Moving as stealthily as is possible (when one’s toe is probably shattered! Hmm!), the two of them crept into the room and grabbed the sodden, smelly garments from their places. Hermione stood on tiptoe to reach the hanger so she could yank Gemma’s frock down from the hook, straining and letting out a tiny grunt.

“Allow me,” Draco muttered, reaching up with ease and then handing the frock to her. She looked daggers at him briefly, and then her face cleared and she reached out and patted his arm.

“Sorry you hurt yourself,” she whispered.

Much better. He grinned. “Sorry I was being such a twat.”

“You were, y’know.”

“Yeah. Well. Excruciating pain will do that. Sorry—joking! Anyway, it’s not so bad now. You were right. I think I’ll live.”

Hermione gave him a brilliant smile, ready to throw her arms around him, and then a look of alarm crossed her face as she remembered where they were. “Come on, we’ve got to get out of here!”

Sneaking down the hall carrying the soggy, mud-flecked clothing, they had just managed to reach the safety of their own room when the bathroom door opened, steam from the shower billowing out into the much cooler hallway, and Danny and Gemma emerged, wrapped in towels and laughing.

“Told your clothes to the cleaner’s, you lot,” Hermione sang out from behind the closed door as they passed.

“Gosh, did you really? Thanks!” Gemma replied, taken aback, and then muttered to Danny, “When could she possibly have had time?”

Danny shrugged. “Must’ve run all the way. I don’t know, love,” he chuckled, slinging an arm around her wet shoulders. “Does it matter, really? If she did, that’s great.”

“Right,” Gemma said slowly. “Okay, whatever. Let’s get dressed, come on.”

Together they disappeared into their room, shutting the door behind them.

Behind their own door, Hermione and Draco had hung the filched clothing alongside their own on the wardrobe front, and now they stood there, surveying the damage.

“Bloody disgusting,” he muttered. “Let’s get this over with. The room’s really starting to reek now.”

“Open the door a little bit. I heard them go in and close theirs. It’ll be okay. This won’t take long.” Hermione had fished her wand out from the locked jewellery case atop her chest of drawers, and now she stood, feet slightly apart and braced, a look of concentration on her face.

Draco nodded his relief at the suggestion and opened the door about halfway, sticking his head out. A fresh breeze wafted from the window in the hall and gratefully, he sucked in a breath.
“Come on, Malfoy, let’s do this together. We can take it in turn!” Hermione gestured to Draco, inviting him to stand beside her. It had been so long since either of them had done any real magic. She found she was quite looking forward to it, almost gleeful.

Excellent idea. Retrieving his wand from the bottom of the locked trunk in which he’d kept it safe the past year and a half, he took his place next to her and assumed the same focused position, wand raised. The wand felt so right in his hand, like an old friend, the very act of using it so comfortable and familiar and good.

“Ready?” Hermione cast a quick sidelong glance at him and he nodded. “Right, I’ll go first if that’s okay.”

Draco dipped his head in gracious, silent assent.

“Evanesco mud!” She directed her wand in loops, jabs, and swirls at each garment in turn, rather reminiscent of a symphony orchestra conductor drawing the various instruments together with a series of exaggerated flourishes.

Clots of embedded mud began, one by one, to disappear. The big ones vanished rather dramatically, lifting from the clothing and disintegrating into dry clouds of dust that exploded and then were gone. The smaller ones simply were there one minute and gone the next, as if suddenly, they’d been sucked into an alternative universe. Dead leaves and twigs that had been stuck to trousers and dress shirts, ties, dinner jackets and frocks whirled into the air momentarily and then with a pop, they were gone too.

Admiringly, Draco watched her ply her wand with expert grace. With a lazy grin, he nodded his approval. “Nice! I’m impressed!”

“Phew! There’s just so much here!” she replied, frowning with concentration as she extricated some mud that had burrowed deep between the pleats of one of the dress shirts. “But thanks, love!”

Once, just once, there was a noise—a squeak in the floorboards, it sounded like—and they froze. But then there was silence, and they could hear voices in the room next door. Relaxing, Hermione continued the work.

At last, the initial part of the job was done. Draco gave Hermione a cocky smile, pushed up imaginary sleeves, twirled his own wand with a flourish, and cleared his throat. “Observe, Granger.”

Directing his wand at his own dinner jacket first, he said in a low but commanding voice, “Scourgify Profundus!”

The jacket, still damp and certainly—as expected—still filthy despite the removal of the most obvious clumps of mud and other debris, suddenly seemed to snap to attention. The chest section stuck out, looking quite proud of itself, the lapels flapped cheekily, and the whole thing seemed to shimmer for a moment. Then it hung quietly on the hanger, immaculately clean, dry, and pressed.

Hermione let out a low whistle. “You’re good!”

“Of course I am.” Flashing a wide, unabashedly smug grin at her, Draco turned back to the task at hand, pointing his wand at the shirt that hung next to the jacket. It was an irredeemably soiled shade of grey, wilted and sad. And then it wasn’t. Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. She could have sworn the newly spotless shirt was about to take a bow.

All was done in a matter of minutes. They got busy, then, moving the clothing inside the wardrobe for safekeeping, until such time as they could realistically resurface after a presumed trip to the
Just as Draco was handing Hermione the second to last piece, she sucked in a horrified breath. “The shoes! Oh, Draco, we forgot to take their shoes!”

“It’s okay-- don’t forget, we didn’t say anything about that. It would be odd for their shoes to go missing all of a sudden.” Draco’s tone was reassuring as he handed her his trousers, which gave a jaunty little backward kick and then tried to wrap its legs about her waist before disappearing into the wardrobe.

Pushing them off, she hung the trousers up and began to turn away. Just then, one of the legs snaked out a final time and patted at her breast. With an exasperated giggle, she slapped it away. “Malfoy, your trousers are flirting with me!”

“As well they should do, if they’re self-respecting trousers of mine!” he teased.

“Anyway, I suppose you’re right about the shoes. I can always take them tomorrow and just say I’ve dropped them off with ours. A quick cleaning spell and a Reparo should do it.”

“You could always take them to Timpson’s. They fix shoes and do dry cleaning as well.”

The words, spoken in a monotone, had come from the doorway. It was Gemma. She stood there along with Danny, both of them wide-eyed with shock and confusion.

“How long have you been standing there?” Hermione could barely choke the words out.

Danny seemed not to have heard the question. His own voice was wooden as he moved towards the wardrobe. “All right if we take back our clothes now? Thanks for cleaning them.”

Wordlessly, Draco began to give him his suit, shirt and tie. Danny’s hand shot out, his fingers closing instead around Draco’s wrist.

“What the bloody hell did we just see?”

TBC

Photo Gallery

As promised, here are Hermione and Draco at the Hertford Ball! The very talented Mystik_Rose worked her magic once again with the headshots and bases I chose. Aren’t they amazing? Thank you, Cheryl!
Oxford Town Hall, corner of the High and St Aldate’s
May Morning festivities
As the first rays of the sun hit Magdalen Tower. Photo by Damian Cugley
Morris dancers and other revellers. Photo on the bottom by Kaihsu Tai

The Quod, 92-94 High Street
Punting on the Cherwell
No clue who did this wonderful little drawing!
Disclaimer: Only the original plot and characters belong to me. No money is being made from this story.

A/N: Huge thanks, as always, to my betas, mister_otter and kazfeist. Brunch, drinks, and a relaxing punt on the Cherwell have been reserved for you!

Sources for May Morning photos, illustration, and information are as follows:

http://www.dailyinfo.co.uk/whatson/maymorning07.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_Morning


Drinks Glossary:

Pimm’s Cup: one part Pimm’s No.1 (gin-based) with three parts lemonade or lemon soda, ice cubes, borage leaves (or a wedge of cucumber), mint leaves and slices of lemon, orange and strawberry. Pimm’s and Lemonade comes pre-mixed in cans and bottles.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pimm’s

Buck’s Fizz—essentially the same thing as a Mimosa. It’s champagne and orange juice.

Bloody Mary—vodka mixed with tomato juice, adding a dash of lemon juice, Worcestershire sauce, and Tabasco sauce, and served with a wedge of lime.
“What the bloody hell did we just see?”

FUCK.

As Danny gripped Draco’s wrist, the two of them locked eyes and Draco flinched. Slowly, Danny opened his fingers and let go, and Draco stepped back involuntarily, still caught in his friend’s fiercely questioning gaze.

Watching, Hermione sensed Gemma’s eyes boring holes right through her. She felt all the blood leave her face in a rush. How could they have been so stupidly careless?

Now what?

“Draco…” she began faintly. “Can I… we need to…”

It was as if a glass of ice water had been thrown into his face, and Draco suddenly seemed to wake
from the trance he’d been in. He shuddered slightly, and then nodded.

“Yeah…” he said, moving to Hermione’s side. Tugging his head close, she whispered hastily. He listened, his eyes moving to Danny and then Gemma as he did so, and then nodded once.

“Sit down,” he said finally, gesturing towards the bed. “We’ve got a lot to tell you.”

Warily, Gemma and Danny approached the bed, seating themselves at the end. Hermione pulled the butterfly chair over next to Draco, who now straddled the desk chair backwards, leaning forward to rest his folded arms on its back. She looked at their friends and then back at Draco, anxiety plainly etched in her face.

“We’re… it’s… well, it’s like this, see…” He took a deep breath and plunged ahead, his words rushed and falling over each other. “What you saw… it was magic.”

Several seconds of dead silence.

“Oh, you mean like… like an illusionist, that sort, yeah?” Danny breathed an audible sigh of relief and grinned at Gemma. “See, Gem, I knew it. It wasn’t anything weird. Come on, let’s--”

“No.”

Something in Draco’s voice made them both freeze, caught in a comical posture halfway between sitting and standing.

“Sit down. Please,” Hermione entreated, opening her arms.

“It wasn’t a trick. It was real.” Draco’s gaze was steady. “We-- Hermione and I, that is—we have… well… certain powers.”

Danny let out an incredulous snort. “‘What are you supposed to be, then, mate?’ he laughed. “Some sort of wizard?”

The word seemed to hang on the air quite palpably, and then Draco replied, “As a matter of fact… yes. I am. And Hermione is a witch.”

“Steady on …” Danny licked his lips, swallowing hard. He stopped, considered for a moment, and then his face broke into a wry, knowing grin. “You lot actually had me going there for a minute! Gemma, come on, they’re taking the piss! They’re not really saying they’re…”

“Magical? Yes. We are, in fact,” Draco said flatly.

More and more far-fetched by the minute—except, of course, that there had to be a perfectly logical explanation. Gemma was suddenly sure she knew what it was. She smiled.

“Right,” she said, relaxing visibly. “So you two are Wiccans, then, yeah? In a—what do they call it? —a coven? I’ve read a bit about that. Or some sort of pagans, anyway?”

Draco glanced at Hermione. The look he gave her plainly said, Your turn. She nodded and cleared her throat.

“Well, see, it’s much more than that, really,” she started, wondering how in Merlin’s name she would ever manage to explain it all adequately. “When people into Wicca or Druidry study the Old Ways, they’re learning our history. But for us, the practice of magic goes much deeper than they can possibly know. It’s something we’re born with, and then we have to learn how to use it properly.
See, we’re... we’re different. And... because of that, our world has to stay hidden from non-magical people. I mean to say...” She lifted her hands in a faintly desperate gesture, looking quickly at Draco for help.

“Look, it’s like this,” he went on. “The wizarding world functions completely outside the non-magical world. It’s down to what Hermione said, really. We’re born with the gift. It’s what we are. People who choose to be Wiccan, for instance... well, they can study and practice the Craft, but only to a limited degree. They don’t have the sorts of powers that we have. They don’t have magic in the same way we do. So they can’t do what we can. They don’t even know we exist.” He paused, checking his friends’ faces. “Does this make any sense?”

Gemma and Danny had that stunned, deer-caught-in-the-headlamps look again, only now it was more deeply profound. Because now, mixed with the surprise, there was the beginning spark of reluctant belief in their eyes.

“Right...” Danny began, struggling to grasp all he’d heard. “You’re saying that you—the two of you—are just like the wizards and witches in stories? Like Gandalf?”

Draco nodded. “Yeah. And Merlin.” He paused, mischief lighting his eyes. “Oh, by the way... he was real, y’know.”

His little revelation had exactly the desired effect.

“Real...??” Danny and Gemma echoed in unison, their eyes growing round once again.

“Just like Glinda the Good,” Hermione put in hastily, giving their friends a big wink and then flashing an exasperated face at Draco. Honestly, how many shocks were their friends supposed to deal with all at once!

Unfazed, he rolled his eyes as he recalled the nauseatingly twee creature from the film Granger had insisted he watch on the telly one afternoon. Hollywood’s take on witches—positively sickening. Such utter rubbish gave witches a bad name in the Muggle world, and the thought of that wound him right up. Though hmm... he could just about imagine Granger in that poufy, spangly, pink gown that looked like a bloody great birthday cake. For Hallowe’en. She definitely had the hair for it, he thought, biting back a chuckle.

“What about the Wicked Witch of the West, then?” Gemma joked, successfully distracted by Hermione’s “Wizard of Oz” reference. “Know anybody like that?”

“Well, actually...” Hermione paused, frowning. This would be an answer Gemma wasn’t expecting to hear. “Yes. There are lots of Dark witches and wizards, too.” In contrast to the portrayal of the good witch in the film, Margaret Hamilton’s evil witch had been frighteningly accurate. In truth, such unsavoury characters could be found any day of the week skulking round Knockturn Alley. And certainly both she and Draco had had their fair share of intimate encounters with practitioners of the Dark Arts.

“Really...” Gemma echoed faintly, chastened.

“There’s more,” Draco said quietly. In for a penny, in for a pound. He cleared his throat and plunged ahead. “You remember when we had that barbecue last summer and you turned up unexpectedly with Mark and Maggie?” he asked.

Danny and Gemma nodded, and she opened her mouth to speak, but Draco raised his hand. “Hang on.”
“Let him talk, Gem,” Danny whispered, and then turned his attention back to Draco.

“Those friends of ours that you met… well, you remember we all went to school together.”

“Funny name it had, your school. I remember. It was something to do with pigs…” Danny trailed off, his brows drawn together in a frown as he struggled to recall. Then he brought his hand down on his knee. “Hogwarts! That was it, yeah?”

Draco nodded. “Its full name was…”

“Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” he and Hermione finished together.

Gemma and Danny looked at each other as a dawning sense of understanding broke over the two of them simultaneously. And then Gemma voiced the realisation that both of them had just reached.

“You mean… you mean to say that those friends of yours… they’re all like you?” Gemma was almost too astonished to finish framing the question, but the final words struggled out of her at last.

“Yep. Witches and wizards, the lot of them,” Draco sighed, with a small, faintly apologetic shrug.

This latest piece of information needed some time to sink in properly. There was utter silence for a full two minutes and then Danny turned slowly, another truth having just struck home as well.

“So…” he said, remembering. “That night… the dragons… the ones in the picture frame, I mean…” He stood abruptly, looking almost gleeful. “I wasn’t just imagining things, then, was I! It wasn’t because of… They really were moving, weren’t they! And breathing fire!” He looked sharply at Draco, who simply nodded, shrugging once again.

“And what about that one bloke who said somebody had… what was it again? Somebody had fallen off the staircase between floors when the stairs moved. I remember distinctly!” Gemma exclaimed, recollection flooding her face, her eyes unnaturally bright all of a sudden.

“Everything is magical at the school. All sorts of things you can’t possibly imagine. Such as staircases that move randomly and when you least expect it.” Hermione sighed, remembering back nine years. “I’ll never forget the first time I saw that. It was our first day. We’d just come from the boats.”

“Boats?”

“First-years cross a lake to get to the castle. Everybody else goes by carriage,” she explained. “We’d just arrived and been welcomed and Sorted, and we were going upstairs to our rooms. The staircase shifted suddenly. I’d never seen anything like that in my life!”

“Reckon you hadn’t!” Danny muttered. Castles with moving staircases, lakes, boats and carriages, being “sorted,” whatever that meant…

Gemma tucked her legs beneath her and leaned back against Danny to make herself more comfortable. “This school—what sorts of classes… I mean, what did you study there?”

“Oh, well…” Hermione reflected. “Potions, Transfiguration—changing things from one state to another—History of Magic, Divination, Ancient Runes, Herbology… all sorts of things, really.”

“Flying.”

All eyes were on Draco, who had said the word so quietly, it was almost as if he were speaking to
himself. His tone was wistful.

“On broomsticks, naturally!” Gemma laughed at her own joke, pictures of Halloween witches in her head. Imagining Hermione and Draco soaring through the air on brooms was just too ridiculous.

“Actually…” Hermione began.

Draco nodded. “Broomsticks. Yeah. We were all expected to learn. Some of us were rather better at it than others, however.” He cast a sly, sidelong glance at Hermione, his mouth twitching, and then neatly dodged the swift kick in the shins she aimed at him.

Meanwhile, their friends had shrunk back again into stunned silence.

Shit.

And then Danny remembered something else that had niggled at him that evening, though at the time, he’d blown it off as one more piece of weed-inspired weirdness.

“What the fuck is parsel… parseltongue, was it?”

Draco shook his head, grinning. Apparently, they’d been paying far closer attention than anyone had realised at the time, regardless of the conclusions they’d come to regarding logical explanations.

“Parseltongue, right. It’s the language of snakes. When a human can speak it, he or she is referred to as a Parselmouth. It’s a pretty rare gift,” Hermione interjected. “Our friend Harry is one. We don’t know why,” she added hastily.

“And what was all that about being somebody’s cat, Hermione?” Gemma asked, remembering suddenly. It had been the one bit of information Hermione had blurted out, surprising even herself, and now both Gemma and Danny waited for her explanation.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, well, that was an accident. We’d brewed a potion that can make you look exactly like somebody else for an hour or so, but you have to put in a hair from the person, or a nail paring or something, in order for it to work. By mistake, I used a hair from this girl’s cat instead. So… so I wound up with… with the head of a…” A giggle bubbled up unbidden at the memory, but it died in her throat when she saw the expressions on her friends’ faces. They weren’t laughing along with her, although Draco was turning rather pink in the face trying to contain his own amusement.

“Hang on a minute. There’s something I don’t understand.” Danny frowned, puzzled. “You both said real magic is something a person is born with. But Hermione—you’re from Watford, for fuck’s sake. Are you telling me that—”

“No. My parents are ordinary people. Dentists. No magic. But I was different, somehow.”

“How did you know, at first?” Gemma asked quietly.

“Well, when I was very little, things began to happen. Things I couldn’t explain. If I got very upset, for instance.”

“Like what?” Danny arched a curious brow.

“Things went flying and smashed a lot. When I was five, this girl at school was making fun of me, saying horribly hurtful things. I got really angry, and then suddenly… the next thing I knew, her hair had turned to masses of worms. I’d knew I’d done it, though I didn’t know how.”
Danny let out a low whistle and shook his head. “Bloody hell.”

“I didn’t understand any of it. I only knew that somehow, I could make things happen— weird things—and it scared me. So I learned to hide it really well. It wasn’t until I got my letter from Hogwarts when I was eleven that it began to make some sort of sense. And even then, my parents thought it was a joke—a letter from a school they’d never heard of, announcing that their daughter was a witch. Until our headmaster came to visit, and explained.”

“So, then… a witch or wizard really can be born to parents who are…” Gemma said slowly.

“Muggles,” Draco supplied. “That’s what we call non-magical people. It’s more the exception, but yeah. It happens. Most often, if you have the powers, your parents do too, and generations of your family before them.” Carefully, he refrained from saying more. He would let Hermione explain the rest, if she chose to.

“Your family is like that?” Danny wanted to know, and then he began to snicker. “Shit, no wonder your parents were so put off when they came to visit last year!”

Draco shook his head, smirking. “No, it wasn’t so much that we live as Muggles here. It’s that my room was so small.”

“And such a sty,” Hermione added drily.

Draco chuckled. “That too, yeah. They’re used to things being just so. And yeah, in answer to your question, we Malfoys are a very old family, one of the very oldest in wizarding Britain.”

“They’re ‘pure-bloods’; that’s when everyone in the family going back absolutely forever is a wizard or a witch. Then there are ‘half-bloods,’ one parent who’s magical and one not. And then there are people like me—‘Muggleborns.’ No magical relatives at all.” Hermione gave a slight shrug. “That’s about it.”

“Old wizarding family…” Gemma mused. “Loads of very old money… Oh my God, I think I get it now! The thing with Hermione’s parents at the New Year’s party—it wasn’t just about class, was it! Were they the only non-magical people at the party? Was that it?”

Hermione nodded. “Mmm. Now you understand why it must have been so difficult for them.”

Everybody grew quiet as the gravity of all the revelations, collectively—both for the ones who’d made them and the ones who’d been the recipients—became evident. Hermione glanced nervously at Draco, who tried to give her a reassuring smile but only succeeded in pulling off an edgy half-grin, half-grimace.

Both were wondering the same thing: had they done the right thing in being honest? Or had they just compromised the security of their world by sharing secrets that had for generations been so carefully guarded?

“So, you lot…” Danny’s voice interrupted their ruminations. He had stretched out comfortably on the bed and now, leaning on one elbow, he gazed up at the two of them expectantly. “Show us, then.”

Draco and Hermione glanced at each other quickly.

“Yeah,” Gemma chimed in. “For starters, what was all that you were doing before?”

“Vanishing spell,” Hermione replied, “to get rid of all the mud and twigs and stuff. And then a
cleaning spell. I just couldn’t bear our lovely clothes being ruined when I knew we could do something about it!"

She considered for a moment, and then went to retrieve her wand from the desk, where she’d dropped it earlier.

Pointing it towards the bookshelf, she said firmly, “Accio dictionary!”

Instantly, a small, thick paperback book came sailing out from the top shelf, landing neatly in Hermione’s open palm. Laying it down, she pointed her wand once again. “Wingardium Leviosa!”

The book slowly rose into the air and hovered serenely a foot above the desk, its pages fluttering gently.

She turned to regard her friends, whose mouths had dropped open again in astonishment, and then to Draco. “You have a go.”

He gave her a playful wink. “Accio wand!”

It shot towards him, straight as an arrow, and he reached up and snagged it elegantly in mid-air. Then, giving it a twirl, he murmured, “Avis!”

There was a sudden flapping of wings. Small feathers drifted lazily down to the floor as a small flock of budgies materialised, rising up together out of thin air and then taking off to find perches in the four corners of the room. Some sat on the chests of drawers, others landed on the window sills, and still others settled themselves in front of the mirror, circling and preening as they admired their reflections.

Draco cast a quick glance at Danny and Gemma, who now had identical fish-out-of-water looks on their faces. Then he turned to Hermione and grinned. “You do the honours, love.”

“Right,” she said crisply. “Finite Incantatem!”

As suddenly as the birds had appeared, they vanished, only a few telltale feathers left behind as proof they’d been there at all. The dictionary fell to the desk with a soft thud.

After a couple of beats of utter silence, Danny let out a pent-up breath, muttered a quiet “fuck me,” and then looked up with a crooked grin.

“Reckon you showed us,” he remarked wryly, and everybody laughed.

“Your’s just one thing, though,” Draco said, his expression suddenly somber. “This can’t get out, not to anyone. Our world can’t be exposed. Understand?” He darted a glance at Hermione, then, raising a brow. The meaning behind the look was all too clear.

“Oh, right, ‘course we do,” Gemma reassured him. “We won’t say anything.”

“Not on purpose, Gem, but something could slip. We can’t take that chance. There’s a… well, it’s just… there’s a spell we can do, you see, that will make you forget all this stuff when other people are about. Non-magical people, I mean. Our friends, for instance. See, it’s not that we don’t trust you, but… it would just be a lot easier and safer all round,” Hermione rushed on, suddenly feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable.

Gemma and Danny looked at each other, nonplussed, and then put their heads together, whispering briefly. A very tense, awkward minute passed.
Then Danny gave a terse nod. “Right. Fire away.”

Draco stepped forward, his wand pointed at the two of them. Suddenly, he could see the tiniest flicker of fear crossing their faces as they held their breaths, waiting for the unknown. It was startling and rather disturbing to think his friends would have reason to be afraid of anything he might do. Shaking the feeling off for the moment, he pressed on. This had to be done.

“Obliviate partim!”

One heartbeat, two, and then Danny and Gemma looked first at each other and then at Hermione and Draco.

“I don’t feel any different,” Gemma said slowly, amazed. “And I still remember everything, all of it.”

“Me too,” Danny murmured. He looked as if he were tempted to pinch himself.

“’Course you do. I didn’t erase your memories, only tweaked ‘em very slightly. No worries, mate.” Draco grinned reassuringly.

Danny and Gemma stood to leave, and once again, a certain awkwardness fell between the two couples. Today’s revelations would take some getting used to, and they all knew it. On the way out, Danny reached out to rest his fingertips lightly, almost nervously, on Draco’s wand, which now lay on the desk once again. One brief, glancing touch and then, with an embarrassed little laugh, he withdrew his hand again, shoving it deep into his jeans pocket.

After they’d gone, the door closed securely behind them, Draco threw himself onto the bed with an explosive sigh, collapsing on the large, soft throw pillows.

“ Fucking hell! I can’t believe that just happened!”

Hermione flopped down alongside him, an arm thrown over her face. A moment later, she peeked out from beneath it, looking at Draco with large, troubled eyes. “We did do the right thing, didn’t we? Telling them, I mean?”

Draco raised himself up on one elbow and regarded her soberly. “I don’t see that we had much choice, love. It was either that or Obliviate them completely. I think you were dead on when you said you thought they could be trusted. Merlin, they’re our best friends after all. I’m actually kind of glad they know finally, aren’t you?” He gave her a rueful grin. “I wouldn’t go blabbing to anyone else, though. Going through all this once was enough!”

Hermione nodded, lying back and staring up at the shadowy leaf patterns shifting gently on the ceiling. And then suddenly, her eyes opened wide and she sat up. “Bugger! What’ll we do about the wedding? Oh gods, Draco, we won’t be able to invite any of our other friends from uni because… because…”

“Hmm.” He flashed her a cheeky grin. “We could always spike their drinks, I reckon. Give ’em something to make ’em forget that they saw house-elves appearing and disappearing at will and musical instruments playing themselves.”

“Oh, and how do you plan to make them forget the ceremony itself, Mister Smart-arse? Come to think of it…” Hermione’s voice rose with growing alarm. “It’s not just our friends. What am I going to do about my entire family?”

Draco pulled her in close, wrapping his arms about her snugly. “Calm down, Granger, we’ll get it all sorted. It’s more than a year away. Talking about family, though, do you realise that our parents still
know absolutely sod-all? Reckon that’s what we should be worrying about now, not the bloody wedding!” Heaving an exhausted sigh, he dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “At the moment, though,” he murmured, his eyes already drifting shut, “I don’t give a fuck about any of it. Just want to sleep!” And with that, he burrowed into the pillows and was sound asleep in a matter of minutes.

Snuggling closer, Hermione closed her eyes against the headache that had begun to assault the muscles in her neck, trying to relax and let all of it go. What she desperately wanted now was sleep. Unbidden, thoughts of his parents and hers began to niggle at her afresh and she groaned, burying her face in Draco’s chest.

6 May

The phone call from Hermione had been cryptic to say the least. “Can you come for tea Sunday afternoon?” she’d said. “We’ve something we need to discuss with you.”

There were any number of possibilities as to what that could be, ranging from those that left Claire quite giddy to several that filled her with dread. She glanced over at Richard, who was grimly focused on the traffic that snarled the A40 going towards Oxford.

“What do you suppose this is all about?” she asked him for the fourth time since the phone conversation. “You don’t think Hermione’s in some sort of trouble, do you?”

Richard pursed his lips as he considered the possibility, and then he shook his head. “I told you before, Claire-- I’ve no idea. I expect we’ll know before very long, though. We’re nearly there.”

The large, red-brick Victorian in the Iffley Road looked as solid and imposing as ever as they pulled into the gravelled drive. Closing the car door, Claire checked her watch—half past three, right on time-- and then glanced up at the windows on the floor above. Hermione appeared suddenly behind the glass. Spotting her parents, she beamed down at them and waved.

Well, it couldn’t be anything too awful. The thought was a comfort as Claire started up the stairs behind Richard.

“Dad! Mum! You’re here!” Hermione enthused, throwing her arms around both her parents at once.

“Let us get through the door, Kitten!” Richard chuckled, as the three of them found themselves wedged together in the entrance to the flat.

“Right, sorry, Daddy!” With a small giggle, Hermione stepped back and her parents moved into the sitting room.

Just then, Draco walked in from the kitchen, carrying a tray of tea things. Setting it down on the coffee table, he hastened over to the Grangers, his hand outstretched.

“Hello…” he began.

“Richard,” the older man prompted, winking.
“Richard.” Draco grinned sheepishly. It still felt just a bit weird to be quite so informal with his girlfriend’s—no, scratch that, his fiancée’s—parents. Such a thing would never have been possible if he’d chosen a girl from within his parents’ circle. He could be married a hundred years and still never reach the sort of relaxed, comfortable rapport he’d already achieved with both Richard and Claire.

A moment later, as he was reflecting on this, he found himself enveloped in a warm hug. “Claire,” he smiled into a sudden faceful of curly hair. “It’s good to see you again.”

Claire gave him a quick peck on the cheek and then a carefully appraising look, one he’d have had to be oblivious to miss. Well, they were Granger’s parents. She could start things off, if curiosity got the better of everybody before his parents arrived. He checked his watch quickly. They should have been here by this time.

Just as the tail-end of that thought was passing through his head, there was a slight shimmer in the sun-streamed dust motes by the large windows, and then Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy materialised.

Richard and Claire rose quickly from their seats on the sofa. Frankly, all this business of appearing and disappearing at will was still just a bit disconcerting. It wasn’t anything Hermione had ever done at home, much less any other magic that they were ever aware of over the years, not even after she was legally of age in the wizarding world and could have practiced witchcraft without bringing repercussions down upon herself. For those brief summers, it had been all too easy to pretend it wasn’t true, that things were the same for their family as for everybody else they knew.

Except, of course, that they weren’t and hadn’t been for years. And never would be again. The spectacle of her boyfriend’s parents popping into view out of thin air, cloaked and regal-looking, merely confirmed the still-bizarre reality of their lives as the parents of a bona fide witch. Perhaps it would only get stranger as time went on. One could only hope that the strangeness would gradually evolve into something familiar enough, at least, to be comfortable. The devil you know, as they say.

Lucius inclined his head, a faint smile lifting the corners of his mouth as he offered his hand to Richard. “Granger,” he said with the correct degree of cordiality. “And Claire. A pleasure, I’m sure.”

“Indeed,” Narcissa smiled. Catching Claire’s eye as the two women clasped hands, she gave her a quick but penetrating look that plainly said, *Have you any idea what this is all about?*

Claire shrugged, completely at a loss, and sank back down on the sofa alongside her husband, who’d already exchanged the appropriate pleasantries with both Malfoys as well.

Narcissa and Lucius divested themselves of their cloaks and turned to find both Draco and Hermione at their side.

“Draco!” Narcissa cried, a delighted smile lighting her face as she gathered her son into her arms for a hug. “It’s wonderful to see you. You know, it really has been far too long. Shame on you! And Hermione, my dear…” She turned to the young woman who stood smiling by Draco’s side. “You’re looking lovely as always. Thank you for inviting us, darlings.” Swallowing down the question she was dying to ask took every ounce of will power she possessed.

Draco brushed his lips over his mother’s cheek and then stepped back from her embrace. He turned to his father, who waited silently just behind her, and resolutely stuck out his hand.

“Father,” he said. “Thank you for coming.”

Lucius raised a dubious eyebrow ever so slightly and then nodded. “Draco. How charming that you and Miss Granger—Hermione, rather—have invited us to tea. As gracious as the invitation is,
however, it is also a bit sudden. Might I inquire as to the reason?”

Three sets of eyes swivelled sharply in Lucius’ direction.

“Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy,” Hermione jumped in hastily, waylaying his question. “Please… won’t you sit down?” She gestured towards the sofa adjacent to the one on which her parents now sat rather stiffly and then, visibly nervous, she busied herself pouring out cups of tea and handing them round to everyone.

“Will you have some cake, Mrs. Malfoy?” she asked.

They nodded mutely, accepting the plates she handed them, and then she turned to her own parents. By this time, the tension was as thick as the lemon curd that filled the cake. Both sets of parents chewed silently, waiting. The question had been asked. Now it hung heavily in the air, waiting for Draco and Hermione to answer.

Finally, Draco cleared his throat, taking a bracing sip of the hot tea to fortify himself. “We’ve asked you here this afternoon because we’ve something very important to tell you.”

Both sets of parents leaned forward imperceptibly, cups balanced on saucers, their cake quite forgotten.

“I…” There was a sudden tickle in his throat and he cleared it once more, this time a bit more forcefully, glancing at Hermione. She smiled and gave him an encouraging nod. Draco turned back to their parents, his chin up.

“I’ve asked Hermione to marry me,” he proclaimed stoutly. “And she has accepted.”

For ten seconds, there was utter silence, as if the very air had been sucked from the room. Then, both Narcissa and Claire, as if propelled by a single, electrifying impulse, gasped in unison and jumped up, rushing at their children from opposite directions.

A flurry of questions, punctuated by excited exclamations, rose up around them like a dense cloud.

“When?”

“At the New Year?” And a moment later, an even more incredulous “At the party?”

“Good heavens, Hermione, why didn’t you tell us sooner? It’s been—let me see—four months!”

“Oh my stars! What divine news! I’d been hoping for this! Claire, we’ve simply loads to do!”

Beyond the small whirlwind that was a pair of mothers surprised with the sudden news of a wedding to plan, there were the fathers, the look on each one’s face every bit as expressive as the stream of words coming from their respective wives.

Richard Granger sat back against the sofa cushions, looking as if he’d just taken a sucker punch to the gut that he’d seen coming a mile off: winded but really not surprised. His gaze was fixed on his daughter, and he found himself feeling oddly wistful, suddenly, as he looked at her smiling face and the way she had her arm so comfortably twined through Draco’s. She seemed so… so completely at home.

That was it. He remembered fondly, with Claire and him, right from the off—that feeling of being precisely where they were meant to be. He could see it in both Hermione’s and Draco’s faces too—the contentment shining in their eyes said it all.

Lucius Malfoy’s expression was far less revealing, although there was no real surprise in this for him
either. He had, in fact, been anticipating it for some time. Now that it was a reality, however, he found a remnant of the old, resistant feelings rising up in his gorge to war with the newer ones he’d been experiencing in the last number of months. It was really going to happen, it appeared—there would be a Muggleborn in the Malfoy family for the first time in centuries, if ever. The last time there had been even a hint of such a scandalous event had been four hundred years earlier, when it was rumoured that Etienne Malfoi had taken a wife with a less than pure pedigree. Her lineage had been the subject of increasingly vitriolic speculation until the duel that settled both her honour and his had killed the one wizard who had gone too far with his dirty little insinuations. In the end, the rumours had never been either proven or discredited.

Privately, Lucius permitted himself a dry little smile as he imagined Draco doing the same, knowing, somehow, that his son would go to any lengths for this girl. He had presented his parents with an ultimatum more than a year earlier, showing a fortitude and strength of conviction that had taken both Lucius and Narcissa by surprise, Lucius especially. When had his son developed such a tough core—this boy who had always been so easily moulded in the past?

Well, of course, Lucius reflected, he knew. And it wasn’t because of anything he had done. If anything, the strength Draco had acquired had grown in the precise absence of a father’s influence rather than because of it. It had been cultivated in pain and fear and loneliness and out of desperation, and then nurtured by Severus Snape, who had been there for his son when Draco had needed someone most. And then, at nineteen, Draco had gone a step further, building on his resolve by defying his father’s wishes and walking away from everything he had ever known. At nearly twenty-one, he was already a stronger man than his father had been nearly his entire adult life.

Lucius sighed briefly as he shook off thoughts of what could not be changed and brought himself back to the present. What would be would be. This girl—brilliant, beautiful, and easily up to the challenges of life with his son in every possible respect—was part of the future. In so many ways, that future was now bearing down on him hard, dragging him further and further away from everything familiar that hitherto, he had held dear.

It was time to let go.

“A toast, eh?” His own voice, rising abruptly above the excited chatter, surprised him with its clarity and firmness. Sliding his wand out from an inner pocket, he pointed it at the coffee table. “Vinum exori!”

Instantly, six slender champagne flutes appeared there, filled with the finest vintage from his cellars at the Manor. They shone golden and effervescent in the late-afternoon sunlight.

Narcissa was looking at him with an odd little smile, her eyes telling him a thousand things that were all really one and the same. Richard and Claire took up their glasses and looked at him expectantly, a tacit nod of approval from Richard as he raised his glass. Hermione glanced away, a faint blush of pleasure colouring her cheeks, and then she met her future father-in-law’s gaze dead on and smiled. This would be the way of it between them hence, Lucius supposed—a directness tempered by the proper respect but sparked by an independence of spirit, and maybe even, over time, joined by a positive regard. Her love for his son was unmistakeable. His wife had suggested that she might well prove a powerful advocate for mending the rift that had grown so deep between father and son, as Narcissa herself already was. He raised his glass to salute her and then turned to his son.

Draco had gone very still, his eyes dark and wide with surprise. Beyond that, there was scepticism—this Lucius saw all too clearly. And there was something else as well. His wife and his son’s fiancée could have told him what it was. But it had been so long since Lucius himself had seen the need—so raw and because of that, so carefully masked—that he did not recognise it now.
Nevertheless, he carried on.

“To our children, on the occasion of their betrothal. May you find in each other what I have had the good fortune to share with Narcissa the past twenty-three years. Draco and Hermione!”

“Hear hear!”

“Draco and Hermione! Cheers!”

The chorus of voices died away as the glasses clinked together. Lucius chanced another glance at Draco. His son was standing quietly alongside Hermione, each with an arm looped about the other’s waist. As he caught his father’s eye, a small, tentative smile slowly crossed Draco’s face, and he lifted his glass in a silent salute.

Lucius raised his own in return, downing the remainder of his champagne. Excellent stuff. It had aged well. Before leaving, he would make certain to Conjure a bottle of it for the children to enjoy on their own. It was so important to cultivate a taste for the finer things early in life.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks and a magnum of the best champagne to my fabulous betas, kazfeist and mister.otter.

Disclaimer: You know the drill. Not mine—well, except for Richard, Claire, Danny and Gemma, and the plot. No money being made at all.

Vinum exori!: “Wine, appear!” My own Conjuring spell for champagne. If only I could do it myself!

Obliviate partim!: This is my take on a partial Memory Charm. The Latin “partim” is meant to convey that it is selective– in this case, applying only to situations when other Muggles who are ignorant of the wizarding world are around.
Ten months later
Third Year

2 March 2002
Saturday, late afternoon

Disgusted, Hermione threw down her Biro and shut her book with a bang. Pushing the pile of index cards to the far end of the desk, she sighed, closing her eyes and rubbing them.

She’d been wrestling with this bloody essay for hours, the better part of the day in fact. Just one more week until the end of Hilary term and they’d be free for five whole weeks until the start of Trinity, their final term at Oxford. That vacation was looking better and better from where she sat at the moment. For one of the very few times in her life, Hermione Granger was sick and tired of studying, reading, and writing. She yearned to be free.

Free. Well, that was a relative term, wasn’t it. Hermione permitted herself a grim, little laugh. How
could she have forgotten? The vacation was already promising to be an almost non-stop round of wedding-related activities, if her mother and future mother-in-law had anything to say about it. The date had been set. It was a mere four months away.

Very tired suddenly, she leaned back in the chair and stretched, absently fingering the ring on the fourth finger of her left hand. It had taken the place of the silver promise ring, which she now wore on her right hand instead.

This ring was nothing short of spectacular in its own quiet way. In an antique setting of burnished silver, it featured an iridescent, pear-shaped moonstone surrounded by tiny sapphires and diamonds. Belonging originally to Draco’s great-grandmother, Acantha Bellingham Rosier, it had eventually come to Narcissa in her grandmother’s will as the favourite grandchild. She had cherished it, wearing it proudly for fifteen years.

And now it graced Hermione’s hand, looking as if it had been made for her.

“Skiving off again, Granger?”

The teasing voice broke into her reverie, and she looked up to see Draco lounging against the doorframe, arms folded, grinning.

“Careful, darling,” he continued, shaking his head. “You’re picking up bad habits.”

“From you!” she retorted, laughing. “I think I’ve been around you entirely too much for my own good!”

He laid a hand on his chest. “You wound me! I thought I’d brought nothing but sunshine and cheer into your life!”

“Well,” she replied slyly, twisting further around in her chair so that she faced him directly, her eyes glinting with mischief. “You’ve certainly brought lots of very nice things into my life. Don’t know that they’re sunshine and cheer, though. You’re not exactly Pollyanna!”

“Not exactly who?” Every once in a while, she would come out with one of those cryptic Muggle references that left him mystified.

“Character in a novel I read when I was a kid,” Hermione explained. “A little girl who always looked for the good in everything and everyone around her. Called it ‘the Glad Game.’”

Draco made a face. “Ugh, sounds revolting. However,” he went on, “once again you’ve cut me to the quick, Granger. I’ll have you know that people round here are quite taken with me. Ask anybody.”

“Hah!” Hermione teased. “That’s because they don’t see Draco Malfoy the cynic.”

“Nevertheless,” he said primly, still affecting his wounded pose, “whilst it’s true that occasionally I might take a short cut or two when I work—”

“Like that all-nighter last week when you started your essay for Blackman the day before it was due?”

“Oh yeah… that. Got an A anyway, though, didn’t I,” Draco replied airily, with a wave of his hand. His smile was insufferably smug.

“Hmm!” Hermione raised a sceptical brow, and then reached out and pulled him into her lap. “Don’t
remind me. And don’t gloat! Makes me want to smack you.”

‘Really? Kinky,” he murmured into the soft skin of her neck, capturing a bit of it to suck on.

“Anyway,” she went on, undeterred by the delicious sensations his lips, tongue, and teeth were creating in one of her most sensitive places. “This time, it really is all your fault that I was daydreaming. I was just thinking about this incredible ring.”

Draco paused in his exploration of that sweet spot just under her ear. It had been one of the single best moments of his life, seeing the look on Hermione’s face when she’d opened her eyes, finally, to discover in her palm a piece of the moon limned in silver and bounded by tiny, winking stars and fragments of the night sky. Her eyes had opened almost impossibly wide and then, very slowly, a dazzling smile had lit her face right up to her eyes. They’d sparkled with surprise and excitement, and the joyful tears she couldn’t stop.

“Now it’s really official,” he had said softly, slipping the ring onto her finger. She’d smiled tremulously up at him, and in that moment, he’d known deep in his bones that it was true. She was really going to be his wife.

He thought, then, of the other signal moment that would forever be part of the ring story, something their children (children!) would ask to hear again and again.

“Tell us again, Daddy,” he imagined them clamouring, his remarkably beautiful, towheaded children (because of course, they would look exactly like their father). “Tell us how Grandmama gave you the ring and then you gave it to Mummy!”

It was something he would never forget, as sharp in his mind as if it had just happened instead of being nearly a year ago. The Grangers had just taken their leave after the excitement following the big announcement had finally abated. Lucius had stood, making ready to slip into his travelling cloak, but Narcissa had stayed him with a light touch to the arm.

“Just a moment, darling,” she had said under her breath. “There is something I wish to do first.”

She had turned to Hermione, who sat on one of the sofas with Draco, her hand enfolded in both of his and resting in his lap. “Hermione, dear, might I steal my son away for just a moment? I promise to return him to you very soon.”

Hermione had nodded, curious, and looked at Draco, who’d merely raised his eyebrows and shaken his head. He had been mystified but curious as well, following his mother into the kitchen with a backward glance and a shrug in Hermione’s direction.

As soon as they were behind closed doors, Narcissa had taken Draco’s hands in hers. Her cornflower-blue eyes were clear and there had been a warmth in them that felt to Draco like an embrace.

“You must know, I think, how happy your news has made me,” she’d smiled. “A year and a half ago, I could not have imagined something like this happening, much less that I would feel about it as I do, but things have changed. You and Hermione have brought that about. She has made you so very happy, and for that alone, I would love her, but I find that I care for her like a daughter now as well. I believe she and I will become great friends over time.”

“She likes you too, very much indeed,” Draco had murmured, his throat constricting suddenly. “She’s told me so more than once.”

“Has she?” Narcissa had smiled. “I’m so pleased to know that. And your father? What has she said
about him, if I might ask?"

Draco’s own smile had been crooked. “Not too much, really, but… I think there’s a strange sort of
understanding between the two of them. Not sure how or why, exactly. She seems to see something
there that… I don’t know…” He’d paused, at a loss momentarily. “She thinks he’s… well… that he’s
trying to…”

Narcissa’s hands had tightened around her son’s, and she’d looked at him intently. “He is. Truly.
Give him a chance, Draco. Please. You won’t regret it.”

Draco had glanced away, fighting down the response that always seemed to rise up in his throat at
the thought, the all-too-familiar mix of scepticism and bitterness, laced with the smallest quantity of
hope that he tried to pretend he did not feel. When he had looked back at his mother, the expression
on his face had been strained.

“No promises, Mother. Don’t ask me for that.”

“He likes her, you know,” Narcissa had said quietly. “Does that surprise you?”

“Has he actually said so?” Draco’s doubts about such an admission were plain, though for some
time, he had suspected his father secretly felt that way.

“Not in so many words, no,” Narcissa had admitted. “But I can tell. I know him, Draco, far better
than perhaps you realise. I doubt very much he has admitted it even to himself, as such. But she has
forced him to reconsider so many notions both he and I were raised to believe without question.
Despite himself, perhaps, he likes her spirit. And she has earned his respect, too, I believe.”

“Which is more than I’ve done,” Draco had muttered. There had never been an acknowledgement
from his father, not even once, of his accomplishments since coming to Oxford. Not that he’d really
expected any, of course.

“Oh, Draco,” Narcissa had sighed, slipping her arms around him and drawing him close. Her
beautiful son was so tall now, nearly as tall as his father. She’d stroked his hair briefly, remembering
how silken and impossibly blond it had been when he was a baby. It was much the same even now,
as his twenty-first birthday neared. “I am certain that one day, your father will tell you himself how
proud he is of you, just as much as I am. He finds it so difficult to approach you now.

“Does he.”” Draco’s tone had been flat. Suddenly, he no longer wanted to talk about his father.
“Look, there was a reason, wasn’t there, that you brought me in here. What…”

Narcissa had nodded, shaking off the sombre mood she’d slipped into and returning to the happy
purpose with which she’d begun. “Yes, yes… of course. I have something for you, darling, and it
would give me tremendous pleasure if you would accept it.”

Slipping a ring off her finger, she’d pressed it, still warm, into his hand. He’d looked down, and then
quickly raised his eyes to hers, bewildered.

“But… but that’s Great-grandmother Rosier’s ring, isn’t it? You love that ring, Mother! Why--”

“I’ve always intended that when you became engaged, you would have this ring for your future
bride. As a family heirloom, it is only proper that it should be handed down in this way. Now that
you and Hermione have taken this step, it’s time. Please accept it. It would mean so much to me.
And knowing Hermione, I suspect she will love it.”
Draco had closed his fingers over the ring, his full heart aching and rendering the words he wanted to say into dust in his mouth. He had always adored his great-grandmother. His memories of her went back to his earliest childhood, and they were such happy ones: warm, bosomy embraces that smelt like violets and felt like silk… long, hanging earrings he’d loved to reach for as a baby, and white hair that was thick and wavy, twisted into a French knot and held by pins she’d enchanted to stay in place—except when her tiny great-grandson wanted to play the hilarious game of pulling them all out… And then, there had been the kindness in her smile, and the love and pride in her eyes whenever she’d looked at him. Acantha Rosier had died when he was only six years old. Her own daughter—Narcissa’s mother Druella—was far too caught up in her life on the Continent to be bothered much with grandmotherly pursuits, and so her presence in her grandson’s life was fleeting at best.

To have this ring in particular for Hermione meant the world. And she would love it. His mother was right.

He’d gathered Narcissa into a tight hug, sudden tears pricking at his lashes. Blinking them away, he had laughed shakily and given her a quick kiss.

“Thank you, Mother. Of course I’ll accept it. It’s… it’s wonderful.”

Narcissa had smiled up at him, holding him firmly by the shoulders. “Good! Now I think we’d best get back inside, or your father and your fiancée will really begin to wonder what I’ve done with you.”

That very night, after a casual take-away Thai dinner devoured straight out of the cartons and made festive with mismatched candles in varying sizes, he had surprised her with the ring. The elation they shared was just slightly bittersweet for Draco as he remembered the original owner of the ring and wished she were still alive. His great-grandmother would have loved Hermione, he felt sure.

Hermione’s engagement ring. Imagine a slightly smaller moonstone, surrounded by alternating tiny sapphires and diamonds where the small silver balls are.

“Vac starts in a week, y’know.” Hermione’s voice broke into his thoughts now, and Draco stirred
with a small shiver, getting up from her lap and stretching his long legs.

"Too right! I can’t wait. What shall we do, then? S’pose we could always work at Blackwell’s again. Our jobs are there whenever we want them."

“Well, you might have the time to do that, but I fully expect to be kidnapped and dragged round to fittings and caterers and printers and – oh! Your mum wrote to say that there are some musicians she wants us to listen to, and…"

“Oi! Stop!” Draco held up a hand, laughing.

Indignant, Hermione jumped to her feet. “It’s not funny, Draco Malfoy!” she wailed. “You promised you wouldn’t leave me alone in all this, remember?”

He remembered. There was no way he could have forgotten. And mostly, he’d lived up to his promise, albeit none too happily. Whatever he had managed, by stealth or lucky happenstance, to get out of doing, he had heard about in excruciating detail afterwards. For days. Until, like an exhausted torture victim, an opinion had been forcibly wrung out of him on the style and design of the invitations or which fish or meat dishes might do nicely for the main course at dinner. Hermione hated to do it to him, but she would be damned if she were stuck in all this silliness on her own. And it was his wedding too, after all. Surely he should have an equal say in everything, she pointed out with an evil grin one day when he was ready to cover his ears in desperation.

There had already been two major tussles pulling the two of them first one way and then another, a mother at either end: the ceremony itself was the first big hurdle, and for that, the burden of capitulation fell to the Grangers in the end. They were not remotely surprised that the ceremony would reflect their daughter’s life as a witch rather than her Muggle beginnings, but there was a certain blunted disappointment that they could not deny.

In the end, the second major decision fell on the side of the Malfoys as well: the location of the wedding reception. Here, there really was no choice, given the fact that a sizeable number of the guests were powerful, influential pure-blood wizards and witches, far too many to request that their magic be disguised or curtailed in any way. Not that they would be so inclined, even if asked, Narcissa was quite certain. The only other alternative—and this, the Grangers had seriously considered, though only briefly—would be to give a separate party for all their own guests, family and friends alike. But no, that really wouldn’t do. It would raise far too many sticky questions. There must be one wedding, start to finish. Somehow, a way must be found to accommodate both the magical and the Muggle guests in a manner that would be comfortable for both and yet keep the wizarding world safely insulated against exposure, and a place must be found where this would be possible.

The problem was, no such place had suggested itself. Yet.

In the meantime, there were hundreds of other details that had to be ironed out as well. And these were waiting in a fiendishly long list, to be ticked off over the five weeks of the vacation.

“It’s perfect, sweetheart!” Claire had enthused one afternoon on the phone. “We can go shopping in London, if you like, or right here in Watford at the shopping centre. You could come and stop overnight, that would be lovely. Draco too, of course. We’ll get your gown taken care of, and—does Draco have a dinner suit? Of course he does, how silly of me to ask! And bridesmaids’ frocks… oh, and…”

Her mother had chattered on excitedly, but Hermione had stopped listening. There was still so much work to do before the end of term. Shopping for gowns was altogether the last thing she’d wanted to
think about, then or now. Both Narcissa and Claire were set on an afternoon of choosing floral arrangements and doing tastings at various catering establishments, although they had rather different ideas about what would suit and where to find it.

Wearily, Hermione pressed two fingers to the bridge of her nose, where the beginnings of a headache throbbed dully.

“Okay, listen, Malfoy,” she began with forced firmness, her voice beginning to tremble, and then an altogether different truth spilled out of her before she could stop it. “This is NOT what I want, all right? This isn’t the sort of wedding I wanted at ALL.” A single tear rolled down her cheek and she wiped at it furiously. “Oh, Draco, I’m… I’m just… I don’t think I can do this!”

It wasn’t what he wanted either. Hearing her say it, though, put things in an entirely different light. Swiftly, he pulled her into a fierce hug. He could feel her shuddering with the tears she was trying so hard to hold back.

“Look, Hermione, I hate all this stupid shit too. Let’s… let’s give it a think, yeah? See if we can come up with something that’ll make it better all round. In the meantime, what about a good meal someplace and maybe a film? I’ll even go see that one you were talking about the other day, if you like. What was it… ‘Bridget Jones’s Diary’?”

In the end, they opted for “Gladiator” instead, following pizza and a shared bottle of Merlot at Mario’s, just down the Cowley Road from the cinema. Chick flicks were much better shared with one’s girlfriends, not a fiancé, Hermione decided. And besides, she wasn’t entirely sure she was ready for two hours of a film character obsessing about when or if she’d ever be getting married. Much better to lose herself in something gritty and intense, and historically accurate enough to give the film real substance. She was feeling rather murderous at the moment anyway. It suited her mood.

By ten, they were back at the flat, tired but still carrying on an animated discussion of the film as they trudged up the stairs.

“Merlin! That emperor…” Hermione shuddered. “He seemed almost inhuman at times!”

“It’s all about power. Very simple. Power makes people inhuman,” Draco muttered darkly. “Commodus is a perfect example. Smarmy bastard forced himself on his own sister, murdered his father, completely destroyed the life of a loyal soldier… and all in the name of ambition and lust for power.”

“And yet…” Hermione mused, as she fitted the key into the lock and pushed the door to the flat open, stepping inside. “And yet, I think we’re meant to understand that there was a deep-seated insecurity there, a need for approval from his father that he never felt he got, really. And this is what drove him. He needed to fill that void, and power over others was how he did it.”

Draco peeled his jumper over his head, tossing it onto the sofa back. “That’s bollocks, Granger! You’re not going to tell me you feel sorry for the git, are you? Does the lack of approval from his father justify patricide, incest, or all the evil shit he does to Maximus? Huh!” With a derisive snort, he flopped down on the sofa. “I think not!”

The sudden intensity of his expression was chilling.

She sat down next to him, remaining quiet for a couple of moments before replying. “Not sorry for him, exactly. But I think we’re meant to understand that there can be reasons for things people do, even if those things are horrible. I mean, he was still a human being, wasn’t he? People make
mistakes. Doesn’t he deserve any compassion at all?”

“No. He was a totally *fucked-up* human being. And he got what he deserved: a knife in the throat. Y’know, he was lucky he met his death at the hands of Maximus and not the Senate. If all his atrocities had been found out, he’d have been scourged--”

At Hermione’s questioning glance, Draco explained. “Flogged. Brutally. They used whips with bits of metal or bone at the tip. It wasn’t pretty. Afterwards, they’d have stuffed him into a leather bag along with a dog, a snake, a monkey and a cockerel, and then, after it was sewn shut, the whole lot would have been thrown into the river. And he’d have deserved it. Not those poor animals, though,” he added as an afterthought.

Hermione shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself. “Is that what they did, really? I mean, I knew about a lot of the really awful practices in ancient Rome, but I didn’t know about…” She grimaced. “About that.”

Draco nodded, oddly detached now. “Yeah. That’s what they did for crimes like patricide. Reckon there’s one thing you can say about the Romans—their punishments were never ordinary. Vicious, horribly cruel—but always creative.” He gave her a grim smile and then lapsed into a ruminative silence.

Hermione’s hand stole over his, resting lightly on it. She didn’t look at him, keeping her gaze fixed on a speck of dust in the rug. When she spoke, finally, her voice was quiet and even.

“It’s not the same. You—you didn’t *want* to do those awful things.”

“True. But what about all the years before that? When I was so busy being a Malfoy, doing what was expected of me. What my father expected of me.” Draco looked at her then, his gaze frank, unguarded. “And for what, Hermione? What did it get me? Not a fucking thing except deeper into the shit, so deep I almost didn’t get out at all.”

“You wanted his approval. You wanted his love.” Hermione’s voice was nearly a whisper now. She held his hand tightly in her own, unwilling to let go.

“Too right.” Draco laughed briefly, but it was a bitter, mirthless sound. “What a joke.”

Several moments of silence passed before he spoke again, the memories rising like bile in his throat. His voice was tight, as dry as old leaves.

“It got to where I just didn’t fucking care anymore, you know? I just wanted out.”

“Thank Merlin for Professor Snape,” Hermione whispered. “Without him--”

“Yeah.”

The heavy silence that fell like a stone after this one word spoke eloquently-- of pain and fear, of redemption and the terrifying consequences of its absence for one seventeen-year-old boy. And loss. A terrible, irreconcilable loss whose sharp edges had only been somewhat blunted in the last four years but would never truly be dulled and certainly never erased.

Hermione rose to her feet and held out her hands to Draco. He took them and she pulled him up, wrapping her arms about his waist.

“Come on,” she said quietly. “Let’s have an early night. I’m feeling a bit knackered.”
The idea of bed—warm, dark, and sheltering—sounded very inviting, suddenly. Soft kisses shared in the velvet silence were a prelude to deeper, more urgent ones. Touches alternately soothed and ignited as they held each other close. Sleep took them at last as they lay, limbs comfortably entangled, beneath the soft, white duvet.

Sometime later, Draco awoke, blinking in the darkness several times as he waited for his eyes to adjust. The overwhelming blackness of the room gradually dissolved into shadowy greys, moonlight filtering gently into the room through the curtains and leaving ragged patches of light on walls and furniture. The outlines of leaves on the tree outside their window were limned in silver, dancing in shadowy, swaying patterns on the walls and ceiling.

For a time, Draco lay watching the leaf shadows as they fluttered, feeling curiously calm and peaceful.

Turning carefully onto his side, then, he leaned back on the pillows, propping a hand beneath his head, and watched Hermione sleep. She lay facing him, her hair lit with silver as it fell in messy tendrils over her bare shoulder, her skin an unearthly milk-white in the moonlight. One hand was trapped between her cheek and the pillow and the other rested on the duvet. He could see the gentle rise and fall of her chest, and the slight flutterings of her lashes as her eyes moved beneath their lids, propelled by a dream.

It was always like this after he’d found himself in that dark place that could still reach out from the past and clutch at him. Hermione would always hold him tightly to the now, keeping him from slipping back and surrendering to the twin voices of guilt and regret.

Watching her, he felt a sudden tightening in his throat. What could he possibly ever do for her in return that would come close? And then suddenly he had an idea. It wouldn’t touch what she did for him, but it would be something, anyway.

He reached out, giving her shoulder a gentle shake. When she didn’t wake up, he shook her again, this time a bit more vigorously.

Stirring, she peered blearily up at him in confusion. “What…?” Her voice was barely a whisper and thick with sleep.

“Let’s elope.”

21 March
Thursday

Draco paused in the process of stuffing some clothing into an overnight bag, and smiled. On the other side of the bed, Hermione was flitting back and forth between her own small suitcase, the wardrobe and her chest of drawers, scooping up necessary items and muttering to herself. The list in her hand was rather the worse for wear at this point, a bit crumpled and smudged from the constant abuse of adding on and ticking off items to which she had subjected it as she packed.

Her expression was, he thought, rather endearing: a mix of excitement, nerves, and determination.
Nearly three weeks earlier, when he’d jostled her awake and made the momentous suggestion that would change everything, her expression had been quite different. Then, her eyes had gone almost impossibly wide with surprise, and for several seconds, she’d simply stared.

“Cat got your tongue, Granger?” he’d drawled, unable to hide his amusement.

“What…? I mean… did you just say what I think you said?”

He had reached out to snag a curl, lazily twirling it around his index finger. “Yep. Believe I did,” he’d replied, and then he sat up, his own expression suddenly animated. “Come on, Granger, let’s do it! It’ll be brilliant! I don’t know why we didn’t think of it sooner. And then—then we’ll already be married, yeah? We won’t have to deal with all this rubbish!”

For a moment, Hermione’s eyes had lit up. But then her face fell and she shook her head slowly. “I love the idea. But—what about our parents? They’ll be devastated. I can’t do that to them. I just can’t.”

Draco had sat back, crestfallen. Then a slow, cheeky grin spread across his face. “Right, then. They can still have their big, posh party. But if we do this, at least we’ll have been married our way first. And then—”

“Then,” Hermione had said gleefully, catching on, “we’ll make sure that the big, posh party will be much closer to what we want. We really ought to have done that from the off.”

Nodding, Draco had let out a rueful sigh. “Right. We were too busy trying to please everyone else, weren’t we.”

Hermione had snuggled into his arms happily. “We were. I think we should make a list—” She’d giggled then, at the amused snort Draco had let out. “Okay, I know, me and my lists! Honestly, though—we really do need to make a list of everything we want to do differently. I already have some ideas about that. But first—” She’d wriggled closer with excitement, grabbing his hands and giving them a quick squeeze. “Where shall we go? And when?”

“That, my love, is what we are going to think very seriously about the next few days. And then we’ll make some plans. We’ve five whole weeks off beginning next weekend, and it seems to me we can go just about anywhere. What pleases you?”

Hermione brought her mouth close to his ear, her warm breath tickling the sensitive skin of his neck. “You please me. Where we go doesn’t matter, as long as I’m with you.”

The warm feeling squeezing his chest threatened to silence him altogether, but he mastered it with a teasing laugh that was only slightly shaky. “You’d better be with me, woman! I won’t have you off marrying anyone else!”

“No chance of that.” She’d been quite matter-of-fact, though her eyes had glinted mischievously. “I’ve decided I rather fancy the prospect of becoming a Malfoy.”

This had taken him aback him momentarily. “You do? Really?”

“Well,” she’d continued, “first off, I like the idea of your mum as my mother-in-law. She’s great. And now I’ve really seen your house. It’s unbelievable. So full of history! The library alone is amazing! Oh, and the garden too! So you see, there’s lots to recommend the match.”

“No I figure anywhere in all this?” Draco had inquired mildly, one eyebrow arched. “Just wondering.”
“Oh, I s’pose you might do,” she’d teased. “Just a little. Come closer. I need to do a bit of firsthand research into the question, and then I’ll let you know.”

He hadn’t needed asking twice.

And now, the destination had been chosen, the plans had been finalised, and they’d even arranged for their best friends to come along and stand up for them. Gemma and Danny hadn’t required much persuading, given the prospect of a couple of days’ holiday away and the chance to be part of their close friends’ wedding ceremony. Ever since they’d learned about Hermione and Draco’s magical identities, the questions had been frequent, intensely curious, sometimes rather funny, even bizarre at times, and always good-natured and genuinely well-intentioned. And being “outed,” so to speak, had proven a genuine relief for Draco and Hermione. If anything, the knowledge had brought the four of them even closer. There were no more barriers now.

In the end, Hermione had decided to let Draco surprise her. As he thought about the arrangements he’d made, the corners of his mouth crept up in a satisfied smile. It would be wonderful. She would definitely love it.

By half past two, the four of them were assembled in the sitting room.

Danny dropped his bag onto the floor alongside the others. “Right, all present and accounted for. What now, mate?”

“Now…” Draco’s smile was enigmatic. “… we take the train to London, and from there…” He pulled two slim packets out of his pocket, waving them tantalisingly in front of everyone’s faces. “The Eurostar to Paris.”

Three jaws dropped simultaneously. The high-speed train to Paris… They’d be there by dinnertime!

Danny and Gemma hugged each other gleefully as Hermione flew into Draco’s arms, nearly knocking him down in her excitement.

“Oh! Malfoy, this is… I mean, I can’t believe… Oh, Draco!” she spluttered, squeezing him as tightly as she could manage.

“Oi! Easy there, Granger! Need to breathe, don’t I!” he laughed, as she let him go and stepped back, fanning herself.

“So… will Paris do for a wedding, then?”

Hermione’s cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkling. “Will it… Gods, yes! It’s amazing! Where are we going to stay? How long will we be there? What—”

Chuckling, he held up a hand. “Patience, love. And you lot, too,” he said with mock sternness, as both Gemma and Danny opened their mouths, brimming with questions of their own. “Don’t want to spoil anything. I’ll tell you this much now—our return tickets are for Saturday night, so we’ll have two whole days and nights there. The taxi will be here any minute. We should probably go outside to wait, yeah?”

There was a murmur of general agreement, and the four of them picked up their bags and moved towards the door. Hermione got there first, pulling it open.

Her mouth fell open, but no sound came out.

There, hand raised and on the verge of knocking, was Ron Weasley, Pansy Parkinson hovering just behind him.
There was a moment of stunned silence, everybody frozen in a comical tableau. And then Hermione and Ron began talking at once.

“Ron! What... what on earth are you doing h--”

“We thought we’d just... you know, just pop round and surprise you... Been ages, Hermione. And so we thought... Pans and me... That is...” And then Ron’s eyes dropped down to the overnight bags everyone was clutching. “Um... is this a bad time?”

Way to state the obvious. Weasley had a positive talent for it. Pansy was an old and dear friend, of course, and Draco was finally used to her boyfriend, after a fashion, but this was ridiculously bad timing. He was at the door in two long strides.

“Yeah, actually. We’re going on holiday. Sorry, but we weren’t expecting you.” He darted a reproachful glance at Pansy, who shrugged lamely as he muttered under his breath, “Fuck’s sake, Pans, why didn’t you let us know?”

“Sorry, Draco. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Pansy’s head was close to Draco’s, and he got a whiff of something distinctly alcoholic as she spoke. Their ill-timed spontaneity could probably be chalked up to one drink too many at lunch, and rather basely, he decided he could guess whose brilliant idea this had likely been.

“Where are you lot off to anyway?” Ron asked suddenly, casting a curious glance at their luggage once again.

Hermione caught Draco’s eye, and he could see she was dying to tell. Her eyes were almost unnaturally bright, and she was practically bouncing up and down with glee. Fuck it, no point in keeping it to themselves. Might as well tell them. He shrugged, gave her a quick nod, and braced himself.

“Well,” Hermione began, the grin on her face growing irrepressibly. “It’s a secret, see... but... we’re eloping!”

For three solid seconds, there was stunned silence. Pansy’s mouth fell open and stayed that way, making her look rather like a goldfish.

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Ron stared. “All four of you?” he blurted out.

At that, there was laughter all around. Ron blushed to the roots of his hair and grinned sheepishly. “All right, all right. I get it. What are you really doing?”

“Weasley.” Draco’s voice was almost unnaturally patient. “Much as I enjoy the challenge of fabricating outlandish stories expressly for your amusement, this time we’re telling the truth, I swear. Hermione and I really are getting married tomorrow.”

Pansy’s eyes had grown enormous, and now she clutched at Draco’s arm. “But... your wedding isn’t supposed to be for months! Do your parents know?”

He shook his head. “No, and that’s the beauty of it, Pans. They’re not going to know. Not now, at least. We’re going to do this our way, and then... well... sod the rest, we’ll deal with it later.”

“Paris!” Hermione exulted. “I’ve only just found out myself! Oh!” Suddenly she clapped a hand over her mouth and ran to Draco, hooking an arm around his neck and pulling his head close so that she could whisper in his ear. As she did, he nodded once and then again, whispering back a response. Then she turned back to Pansy and Ron, beaming with the delight of a little girl who has just opened a wonderful present.

“Come with us! Oh, please say you will! It would mean so much to have you both there with us! New friends—” She gestured towards Danny and Gemma. “And very old friends as well!”

Ron and Pansy looked at each other, startled. Silent questions passed between them, and Ron shrugged. Pansy gestured again, a bit more urgently, and he grinned at last, slinging his arm around her shoulders.

“Yeah, sure. ‘Course we’ll come. Congratulations, mate,” he said, offering his hand to Draco. Then he turned to Hermione, opening his arms. She rushed into them, giving him a tight squeeze.

And then just as suddenly, she pulled out of the hug, looking stricken. “Oh gosh…” Her gaze swept from Ron to Draco. “What about Harry? He’ll be hurt that I didn’t ask him too!”

Draco looked away, only just resisting the urge to roll his eyes in exasperation. “Granger, we’ve got a train to catch! Look, I…” He paused, choosing his next words with care. “I appreciate that you want to have Potter there, but don’t forget, from the off, this was supposed to be just the four of us, yeah? I mean, it’s great that you lot—” He gestured towards Pansy and Ron. “…are coming too. But—fuck’s sake, Hermione, let’s not turn this into a whole big thing!” He checked at his watch nervously and then looked back at her, unable to contain his impatience.

“Hermione, listen, don’t worry about Harry,” Ron cut in quickly. “He can’t come anyway. He and Gin have gone off for a long weekend. They left this morning. Wouldn’t tell anybody where they were going either.”

*Hmm. Lucky bastard.* Draco’s mouth gave a rueful twitch. Then, abruptly, he was all business again. “Right, then, let’s go. Taxi’s probably already waiting. You two can get whatever you need once we’re there—”

“Or borrow from us,” Hermione interrupted excitedly. “Oh, but wait! We’ll need a room for Ron and Pansy wherever we’re staying! And what about the train tickets, and—”

“No worries,” he replied smoothly. “The hotel had lots of rooms when I called. Off-season, see. And we can book extra train tickets right now. We’ll call on the way to the station. Worse comes to worst, they can always get to the hotel another way.” He grinned, giving Hermione a veiled wink, and she suddenly understood. This was no ordinary hotel, and, she suspected, the next couple of days would be far from ordinary as well. The small knot of excitement in her stomach tightened. This was really happening. By tomorrow night, she would be married. Gods. *Married. To Malfoy.* Amazed, she shook her head, giddy laughter bubbling up inside her as she picked up her bag. Mrs. Draco Malfoy. Hermione Granger Malfoy. Hermione Malfoy. Astonishing and even a bit bizarre, still, when the past crept into her thoughts, but lovely.

The Eurostar, a sleek, modern bullet of a train that sped them from London’s
Waterloo Station to Paris in just over two hours, deposited the three couples at the Gare du Nord just after six. The wait for a taxi outside the train station wasn’t long, and before they knew it, Paris was unfolding before their eyes from the windows of the cab as they made their way to number forty-three, Rue Monsieur le Prince, across the Seine in the famed Latin Quarter, Bohemian heart of the Left Bank.

“There it is,” Draco murmured, pointing out the taxi window. “We’re here.”

Hôtel Saint-Paul Rive Gauche stood proudly on the leafy avenue across from an entrance to the expansive and beautiful Jardin du Luxembourg on one side, and the Sorbonne on the other. A whitewashed building, it had tall, narrow windows, each one graced with a wrought iron-enclosed flower box, the lush evergreens, flowering plants and vines trailing from each like cool oases of colour against the stucco. The red awning over the entrance bearing the hotel’s name was like a welcoming beacon.

Hermione drew in an awed breath as she looked her fill, and then sighed. “Oh, Draco! It’s beautiful!”

Handing some cash to the taxi driver, Draco turned back to her with a chuckle. “It’s even nicer from the inside, I assure you. Come on!”

Once everybody had spilled out of the taxi, standing in a huddle on the pavement with their overnight bags, Draco dropped his voice. “Look. We don’t go in through the main entrance, see? We go in through that other door. Just act casual, like we belong there.” At the questioning glances, he added, “You’ll understand soon enough.”

He jerked his head towards a nondescript, unmarked door in an attached building just to the right of the hotel. It appeared to be the entrance to a building of flats. Door buzzers in brass were fitted to the wall alongside the door, along with slots filled in with tenants’ names.

Everyone strolled to the door, and waited as Draco pressed the top buzzer just once. A high-pitched female voice crackled through the intercom.

“Qui est-ce?”

“Bon soir. Je m'appelle Draco Malfoy,” Draco replied quickly, his mouth close to the intercom. “J’ai une réservation.”

Hearing his flawless French accent, Hermione stared at Draco in frank admiration. He continued to surprise her at odd moments like this, though she supposed she oughtn’t be too taken aback. His family had French roots, she knew, and it stood to reason that he would have been tutored well, long before entering Hogwarts.

There was a brief pause, and then the voice came through again, this time in a quick sputter of words. “Ah oui, oui! D’accord! Un moment, s’il vous plaît!”

A strangled-sounding buzzer rang a few seconds later, granting them entrance, and the six of them found themselves in a dimly lit corridor with a single door at the end and a narrow stairway along the right wall.

“We go this way, if memory serves,” Draco told them, and taking Hermione’s hand, he led them to the door at the far end of the hall.

“You’ve been here before?” Danny asked, surprised.
Draco nodded. “Couple of times with my parents, when I was a kid.”

Drawing out his wand, he tapped lightly on the door, murmuring, “Alohomora!”

The reaction behind him was instantaneous. There was intense interest from Danny and Gemma. And one could almost feel the shock waves as Ron and Pansy stared, first at each other and then at Draco.

“It’s okay,” he laughed quietly, turning to face them. “They know.”

“They know?” Increduleus, Ron and Pansy spoke in unison, their voices identically pitched.

“What do you mean, they know?” Ron demanded. Pansy had gone speechless by then.

“Calm down, Ron,” Hermione sighed. “It’s all right. What he means is, we told them everything. Who we really are. About our world. About all you lot too, actually. They’ve known for nearly a year. It… it was an accident, their finding out, but we’re glad now.”

“But--” Ron sputtered. “What if--”

“Relax, mate,” Danny grinned. “They did this spell thing where we don’t remember any of it around other non-wizard people. It’s cool.”

“You cast an--”

“Yes, Ron, we did.” Hermione smiled patiently, patting his arm. “All taken care of.”

In the meantime, a series of locks had opened, the sound of the metal tumblers clicking from the inside in a series of sharp reports. The door swung open.

They found themselves in an elegantly appointed lobby furnished with upholstered, high-backed chairs, a rather quirky and eclectic series of paintings in gilt frames (one of a beagle in uniform arrested everyone’s attention, drawing muffled giggles and shushes), old stone walls and dark wood ceiling beams. Brass chandeliers cast a warm glow on the highly polished furniture. Just off the lobby was an inviting lounge, a welcoming fire lit in the cherry-red hearth, its intimate grouping of overstuffed, upholstered chairs and sofas inviting the weary to relax and put up their feet with a good book and a drink.

While the others flopped down on the sofas and comfy armchairs to wait, Draco and Hermione went to the front desk to sort out their reservations and get the room keys.

A black and white cat, long and lithe, stretched luxuriantly along the polished desk top, eyeing them curiously.

Hermione gave a soft gasp of delight and moved closer, politely offering her hand for the cat to sniff and then happily stroking his head after he’d rubbed the top of it against her palm.

The woman behind the reception desk was short with an ample bosom, her face mapped by crow’s feet and smile lines and her blue eyes lively and sharp. Thick, silver hair was swept back into a French twist, and long, silver earrings studded with amethysts dangled from her ears. She reminded Draco of his great-grandmother suddenly. He was amazed that he’d never noticed the resemblance before.

She smiled at Hermione, chuckling softly. “You’ve made a friend, I see. This is Pyewacket, official hotel cat and my own familiar, though he thinks he’s above all that. He really runs the place, you know. We humans only think we’re in charge.”

Then she glanced down at the reservation book and her gaze rose sharply to Draco’s face. “Ah, so it
“is you! I thought so! I told Mathilde as much when she showed me the reservation. Gracious, you’ve grown up, haven’t you! How old are you now? You couldn’t have been more than nine or ten the last time I saw you!”

Draco beamed. “Twenty-two in June. Everybody, meet Flora Entwistle. She and her husband Roger own this hotel. They’ve been here for—” He turned to the white-haired lady for assistance. “How long, Mrs. Entwistle?”

“It’s Flora, if you please, and it’s been forty years, dear,” she said proudly. “We’re just a pair of old expats, Roger and I. He’s on the other side at the moment, assisting our Muggle guests.”

“The ‘other side’?” Hermione wondered aloud.

“Oh yes, my dear,” Flora told her. “We cater to Muggles and magical folk alike, you see. The hotel is really divided in two, each side a mirror image of the other. This side is fully Warded against intrusion, and Locking and Silencing spells are always in place to assure the complete privacy of our guests. The only way to get from one part to the other is via a secret passageway accessed by way of a small broom cupboard we always keep double-locked.”

Just then, a diminutive house-elf appeared. She had a decidedly Gallic air about her, right down to the rakish pixie cut of her hair and the fashionably cinched waistline of her tiny shift. Giving her mistress a quick curtsey, she smiled, her pointy ears rising as the grin on her face grew wider.

"Ce sont nos invités anglais?"

“Oui, Mathilde, ils viennent d’arriver,” Flora replied, nodding. “Now then, love,” she smiled at Draco, pulling the reservation book towards her. “Let’s get you and your friends situated. I assume…” she added slyly, with a pointed glance first at Hermione and then down at the ring that sparkled on her left hand, “that this lovely young lady will be sharing with you?”

“That’s right,” Draco said proudly, slipping an arm around Hermione’s slim shoulders and hugging her to him. “This is my fiancée, Hermione Granger.” He flashed the older woman a conspiratorial grin, and then bent his head towards hers. “Can you keep a secret?”

She nodded, though she looked as though she had already guessed it.

“We’re hoping to be married tomorrow.”

“Oh!” Flora clapped her hands together delightedly. “Then you must have our most beautiful room! Number eight. And for your friends, I have number five already reserved. But it appears…” She glanced briefly at the two couples waiting in the lounge. “… that you will need a third room, yes? I do have number two available. It’s quite lovely. All three are on the first floor with very nice views. Will that do?”

“Thanks, yes, that’ll do very nicely.” Draco caught Hermione’s eye and they gave each other tremulous smiles. There was an almost euphoric giddiness to the looks they gave each other now. They were really here—in beautiful, incredibly romantic Paris—and they were actually eloping!

Flora handed Draco three sets of keys, but as his fingers closed around them, he paused.

“I nearly forgot,” he began. “Look, here’s the thing-- we need to find somebody who can marry us. I bet you know everybody in wizarding Paris. Can you help?”

The kindly matron folded her arms across her generous bosom and smiled, Cheshire cat-like, before replying. “It will be my pleasure, dear. Let me see what I can do. I’ll let you know when it’s all
arranged.”

Both Draco and Hermione let out twin sighs of relief and signalled the others to join them. The bags had already been magically whisked to their respective rooms, and now the three couples trooped up the curving staircase to the floor above.

Flora watched as they disappeared from view with a nostalgic smile. To be young and in love in the City of Lights… She hadn’t forgotten. Sighing, she dropped a hand to Pyewacket’s back and commenced a leisurely stroking of his soft fur. His relaxed purring resounded like a tiny motor, and he squeezed his eyes shut in perfect bliss.

*

The first thing one noticed about number eight was the aroma of fresh-cut roses. It wafted through the partially open door, scenting the air with the delicacy of a fine perfume, just enough to be noticed and appreciated but never overpowering. The room itself was fairly spacious. The walls were the colour of pale-gold champagne, and at one end, there were French doors that reached from floor to ceiling and opened out onto a small balcony. Vases of long-stemmed roses stood on the chest of drawers and on one of the nightstands. Their soft petals had just begun to open. The centrepiece of the room was the bed, however. Generously sized and covered in a white bedspread, it was enclosed by a spare, wrought iron canopy, a richly embroidered tapestry hanging above the pillows at the head. Candles flickered on the nightstands and in sconces on the walls, lending the room a richly burnished glow.

“Oh, look!” Hermione crossed the room quickly to the chest. Alongside the vase of roses stood an ice bucket, a bottle of champagne chilling inside. Next to it was a small plate-- Limoge china, Hermione noticed-- containing several foil-wrapped pieces of Godiva chocolate. She felt as excited as a little girl suddenly. This… this place… this weekend… all of it… it was almost too much. Because no matter how grand and glorious the wedding their parents would give them turned out to be, this would always be the wedding of her heart, the one that counted. And he had done it all.

Rushing over to Draco, who was busy hanging his dress robes in the wardrobe, she threw her arms around him from behind and held on tightly.

Straightening with a small, surprised laugh, he turned to face her, wrapping his arms around her waist. “What was that for? Not that I’m complaining, of course.” And then, “Uh-oh, what’s this? Tears? Can’t take you anywhere!”

Hermione raised her eyes to meet his, blinking hard to banish the tears that had puddled there and were beginning to slide down her cheeks. “Oh, I’m being silly, I know! It’s just… well… you. All of this… it’s amazing. You’re amazing, Malfoy.”

His grey eyes were unutterably soft for a moment, as he looked down at her. And then the teasing glint returned to them. “You’re going to have to get out of the habit of calling me that after tomorrow, y’know. ‘Husband’ will do quite nicely though. ‘Wonderful, brilliant and devastatingly attractive husband’ would be even better. Maybe you should start practicing now, hmm?” He bent his head to kiss her once and then again. “Come on, then,” he coaxed, pulling her closer and nuzzling her neck. “Repeat after me. ‘Wonderful, brilliant…’”

“Malfoy, Malfoy, Malfoy…” Hermione taunted, twisting out of his grasp and leaping onto the bed. He was there in a flash, pinning her down, both arms above her head and her chest heaving as she
erupted in giggles.

“Husband,” he growled, nipping at her earlobe and then dropping kisses down her throat to her collarbone. “Impossibly handsome, clever…”

Somehow the buttons on her shirt had come undone—he must have magicked them open! When had he done that?—and suddenly, she was feeling cool breezes fanning the bare skin around her bra.

“Husband.” His voice was nearly a whisper now, his mouth finding its way to the fragrant valley between her breasts even as one hand snaked beneath her back to find the fastenings of her bra and unhook them. Plucking it from her, he tossed it heedlessly to the floor and lowered his face to her breasts, hovering just above them with hooded eyes. She could feel his breath warming the sensitive skin.

His tongue flicked out, just barely grazing one nipple, which tightened instantly. “Husband.”

“Malfoy,” she managed to muster, a moan escaping her as he bent his head to touch his tongue to her nipple once again, this time in a leisurely taste. Tiny frissons of electric heat began to fork from the point of contact straight down to the private place at the heart of her, and as she pressed her thighs together to relieve the insistent throbbing, she felt the familiar moisture beginning to seep through her knickers.

A couple of indistinctly murmured words from him, and suddenly, all her remaining clothing, as well as his, had vanished; now he gazed down at her with openly predatory intensity as he burrowed between her legs, his arousal pressing insistently against her lower abdomen. Then he raised himself on his elbows, just enough that the tip of his cock brushed her labia. An exploratory finger found its way inside, testing, and then casually inscribed a slick circle around the sensitive flesh of her clit, repeating the motion as the tension inside her began to build unbearably. Then, too, there was the matter of his mouth. It had returned to her right nipple and was now teasing her mercilessly with small, delicate kisses and flicks of his tongue.

It was too much. She was about to explode, as much as she tried to hold back. This had to be a record, and from the smugly delighted expression on his face, he knew it.

Her legs began to quiver as everything inside her began to clench in anticipation. And then he raised his head, her nipple popping out of his mouth, and grinned wickedly, cocking an eyebrow in triumph.

“Husband!” she hissed. “Oh-h-h!” Shuddering, she squeezed her eyes shut as he gathered her up in a single, swift movement and then drove into her. Sweet, incendiary release wasn’t far behind.

After they had curled up together, spoon-fashion, for a time, Hermione felt a firm kiss being pressed to her shoulder, and then Draco was standing next to the bed, smirking down at her.

“So… what was that, Granger? About… oh, say, two minutes?”

“Don’t flatter yourself!” she began, and then laughed. “Okay, okay. Like I said, you’re amazing. But…” Her voice dropped to a teasing near-whisper as she rose to her knees, slipping her hands around to the small of his back and then down, to gently cup his buttocks. “You do realise you’ll have to stop calling me ‘Granger’ after tomorrow. ‘Mrs. Malfoy’ will do nicely. Or just ‘Malfoy.’ ” She giggled at the irony of it. “Well, maybe not that.”

“What about ‘wife’? I rather like the sound of that, I think,” Draco murmured, nuzzling her neck and catching her ear lobe between his teeth.
“Mmm.”

Wife. That’s what she would be. It sounded very good indeed.

Suddenly, he gave her bum a playful smack. “I don’t know about you, woman, but I’m starved!” He strode quickly to the French doors, pulling the drapery aside. Beyond the grillwork of the balcony, the city was spread out before them, a universe of tiny lights winking in the darkness. “And all of Paris is waiting for us out there! Semantics be damned. I need food!”

As she hurried about the room, getting dressed, Hermione found herself grinning foolishly. Every once in a while, she stole glances at Draco as he dressed. Suddenly, he seemed brand-new to her eyes—remade, somehow, as the reality of what they were about to do began to really sink in. Once, he caught her looking and gave her a cheeky little wink.

Yes. It would be good, she knew. Better than good. Turning as she reached the door, she took a deep breath and smiled.

“Ready?”

TBC

Paris Photo Album, Part One

The Eurostar
Gare du Nord. Photo by Dan Kamminga

Gare du Nord interior. Photo by Badudoy

Hotel Saint-Paul, 43 Rue Monsieur le Prince, Paris

The lobby
Pyewacket on the reception desk, waiting to greet guests.

The lounge

The breakfast room
Pyewacket, visiting guests’ rooms and settling in

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks and bouquets of long-stemmed roses to my marvellous betas, mister_otter and kazfeist, upon whom I depend! I owe you a weekend in Paris!

Hermione’s engagement ring is courtesy of Beads Treasury. It is a pear-shaped, rainbow moonstone set in silver.

“Qui est-ce?”
“Bon soir. Je m'appelle Draco Malfoy. J'ai une réservation.”

“Who is it?
“Good evening. My name is Draco Malfoy. I have a reservation.”

"Ce sont nos invités anglais?"
“Oui, Mathilde, ils viennent d’arriver.”

“Are these our English guests?”
“Yes, Mathilde, they have just arrived.”

The Hotel St. Paul Rive Gauche is run by British management and does indeed have a hotel cat who basically runs the hotel and makes himself at home wherever he wants,
whether it is in a guest’s room or on the reception desk, greeting new arrivals. His name isn’t really Pyewacket, though; it’s Sputnik.

About the name “Pyewacket”: it has a long and illustrious history connected to both witchcraft and cats. In 1644, it was cited as the name of a witch’s familiar in Essex, England. It has also been, over the years, the name of a rock band, the title of a children’s novel (in which Pyewacket was an alley cat), and finally, a witch’s familiar in the play and film, “Bell, Book and Candle,” by John Van Druten.

The Gare du Nord (Paris North Station)—the huge train station in Paris into which the Eurostar arrives from London.

Jardin du Luxembourg—the Luxembourg Gardens.

The Sorbonne—a world-renowned university in Paris.
Friday, 22 March

The soft, steady ticking of the bedside clock was a soothing sound, not unlike the heartbeat of a person at rest. Draco had awakened to just that drowsy, half-sleep state between true sleep and full consciousness, where one drifts pleasantly in and out, aware only in the most hazy sense of one’s surroundings. Wan light from the outside found its way in through the crack between the draperies, drawn nearly all the way shut over the tall, French doors that opened onto the little balcony. Somewhere downstairs, there was movement and sporadic, muffled conversation.

Draco opened one eye just enough to glance at the clock. Half seven. A sound halfway between a soft groan and a sigh escaped him, and he rolled over, burying his face in the mound of soft pillows, still warm from the heat of their bodies.

“Malfoy.”

Unmoving, eyes still shut, he directed his reply into the pillows. “Hmm?”

“I can’t do this.”
“’kay. Talk later. Sleep now.” He nestled comfortably beneath the covers, in pleasant anticipation of several more hours’ sleep.

“No. I mean it. I can’t do this.”

There was a poke to his shoulder. Draco wiggled it in mild annoyance, burrowing down even more deeply until even his head had disappeared beneath the covers. “Whatever you say,” he murmured, hoping that would be the end of the conversation, at least until he was fully awake and coherent— in several hours’ time. And then the words penetrated the remaining shreds of sleep that had fogged his brain. His eyes snapped open, and throwing back the covers, he sat up.

“What?”

Hermione was already sitting up, her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms wrapped around them. She looked clearly troubled, her brows drawn down and her eyes large.

“It’s just… well, it just feels wrong, you know? Getting married without my parents there to see it. To share it with me. With us.” Suddenly, she looked away, roughly wiping at her eyes with the heel of her hand. Then she gazed at him again.

“And what about yours?” she continued. “Your mother has been so kind to me. And your father… going out of his way for my parents… making those toasts… Draco, I think he would be very hurt and disappointed too.”

“How the fuck could you tell?” he muttered, looking away.

“Look, never mind that. I’ve been thinking. I know we said we’d get married twice, once for us and once for the family and all, but… well… You’ve made everything so incredibly perfect. I want this one to be it. Couldn’t we just… you know…”

Draco looked at Hermione for a long, thoughtful moment. Her eyes were wide, beseeching. And in that moment, the stirrings of—conscience? regret?—that he’d been studiously trying to ignore began to prick at him once again as his mother’s face came unbidden into his thoughts. Suddenly, the solution seemed clear.

“Right,” he said briskly. “We’ll ring your parents, yeah? And we’ll send an owl to mine. Reckon Flora can help us with that. We can be married tonight instead. That’ll give them time to get here.”

He tipped her chin up with a reassuring grin. “All right, Granger?”

Hermione nodded, her mouth curving in a tremulous little smile. And then a cloud seemed to pass over her face.

“What in Merlin’s name will we say to explain this whole thing? ‘Oh, by the way, we’re in Paris getting married. Do pop round if you’re not too busy.’ ”

Draco thought for a moment. She had a point. “Well,” he said slowly, mentally scrambling to come up with an answer that would satisfy Hermione. His eyes took on a mischievous glint. “I know. We’ll say we did it on a dare. Or we were drunk. Or that I couldn’t wait one more day to marry you.”

Hermione flopped back against the pillows and rolled her eyes. “Right. They’ll really believe any of
That comfortably warm sensation was back again, suffusing Draco with a sense of security and peace he’d only really known in the last couple of years. He felt an embarrassingly goofy grin threatening, and fought it down.

“Of course they’ll believe you, darling,” he replied airily, waving a hand. “And no doubt they’ll appreciate that I can’t deny you anything. Et voila.”

He lay back down, rolling onto his side to face her, the grin quirking his lips unabashedly wolfish now. “It’s our wedding day, Granger. I say we start celebrating now.”

*  

The celebration went on until late morning. Several times, knocks sounded, cautious at first and then a bit more insistent. Once, there was a particularly emphatic bang on the door and then Ron’s voice, interrupting a delicious interlude in the bath.

“Oi, you two! Come up for air, why don’t you!”

They ignored him. Happily, he and the others retreated and didn’t return after that, though their muffled snickers hung on the air even as their footfalls faded down the hall.

At just past noon, Hermione and Draco stood expectantly at the front desk, waiting for Flora to return. Danny, Gemma, Ron and Pansy had already spent a few hours exploring the neighbourhood and enjoying an early, al fresco lunch at a nearby café. Now, they waited in the lounge.

Flora bustled into the reception area, a satisfied smile on her kindly face. “Your message is on its way, dear,” she informed Draco. “Your parents should have it post-haste. As the owl flies, of course.” She frowned briefly. “I do hope Cyril doesn’t encounter any nasty headwinds, crossing the Channel. He hasn’t been quite himself lately.”

Then she turned her attention to Hermione. “I understand you will need to use the telephone, yes?”

With a tiny gulp, Hermione nodded, reaching for the receiver that Flora held out.

*  

The phone jangled in the reception area of the Grangers’ dental offices, a common enough sound on a busy Friday afternoon.

Vera, the new receptionist, plucked the receiver up with a somewhat bored expression. The day wasn’t going fast enough for her. She had a date that evening and was anxious to get home.

“Dental surgery,” she answered in a sing-song voice.
“Rosemary?” Hermione said, confused.

“No, it’s Vera. I’m new,” came the reply. This question was getting rather tiresome.

“Oh. Well… this is Hermione Granger. Can I speak to either of my parents, please? It’s important.”

The rate at which her heart was currently thudding inside her chest meant that another moment’s delay to gather her wits was not a bad thing.

“Hang on,” the bored voice muttered.

“My parents’ new receptionist is really r-” Hermione began in a whispered hiss to Draco, and then there was the sound of an extension being picked up.

“Hermione?” It was Claire. “Is everything all right?” Phone calls in the middle of the day generally meant that something was up.

“Oh yeah, Mum, everything’s fine.”

“Sure?”

“Absolutely. Only…” Hermione paused, glancing up at Draco as she gathered her thoughts. He gave her an encouraging wink.

“Go on,” he mouthed.

She nodded, her brow furrowing. “Look, it’s like this. Draco and I… well… we’re in Paris. Because--”

“Paris!” Claire exclaimed. “My goodness, that’s lovely! Are you taking a long weekend? I’m so glad. Heaven knows you both needed it after last term. You worked so hard. And then, of course, all the wedding plans. I know it’s been a bit stressful.”

“Well, that’s just it, see. It’s not a long weekend, Mum. Well, I mean, it is, but it’s not just that.”

Oh gods, she was talking utter and complete rubbish.

“Hermione.” Claire’s tone was one of forced calm and steadiness. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“It’s just… I… I hated what the wedding was turning into. It just felt all wrong, … out of control. To both of us. So we… we decided—well, we decided to elope.” The last four words spilled out in a breathy rush.

Claire sat back in the swivel chair, her pent-up breath escaping in a noisy sigh. Confusion and surprise warred with simple relief that nothing catastrophic had happened. Or… on second thought… had it? She wondered, suddenly, if Narcissa Malfoy had been apprised of the situation yet.

“You’re eloping…?” she echoed weakly. “I see…”

“Yes, and… and we really want you and Daddy to be here with us. The Malfoys too, of course. We want to be married tonight. Can you come? It would mean so much to me. To both of us, really. There’s a four o’clock train that will get you here by six-thirty, if you can’t get away sooner.”
Normally, Claire Granger was an incredibly efficient, organised woman who didn’t ruffle too easily. Now, in the space of a mere sixty seconds, she found herself verging on a small tidal wave of panic. A million concerns and questions flooded her mind at once, threatening to crowd out coherent thought, and then she quite deliberately closed her mind to all but three: how many patients remained this afternoon, who would have to be cancelled, and how quickly she and Richard could pack an overnight bag and get themselves to Waterloo Station for that four o’clock train, if not an even earlier one? Oh, and what on earth would she wear?

“We’ll be there, darling. I’ll ring you in a bit and let you know exactly what time,” she said firmly. “Now, then-- where are you staying?”

The information was carefully recorded, the telephone receiver replaced in its cradle. And then Claire stood up and walked to the door of her office, her steps measured. She poked her head out.

“Richard?”

“*" 

“No, no, Hermione! Wear it up! It’ll look fantastic. Draco will love it!”

Hermione stood before the full-length mirror in her room, frowning. One hand poked half-heartedly at her hair, as stubborn curls spilled from the bun she’d caught them up in, falling about her face.

Gemma’s reassuring words were scant consolation. She and Pansy had appointed themselves official surrogate mothers to help Hermione dress for the wedding. Now Pansy checked her watch. Ten past seven. The ceremony was set for eight.

“Look,” she said briskly, “let’s start over. We’ll do it for you this time, yeah?”

“All right,” Hermione replied weakly, sinking into the chair that Gemma had unceremoniously shoved behind her knees. “I’m absolute rubbish at the moment.”

“Yes, you are,” Gemma laughed, taking up the hairbrush and pulling out the ragtag bun. She plied the brush with vigorous strokes until Hermione’s hair shone, and then deftly twisted it up.

"Right," she grinned, nodding at Pansy. "What about some of your magic then?"

Pansy gave her a grin in return, pulling her wand from her jeans pocket. She and Gemma would dress momentarily, once they were satisfied that Hermione looked perfect.

"Fascia!" she murmured, and the bun was secured, threaded through with a gleaming satin ribbon that matched the cream-coloured frock she wore.

Pansy nodded, satisfied. "Lovely."

Meanwhile, Gemma was busy pulling small tendrils loose to gently frame Hermione's face. Finally she stood back alongside Pansy, arms folded, and smiled. "Done. You look absolutely--"

"Beautiful," came the hushed voice from the doorway, where the girls had inadvertently left the door ajar. "Oh, Hermione…"

Three heads turned in the direction of the voice. Claire stood in the doorway, her eyes glimmering
with the beginnings of tears. Narcissa was just behind her.

"Mum! And Mrs. Mal—Narcissa, I mean. You’re here, both of you. I’m so glad!" Hermione jumped up, unmindful of anything except getting to her mother's open arms as quickly as possible.

Hermione looked absolutely incandescent, more beautiful than her mother could ever remember seeing her before that moment. Claire gathered her daughter into a tight embrace, the need to hold her child close suddenly overwhelming.

“Love you,” she whispered, and Hermione nodded, her own eyes welling up. She blinked hard and drew in a deep, steadying breath.

“Come now, none of that! Your makeup will be running down your face, and you’ve done it so prettily too.” Narcissa was all business as she patted both Claire and Hermione’s shoulders and gently drew them apart. “Anyway, we have things to attend to. Hello, Pansy dear, what are you doing here? And where is my son?”

Hermione gave a small half-hiccough, half-laugh. “Oh, he’s getting dressed down the hall, with—”

“It’s all right, Hermione. I can explain.” Pansy grinned sheepishly. “Ron and I stopped round to visit Draco and Hermione—well, we barged in, really—as they were on their way out the door to come here, with Danny and Gemma. So they invited us to come along.” She gave a small giggle.

“Daddy and I never expected to find ourselves in Paris tonight,” Claire remarked wryly. “You and Draco certainly know how to keep life interesting, Hermione.”

“Indeed,” Narcissa agreed, one eyebrow elegantly raised.

Hermione darted a quick, anxious glance in her future mother-in-law’s direction and was relieved to find a faintly ironic smile playing about her lips.

“Mrs. Granger,” Gemma interjected politely. “And Mrs. Malfoy. It’s so nice to see you both again. Hermione really wanted you to be here.”

“And Draco,” Hermione added hastily. “He’ll be so glad to see you. Where’s Daddy? And Mr. Malfoy?”

“They are downstairs— in the bar, actually. Both of them seemed curiously in need of a drink when we arrived. I left Lucius extolling the virtues of a particularly good sherry.” Narcissa smiled fondly. “That will keep him busy for some time. Hello, Gemma. It’s lovely to see you too. Now, Hermione darling… I believe we must make certain that the proper traditions are observed. Have you something old?”

Hermione thought for a moment, and then a smile crossed her face. She held up her left hand, showing off her engagement ring proudly, the fire and ice of its stones sparkling against the pale, smooth skin of her hand. “Yes, I do. And I believe this takes care of ‘something blue’ as well.”

“It does indeed.” Narcissa smiled back, pleased. Acantha Rosier would heartily approve.

“Now—you just need something new and something borrowed,” Gemma observed. Slyly, she dug into her pocket and pulled out something small wrapped in pink tissue paper. “Here, Herms. Something new, from Pansy and me.”

Carefully, Hermione opened the folds of tissue paper to find a lacy, white garter. Flushing, she caught her friends’ eyes and grinned. “Thanks, you two.”
“Our pleasure,” Pansy giggled. “Gemma and I found the most delicious shop this morning whilst you and Draco were… um…” Now it was her turn to blush beneath the knowing smiles of the two mothers. “Yeah. As I was saying… just make sure you wear it up high enough… that’s it.” She nodded approvingly, as Hermione lifted the hem of her frock and slid the garter up her leg.

“My turn, I think,” said a soft voice behind her.

Hermione turned to her mother.

“Something borrowed, yes? I have just the thing,” Claire told her, reaching into her handbag. She drew out a small, square box. “You’ve always liked these whenever I’ve worn them. It would mean a great deal to me if you would wear them tonight.”

Suddenly Hermione knew exactly what was inside the box. Swallowing hard, she opened the lid. Sparkling on a bed of cotton wool were a pair of diamond earrings, ones she had seen her mother wear many times over the years. As a child, she had always thought them magical somehow, like tiny, fragmented stars gleaming against Claire’s skin.

“Oh, Mum… they’re perfect!” Sighing, Hermione threw her arms around her mother, squeezing her tightly. A feeling of rightness flooded her. That she could ever have imagined being married without her parents there to share it was unthinkable now.

The hands of the tall-case, rosewood clock in the lobby of the hotel slid slowly and inexorably towards the hour of eight, moving with a creeping dignity befitting the grande dame that this clock surely was.

In the bar, Lucius Malfoy and Richard Granger were sharing the dregs of a bottle of some excellent sherry. Their conversation was intermittent and subdued, each one lost, for the most part, in his own private thoughts, tempered by the quantity of alcohol they’d already consumed and the gravity of the situation that had suddenly hit both of them hard.

“Well, Granger,” Lucius began, his reference to Richard an unconsciously ironic echo of the very name by which his son had referred to his fiancée over the years, the original tone of scorn evolving eventually—surprisingly—into deepest affection and finally, love. “It would appear that our children have presented us with a fait accompli, eh?”

Richard nodded, swirling the last of his sherry in the tumbler. “So it seems. I am not terribly surprised by it, though. What did surprise me was my daughter going along with all the wedding nonsense for as long as she did. She hates a lot of fuss. It’s never been her way. She is a very down-to-earth girl.”

He took a reflective pull on his pipe, from which pleasantly maple-scented smoke rose in a thin, wispy column, hanging in a small cloud before dispersing above the rows of gleaming bottles behind the bar. “This elopement was an act of rebellion just waiting to happen.” He eyed Lucius thoughtfully. “And from what I have observed of Draco’s behaviour since we arrived, your son seems quite willing to go along with the idea.”

“I expect,” Lucius remarked calmly, “that the idea was his in the first place.”

“Ah.” Richard nodded and tossed back the remains of his drink. He found he had nothing further to add, and a quick glance at Lucius revealed much the same inclination. The two of them lapsed back into a comfortable, sherry-enhanced silence once again.
Upstairs, in room number five, Danny and Ron were trying to calm a suddenly skittish Draco, who had commenced pacing back and forth, his dress robes swirling around the legs of his charcoal-grey trousers.

“Steady on, cock,” Danny laughed. “You’re wearing a path into the carpeting. What the hell have you got to be so wired about?”

Draco stopped dead in his tracks and stared at his friend, momentarily slack-jawed. Then he gave a small, mirthful snort. “Oh, not much, I reckon.”

“Fucking hell,” Ron murmured. “This really is happening. You lot are really doing it. I mean, I love Pansy and all…” He paused, as if suddenly surprised at what had just come out of his mouth. “But marriage…” He gave a slight, involuntary shudder.

“Too young to die, you mean?” Draco grinned. “Yeah, well… I’m prepared to make the sacrifice.”

And despite his momentary attack of nerves, he knew it was true. Suddenly, it became a lot easier to breathe. *Fuck yeah.* He was getting *married.* Granger would really be his. They would really belong to each other. Completely, openly, and in the eyes of everyone in both worlds.

“Hell of a way to go, though, yeah?” Danny snorted. “You two were at it for how long this morning? I lost track.”

Draco nonchalantly picked off some imaginary lint from the sleeve of his dress robes and then shrugged. “I never kiss and tell.”

“Reckon he’s trying to break his own record,” Danny told Ron, *sotto voce.* “Back in first year, he and Hermione…”

“Piss off, Kirman,” Draco interrupted good-naturedly. “Or I might be forced to describe in detail the rather unusual noises we were subjected to through the wall. Before I cast the Silencing Charm.” He sighed, shaking his head and clucking his tongue. “Terribly indiscreet.”

Danny held his hands up in surrender, laughing. “Okay, okay. I’ll shut up. Here, your tie needs sorting. Allow me.”

Obediently, Draco moved to stand in front of his friend. Deftly, Danny cinched and straightened the tie, smoothing it down so that it lay neatly over the crisp dress shirt that Draco wore beneath the formal robes and suit jacket. Then he glanced at his watch.

“Time, mate,” he grinned, drawing his pointer finger slowly across his throat.

Draco rolled his eyes as Ron snickered, and the three of them made their way downstairs to the lobby, where they were to meet the others.

There they found Lucius and Richard, the former tall and elegant in his formal robes and the latter smartly attired in a dark suit. A moment later, a flurry of voices drew the men’s attention, as Pansy, Gemma, Claire and Narcissa escorted Hermione down the stairs. She was sandwiched between them much like a princess attended by a bevy of ladies-in-waiting. Despite the cheerful, excited commotion surrounding her, Hermione’s attention was focused on one thing only: the shining wonderment in Draco’s eyes as he looked at her. Pure and intense, it threatened to undo her completely.

For his part, Draco felt riveted to the spot. Suddenly, all he could see was Hermione. Two spots of colour burned high on her cheeks and a hint of a smile graced her lips as she gazed back at him. In the warm light of the lobby, her eyes seemed almost unnaturally bright. Draco decided that she had
never looked quite so beautiful; perhaps it was a trick of the light, but right here and right now, in this moment that seemed to stop time, there was an almost unearthly quality to her beauty. He felt as if he were moving in slow motion as he advanced towards the staircase to take her hand.

“You take my breath away,” he whispered into the fragrant tendrils of hair that curled carelessly about her face. The answering squeeze she gave his hand was enough to tell him that she was as nervous and excited as he.

The group of ten unconsciously sorted itself into couples, and before long, Flora Entwistle appeared, wreathed in smiles.

“This morning, Draco and Hermione and I discussed the arrangements for the ceremony. In accordance with their wishes, we shall be adjourning to the patio. It’s just this way.” She extended her arm in the direction of a corridor leading off the lobby.

The party moved en masse towards a door at the far end of the corridor, filing out one at a time to reassemble in the enclosed patio. It was a gracious, tranquil space made bright with masses of flowers and lush vines in terracotta pots both freestanding and hanging gracefully from posts. Clusters of tiny tea lights winked from every surface. Several tables beneath large canvas umbrellas were set with trays of hors d’oeuvres and tall, slender champagne flutes already filled.

A man was waiting there, his tall figure imposing in his formal robes. He looked to be in his late forties or early fifties, shoulder-length black hair shot through with silver and worn in a ponytail drawn back from his craggy face. There was a rather rakish salt-and-pepper moustache and neatly trimmed goatee, and a small, silver hoop earring in his left earlobe. Piercing blue eyes warmed with his smile as he strode over to the group. Suddenly, he halted, staring. And then his polite smile broadened, splitting his face in sheer delight.


Lucius stared back, for what seemed to everyone else an interminable length of time, and then he regained a modicum of composure once again, though his surprise was still evident.

“Michel! What the bloody hell are you doing here?”

The other man drew himself up, dignified, and then grinned, his teeth flashing white. “I will have you know, Lucius, that I have been asked to perform the handfasting for…” He glanced around, taking note of all the members of the wedding party, his gaze settling on Draco and Hermione. “Ah, I see. It is your son who is being married tonight. But of course.” His eyes narrowed as he regarded Draco. “He is very much a Malfoy, is he not?”

“And very much a Black as well,” Narcissa corrected him with a teasing smile. “I cannot believe it. Michel, of all people! How many years has it been?”

“Far too many, Narcissa. More than twenty, I believe. Although I must say, you are as beautiful now as ever. Lucius, will you not introduce me to your son and his guests?” The man flashed an engaging smile once again and waited patiently for the proper formalities to be observed.

Well, this was an interesting turn of events. Draco watched, one eyebrow slightly raised, as scepticism, amusement and surprise vied with each other. Here was an alleged friend of his father’s who actually seemed completely unpretentious and warm, had a genuine sense of humour, and in no way fit the usual mould that defined the Malfoys’ social circle.
Lucius glanced around at the assembled company and then his gaze rested on Draco. “Michel, this is my son, Draco. Draco, everyone… may I present a very old friend, Michel-Christophe Vaillant. We have known each other since we were boys. The Vaillants and the Malfoys have had ties for generations—centuries, I daresay—although in recent years, we have been rather remiss in maintaining that connection.”

“Shamefully so, I am afraid,” Michel sighed, and then a roguish grin crept over his face. “Ah, but I remember the many ways we forged that connection when we were boys. You cannot have forgotten, Lucius, I am sure.”

“What connection was that, Father?” Draco couldn’t resist asking, a curious gleam in his eye now. This was getting more interesting all the time.

Lucius opened his mouth to reply, but Michel jumped in ahead of him. “We played together as small boys when our families had occasion to visit each other. And then, when we were thirteen, your father spent a term at Beauxbatons.”

He winked at Lucius, who shook his head ever so slightly in warning. He knew Michel and so he knew what was coming. Now it seemed there was no way to forestall it.

Michel continued blithely, “Later, in exchange, I studied at Hogwarts for a term. Your father and I—”

“Were insufferable prats, the pair of them,” Narcissa laughed. “Conceited, arrogant, shamelessly flirtatious, always pulling pranks and getting themselves into trouble. I remember the time the two of you spiked the faculty’s punch at the Yule Ball. Every single professor was—”

“Come, Cissa,” Lucius interrupted hastily. “Such old memories could not possibly be of the slightest interest to anyone here.” This had to be nipped in the bud immediately. It would not do for his adolescent exploits to become public knowledge, especially amongst Draco’s friends. A bit of skillful reconnoitering would direct the conversation elsewhere. “Michel, may I introduce my son’s intended, Hermione Granger, and her parents, Richard and Claire Granger. And these young people are school friends.”

“Enchanté, Mademoiselle Granger. And Madame and Monsieur Granger, it is indeed a pleasure,” Michel said suavely, as first he dropped a kiss on Hermione’s hand and then on Claire’s in turn, finally offering a handshake to Richard. Then he nodded pleasantly towards Danny, Gemma, Ron and Pansy, who stood a couple of feet back, openly intrigued. “May I offer my felicitations to all of you on this happy day?”

Both Hermione and her mother blushed prettily at the unexpected attentions, while Richard cast a faintly disgruntled look at his soon-to-be son-in-law. Draco’s gaze was directed at his own father, however, the frank surprise and curiosity in his eyes mixed with just a glimmer of newfound appreciation.

“Won’t you tell us how you came to be here tonight?” Narcissa asked conversationally, taking Michel’s arm.

“I am a member of the Cour Suprême de Jurisprudence Magique here in Paris. Very like your Wizengamot. Though there are some who would wish to see me lose my seat.” At the many questioning glances, he shrugged, chuckling. “I am afraid that at times, I am a bit controversial for them. Well, let them try. It is of no consequence. Je m’en fiche.

“Anyway,” he concluded, “as a member, I may legally perform wedding ceremonies. Flora is an old friend. She has called upon me occasionally over the years—when she hasn’t been able to find
anyone more suitable, eh?” He laughed as, smiling, Flora shook her head and waggled a finger at him from the tables where she was busy setting out the refreshments. “*Et maintenant…* shall we begin? Draco, Hermione… please stand here before me. The rest of you will please stand in a circle around the bride and groom.”

Draco caught Hermione’s hand in his, gave it a light, reassuring squeeze, and together they walked over to Michel, who stood behind a small, cloth-covered table in the centre of the patio.

The table held several objects: a small bowl of water, a slender stick of incense rooted in a dish of sand, an apple, a knife, two small candles and one tall, slender one. In addition, there were a crystal goblet of mead, a small, scrolled parchment, and a smooth, round stone.

Suddenly, there was a quick, nearly inaudible intake of breath, and then Narcissa came hurrying to Hermione’s side, a nosegay of exquisite yellow tea roses, their petals still furled, in hand. She had set them aside with the champagne and they’d been nearly forgotten. Now she closed Hermione’s fingers over the beribboned stems and pressed a quick kiss to her cheek.

“I couldn’t very well come empty-handed, could I?” she whispered. “These are very special. They will open very slowly, but once they do, they will bloom for ages.”

Hermione was still murmuring her thanks as, beside her, Draco heard a very quiet clearing of somebody’s throat. He turned to find Lucius standing before him holding a single, tiny yellow rosebud.

Silently, he tucked it into Draco’s lapel, just visible above the neckline of his dress robes. His hand lingered on his son’s chest for just a moment, its pressure warm and oddly calming, before he smiled slightly and moved away to join Narcissa.

Michel moved out from behind the table as everyone positioned themselves, and, extending his arm, turned slowly in a full circle. Narcissa explained quietly to the Grangers, Gemma and Danny that he had just cast a protective circle, necessary before any ritual.

Just then, Michel smiled and cleared his throat, glancing around the circle at the assembled company.

“We stand before this company on this beautiful spring evening—Alban Eiler, Light of the Earth, the Vernal Equinox— to witness the joining of Draco Aquila Malfoy and Hermione Jean Granger,” he began. “Let the four directions be honoured, that love, peace, power and radiance enter our circle for the good of all.

“With the blessings of birds on the wing, we call upon the powers of the east. May the song of love be carried on the wind.

“With the blessing of the Great Stag in the heat of the chase and the inner fire of the sun, we call upon the powers of the south. May the flame of love warm the hearts of all people.

“With the blessings of the Salmon of Wisdom who dwells within the sacred waters of the pool, we call upon the powers of the west. May the waves of love pour throughout the sea.

“With the blessings of the Great Bear of the starry skies and the fruitful earth, we call upon the powers of the north. May the light of love shine over the land.

“As we come together within this circle, we also ask for the greater powers to bless this union with their positive energies. Through the presence of the God and Goddess, love and peace fill us all. In the name of the old ones, the Ancestors who gave us life and whose traditions we honour, may we all be united in perfect love. The joining together of the Groom and the Bride through this
handfasting rite symbolises the sacred union within each of us. Within every masculine nature lies the feminine, and within every feminine nature lies the masculine. The joining of the two forces flowing freely in true love generates seeds of creativity and joy.”

He turned to Hermione. “Who walks the path of the Moon to stand before all present to declare her sacred vows?”

Hermione stepped forward. “I do.”

“Do you, the Bride, come to this place of your own free will?”

Her reply was immediate, her voice clear and strong. “Yes.”

Michel turned to Draco then. “Who walks the path of the Sun to stand before all present to declare his sacred vows?”

Draco moved forward alongside Hermione. “I do.”

“Do you, the Groom, come to this place of your own free will?”

Draco did not hesitate. “Yes,” he smiled.

Now Michel took their hands in his own and held them firmly, looking gravely into their eyes. “As the grass of the meadows and the trees of the forest bend under the pressure of the storm, so you two must bend when the winds of change blow. May you both stand in each other’s strength. As you give, so you will receive. May your love nourish you and keep you well.”

He smiled, let go of their hands, and inclined his head towards the apple that sat on the table. “Cut it in half and offer your bride the first bite,” he instructed Draco quietly.

Draco picked up the knife and bisected the apple neatly. He held one half out to Hermione, who leaned forward and took a bite, savouring its crisp sweetness. Then he took a bite from his own half.

“The mead now,” Michel whispered, holding out the goblet to Hermione. “Offer some to your groom.”

This she did. Draco took a healthy sip and licked his lips. His mouth had been so very dry, and the mead tasted delicious. Michel must have intuited his desire for more, because grinning, he shook his head. “Hermione’s turn.” A ripple of light laughter spread around the circle as Draco returned the goblet to her.

Michel held up his hands and the laughter subsided. Then he continued.

“All things in nature move in cycles. Night becomes day, which then becomes night again. The moon waxes and wanes, then waxes again. The Wheel of the Year turns through the changing seasons. Death follows life and life follows death. These things are part of the great mysteries.”

He signalled to Gemma, who held a pair of flowered circlets. She came forward with them now, handing them to Michel.

“Accept these circlets as a representation of this process,” he said, carefully crowning the bride and groom’s heads with the flowery wreaths. Then he asked, “Do you have the symbols representing the eternity of the great mysteries of life?”

“We do,” they replied in unison.
Danny had been charged with safeguarding the rings. Now he moved forward with the box, handing it to Michel. He opened it and removed its contents, holding the rings up for all to see.

“By Air, by Fire, by Water, and by Earth,” he began, “I bless and consecrate these rings, a token of your love for one another. They serve as another reminder that all in life is a cycle; all comes to pass and passes away and comes to pass again.

“May the element of Air bless these rings. Air is at the beginning of all things, the direction of East, and the dawning of a new day. May your lives through the reminder of these rings be blessed with continuing renewal of love. Incendio,” he murmured, and then waved the rings through the almond-scented smoke that suddenly curled into the air from the stick of incense.

“May the element of Fire bless these rings. Fire is the passion within your love, the spark of love itself, the heat of anger, and the warmth of compassion. It is the direction of South, the heat of midday. May your lives through the reminder of these rings be blessed with continual warmth.” Once again, the spell for creating fire was uttered, and this time the smaller candles began to burn. With a flourish, he drew each ring through the tips of their flames.

“May the element of Water bless these rings,” he continued. “Water nourishes and replenishes us, the waters of emotion and harmony pour vitality into our lives. It is the direction of West, the afternoon and evening. May your lives through the reminder of these rings be blessed with fulfillment and contentment.” He dipped the rings into the bowl of cool water then.

“May the element of Earth bless these rings. All life springs from the earth and returns to the earth, the direction of North, the nighttime. May your lives through the reminder of these rings be blessed with strength and solidity.” Finally, he touched the two rings to the smooth stone that rested on the table.

“And now,” he told Hermione and Draco, “before all present, you may exchange your vows.”

Hermione turned to Draco, and in her face, he could see a clear-eyed certainty and an unbounded joy that made her smile luminous. She retrieved a small piece of parchment from the table and unrolled it. Her voice quavered only slightly, gradually strengthening as she read:

\[
I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine. \\
Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for his love is better than wine. \\
My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, showing himself through the lattice. \\
My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. \\
For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine. He feedeth among the lilies.
\]

Gently, Draco took the parchment from Hermione. “I love you so much, Hermione,” he whispered. Then he lifted his head and began to speak, his own voice clear and strong:
The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;

The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.

Thou hast ravished my heart.

The lights of a multitude of candles lit Hermione’s eyes, lambent and glistening with unshed tears. Winding an arm about her waist, Draco held out one end of the parchment for her to grasp. Together, they read the final stanza:

My beloved spake and said to me: Rise my love, my fair one, and come away.

Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages.

Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vines flourish, whether the tender grapes appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my love.

I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.

There was a hushed silence. It seemed that the entire company had been holding its collective breath, caught up in the sensual beauty and enchantment of those ancient words.

“Now the rings,” Michel announced, holding out the pair of them in his palm. Made of white gold, they were inscribed with Hebrew letters that spelled out the beautiful and timeless words they had just spoken.

Each took one ring and in a single movement, slid it onto the other’s finger, where they gleamed in the candlelight. Neither one could hold back an elated grin. This was real. It was true.

Michel gave them a wink. “Nearly done.” He handed one of the shorter candles to Hermione. “Repeat after me. ‘In the name of the Goddess, I give you the warmth of my heart.’”

With a radiant smile, Hermione echoed the words, her gaze never leaving Draco’s, and then handed the other small candle to him.

“In the name of the God,” he said clearly, repeating Michel’s words, “I bring you the light of my love.”

Together, they lit the tall candle, snuffing out the flame of the smaller ones with a shared breath.

At last, Michel smiled and said the words they’d been waiting to hear. “You may seal these promises with a kiss.”

For a moment, both Draco and Hermione stood very still, all sounds around them seeming to drop away into a profound silence. Then, very slowly, he cupped her face in his hands and bent his head,
pressing his lips to hers in a kiss that was ineffably tender.

Feeling nearly drugged with the sweetness of the kiss, her eyes closed dreamily, Hermione sighed when Draco reluctantly withdrew at the sound of a discreet “ahem.” But Michel had hold of her right hand and was already busy binding it to Draco’s with a brightly coloured cord, as he explained the significance of what he was doing.

“As this knot is tied,” he said, “so are your lives now bound. Woven into this cord are all the hopes of your friends and family, and of yourselves, for your new life together. With the fashioning of this knot, I tie all the desires, dreams, love, and happiness wished here in this place to your lives for as long as love shall last.

“As any child discovers when learning to tie his or her own shoes, the first move is to cross the ends. The criss-cross creates the Rune Gebo, which is the Rune of partnership and union. As your hands are bound by this cord, so is your partnership held by the symbol of this knot. May what is done here this night before the gods be not undone by man.

“In the joining of hands and the fashioning of a knot, so are your lives now bound, one to another. By this cord you are thus bound to your vow.

“May this knot remain tied for as long as love shall last. May this cord draw your hands together in love, never in anger. May the vows you have spoken never grow bitter in your mouths.

“We ask the spirits of our ancestors to bless the union. Help them, guide them, protect them and bless their lives.

“Draco and Hermione, from this moment, may you walk life’s long path together. Hold tight to one another through both good times and bad, and feel the strength of your bond grow. You are now handfasted.”

Michel paused dramatically, his eyes sweeping around the circle, and then he grinned hugely. “May I present to you all… Draco and Hermione Malfoy!”

And with that joyous pronouncement, he Vanished the cord, turned the pair around to face the intimate gathering of family and friends, and then quickly unwound the circle, opening it once again. Meanwhile, Flora lost no time distributing tall, slender glasses of champagne to everyone for a toast.

Toast or no, Draco wasn’t about to waste any more precious time. Amidst congratulatory cheers all round, he grabbed his wife of sixty seconds in a fierce embrace and crushed his mouth to hers, literally sweeping her off her feet.

This time, he wouldn’t let go until he was good and ready.

TBC
Disclaimer: Only the original characters and plot are mine. I make no money from this story.

A/N: Thanks and a weekend in Paris to my marvelous betas, mister_otter and kazfeist. You are both without equal!

*Fascia*: Latin for “ribbon”

The handfasting ritual is an amalgam of two ceremonies that I have blended and tweaked a bit here and there. Credit for borrowed material goes to:

http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/1294/druidic_handfasting_ceremony.html

http://www.handfasting.info/scripts.html

The entire Song of Solomon, from which Hermione and Draco borrowed passages for their vows can be read here:
Hermione’s wedding dress:


Draco and Hermione’s wedding rings are white-gold reproductions of a 15th-century ring, the original of which can be seen in the British Museum:

http://www.sapphirelane.com/I%20AM%20MY%20BELOVEDS%20RING.htm
31 May
Friday afternoon

Hermione looked up from the book that balanced precariously on her chest as she lounged in the pillowed butterfly chair. She’d placed it by the tall window that looked out over the back garden, so as to get the best light. She laid the book down, tiredly rubbing her eyes, and yawned. The final essay she was working on, a study of Nathaniel Hawthorne, was due in just one week and there was still so much work to do. Thankfully, the other essay for her paper in the American novel was three-quarters complete. On top of that, finals were coming up in a mere ten days—ten days!—and at the moment, she had serious doubts about the likelihood that her sanity would still be intact at the end of it all.

Hermione stood, stretching luxuriantly, and meandered over to the desk, picking up the small calendar that stood there with all the most important dates circled in red marker and idly scanning the contents. Suddenly, she froze.
Shit. How could she have forgotten, even momentarily? It was Draco’s twenty-second birthday in five days! Oh gods. It was just too close to the end of term to pull together any sort of decent celebration in time. Everybody, Draco included, was working harder than they had ever done in all their time at Oxford, finishing out the term and preparing for finals. But she simply couldn’t let the day pass unmarked.

Flopping back down in the chair, she tucked her legs beneath her and stared out the window at the garden burgeoning with colour below. But her gaze remained absent, her thoughts far away.

1 June
Saturday morning

The atmosphere in the kitchen, ordinarily cheerfully noisy on a weekend morning, was subdued. All four of the flatmates moved about quietly, absorbed in their own concerns. More than that, they were tired, deeply so, all-nighters becoming more frequent, and it was beginning to tell on each of them. Their movements were mechanical, wooden.

“Coffee, ladies?” Barefoot, hair tousled, and wearing an old t-shirt and baggy cotton pyjama trousers slung low on his hips, Draco stood at the work surface next to the sink where the coffee maker steamed, its carafe full of the rich, fragrant brew. He was busy filling several ceramic mugs as Hermione entered the room, rubbing her eyes.

She accepted a pair of steaming mugs from him and sat down at the table, too exhausted even to take a first sip. Gemma was already there, huddled in a scruffy old dressing gown, her favourite, her chin resting in her hands.

“Hey,” she murmured. “Thanks, Herm.” Accepting one of the mugs, she lifted it to her lips and took a gulp. Her eyes flew open and she coughed violently. “Shit, that’s hot! I’ve burnt my tongue!”

“Sorry, Gem.” Draco grinned despite himself as he slid into the empty chair beside Hermione, his own mug in hand. “Should have warned you. Woke you up, though, didn’t it?”

“Plonker. Probably scarred me for life and all,” Gemma muttered darkly. “Hermione, how ever do you put up with him?”

“No choice,” Hermione sighed theatrically. “I’m stuck with him now. Stop!” She let out a shrill squeak as Draco’s foot connected with her leg under the table.

“Now, children, it’s far too early for this sort of nonsense.” Danny shook his head in mock dismay as he sat down with a plate of buttered toast. “Manners, please!”

“Yes, Mother,” Draco muttered.

“You do sound rather like my mum too,” Gemma giggled.

Hermione nodded her agreement, her mouth full of toast.
“Bet none of your mums are such a specimen of manly perfection, though, are they,” Danny replied smugly, and then stopped. “Wait, that didn’t come out right.”

“Best stop whilst you’re ahead, mate.” Draco swallowed a snort of laughter and then cleared his throat. “Don’t think I really want such disturbing images in my head whilst I’m eating, if you don’t mind.”

“What do you want, coherence? I only had two hours’ sleep last night!” Danny protested.

A volley of balled-up napkins and the odd teaspoon went flying in his direction, along with theatrical moans and sighs, and then the four of them settled down to actually eating their meal in companionable silence.

Eventually, first Danny and then Draco heaved themselves up from the table, where they’d been comfortably sinking into a sleep-deprived half-stupor over the remains of their coffee. Dirty dishes were dumped unceremoniously into the sink with vague promises that they would “clear it up later, no worries,” and then the two of them were gone, leaving Hermione and Gemma alone at the table. There was silence for a couple of minutes.

“Well, I’m fucked,” Hermione remarked abruptly.

“Now there’s a statement that’s open to interpretation if ever I heard one.” Gemma smirked, folding her arms and leaning back in her chair. “How exactly do you mean that?”

Hermione groaned. “It’s Draco’s birthday in four days, that’s how I mean it. And I haven’t planned a bloody thing. I don’t even have a present for him yet!”

“Uh-oh. Yeah, you’re fucked all right. You’ve got to be nice to him now, you’re married.”

“Shut up, Gemma!” Hermione laughed, smacking her friend’s arm. “Not helpful!”

“Sorry, sorry!” Gemma rubbed her upper arm ruefully and then grinned. “Right… well… got anything in mind? Or do we need to put our heads together and come up with something spectacular on the spot?”

“Something spectacular on the spot, please. I can’t even think straight at the moment. I’m completely knackered!” Hermione covered her eyes with her hands and kneaded them briefly, her cheeks pink from the pressure and her eyes a bit watery.

“We’ll get it sorted, don’t worry,” Gemma smiled, and then she tossed back what was left of her coffee, tepid now, and stood. “Come on, Hermione. Never mind the washing up. Let’s take a walk. I think we could do with a bit of fresh air. Help us think.”

A certain controlled frenzy of studying descended on the flat after that. Nine days to go until exams, even fewer before final essays were due to be turned in to their tutors. The coffee pot was always full or on the way to being filled, attempts to wash it out in between eventually dispensed with completely as a waste of precious time and energy. It seemed that sleep was being dispensed with as well. There was always at least one lamp on somewhere in the flat at virtually all hours of the day and night, usually more. The four inhabitants of number 236 were hollow-eyed but grimly
The morning of Draco’s birthday dawned overcast and drizzly. He awoke, his head resting none too comfortably on a notebook on the desk in the small spare room. Lines from the spirals had imprinted themselves on his cheek from his eye down to his jaw line. With some disgust, he realised he must have been drooling a bit, because there was a distinct wet spot on the page he’d been leaning on. The ink of several words had been smudged to near-illegibility.

And bloody hell, was his neck stiff. As was his entire body. Wincing, he moved to rise from the chair. Twenty-one, and I feel about a hundred. A pause, after which a surprised, rather pleased smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Make that twenty-two. Suddenly, he felt a whole lot more awake and chipper. His stomach rumbled briefly and he thought of breakfast… and Granger.

Where the hell was she, anyway? Ah yeah, probably crashing after her own all-nighter. She’d had that essay to do for her American Novel tutorial. The last he’d seen her was the evening before at close to eleven, when she’d wandered out of their bedroom into the kitchen to make herself some tea and grab a few fortifying biscuits from the tin they kept in one of the cupboards. He’d joined her for a brief but lovely interlude in the kitchen, during which she curled into his lap, resting her head on his shoulder. Several wide yawns interrupted his attempts to kiss her, and finally he gave up, grinning as he tucked her head back into the crook of his neck. Small, kittenish murmurs of contentment were her response as she nested against him comfortably. “Come on, love, up you get,” he’d regretfully told her after several cosy minutes together. “You’ve got work, I’m afraid, and so do I.”

Now, Draco shuffled sleepily into the kitchen, following his nose towards the ever-present scent of coffee. It was a fresh pot, he noted happily. He could definitely do with some.

Danny was busy pouring coffee, his back to Draco. At the sound of a chair scraping across the tiled floor, he turned slightly and gave Draco a wry grin.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” he remarked. “You look like shit. Up all night, were you?”

Draco nodded numbly, dropping into a chair and resting his face in his hands. Danny silently handed him a mug of coffee, and he accepted it gratefully.

“Where’s--” Danny began, setting down two plates of slightly runny scrambled eggs and toast and then slipping into the opposite chair.

“Dead asleep, I reckon,” Draco replied. He took a sip of the coffee, closing his eyes as it blazed a searing trail down his throat. “Like I wish I were at the moment. I’ve got that bloody translation to finish. What I’ve done so far is complete crap. Dunno, Kirman. My brain is barely functioning in English at the moment, much less Old-fucking-Norse.”

“Reckon you can’t blag it either, yeah? Right, Björn, eat this and then nose back to the grindstone, my friend.” Danny pushed one plate of food in Draco’s direction, and the two of them began eating silently.

“It’s my birthday today, y’know,” Draco remarked in the general direction of his coffee cup, after several minutes of dedicated eating had passed.

Danny stopped mid-chew and then swallowed a half-masticated bite of toast. “Shit. ‘Course it is.” He gave Draco a sheepish grin. “Sorry, mate, I can’t lie. It totally slipped my mind.”

“So all right. Didn’t expect you to remember, with finals and all. Hermione’s got something planned,
I’m sure of it.”

“Oh yeah, she’ll soon have you properly sorted, no worries,” Danny said confidently, and turned back to his plate with renewed gusto, now that he was more or less off the hook.

Draco forked up a bite of his eggs, chewing thoughtfully. Of course she would. He didn’t doubt it at all.

Hermione didn’t emerge from the bedroom until close to ten. She wandered into the bathroom, surveying herself bleakly in the mirror. A too-pale face looked back at her, surrounded by an explosion of curls that appeared to have been electrified, the product of the many times she’d unconsciously raked her hand through her hair while working.

“Oh-h-h-h,” she groaned softly. “Not good. Not good at all.”

It had been a very long night for her as well. The essay she had been consumed with from just past dinner the night before until sun-up this morning was still not beaten into shape, not to her satisfaction anyway. When the birds in the back garden had begun those first frail peeps, she was mentally exhausted; by the time their chirps had progressed to full-throated warbling, she was ready to throw a brick at the nearest bird. Anything to stop that racket. Now, she rubbed her tired eyes and threw repeated handfuls of cold water on her face.

Towelling her rosy cheeks dry, she suddenly remembered something. A small, satisfied smile crossed her face and she left the bathroom, humming quietly to herself. Suddenly, she was feeling a good deal more alert.

*

The early-morning gloom gave way to bright sunshine by mid-morning. But for Draco, the change in weather went unnoticed, the day dragging by in an agony of unrelieved suspense. Not a word about his birthday had been said. Instead, Hermione had been cheerfully industrious all day long, sequestering herself in their bedroom for several hours and then emerging for a large, fortifying mug of tea and a quick sandwich, only to disappear again. He could hear the clicking of the laptop keys as she worked, and he knew not to disturb her on pain of death, or at least a memorable hexing.

His own work stared him balefully in the face, and with a muttered oath, he attacked the translation once again.

By six o’clock, the two of them had migrated into the sitting room, Draco on one sofa and Hermione on the other. The windows were open, letting in the mellow early-evening light and the sounds of children playing in neighbouring gardens. Occasionally, somebody would ride past on a bike, or a bus would rumble by, stopping just opposite the house and across the road from the Magdalen.

Ah, the Magdalen. Draco raised his eyes from his text, thinking just how good a pint of Guinness would be at that moment, with maybe a well-stuffed sandwich and some chips, at one of the picnic tables outside the cosy old pub. At that moment, he caught Hermione’s eye and she smiled slightly before returning her own gaze to her laptop, where the furious tapping recommenced. There was a slight scowl on her face, her brows drawn down and her mouth set in utter concentration.

Bugger. Maybe she really had forgotten. It was possible, he supposed. The pressure on all of them now was pretty intense, after all. This was the very end of third year, their last at Oxford. Everything
they had done in the last three years—well, it was all down to this. What happened now really **mattered**, more than anything he had ever done in his life before. Everyone felt it keenly, nobody more than his new wife.

Suddenly, his birthday seemed a childish indulgence, and silently, he berated himself for having held out hope for some small celebration, maybe a present or two… an acknowledgement… *something.* Work came first. The most intimidating exams of his young life were only a handful of days away. **Right, then.**

Two hours later, Draco’s immersion in his work was total, all thoughts of food and pleasant malingerings over a pint forgotten. And so, when he felt a hand suddenly rest lightly on his shoulder from behind, he jumped. Twisting around, he saw Hermione standing just behind him. She was trying very hard to keep a straight face.

“This isn’t funny, Granger,” he protested. “I was bordering on utter brilliance there, and now my concentration’s all gone to shit. You owe me, woman!”

“Mmm, s’pose I do,” she nodded, her expression serious as she plopped herself down in his lap, his papers and books pushed unceremoniously aside. He looked at her in some surprise as she twined her arms around his neck, still looking at him earnestly.

“I can make it up to you, y’know,” she murmured, leaning in to nuzzle the tender skin of his neck just below his left ear.

One eyebrow rose in amused scepticism, his grin turning decidedly wolfish. “Just what did you have in mind, darling?”

“Oh, well…” she sighed with studied carelessness. “Something a bit… *different.* You’ll have to come with me, though. It’s a surprise.”

So she hadn’t forgotten after all. At least, he hoped she hadn’t. Suddenly, he felt lighter than he had in ages. Practically buoyant, in fact. Trying very hard to fight down the grin of child-like excitement that threatened to split his face, he rose from the sofa, pulling her up alongside him.

“I’m all yours, Mrs. Malfoy,” he told her. “Lead on.”

*  

Half an hour later, they were standing in Bellewether Crescent, Hermione holding Draco firmly by the hand. Judging by the determined gleam in her eye, she was a woman on a mission.

“F*ck’s sake, Granger,” he laughed as she began tugging him in the direction of Jiggery-Pokery Lane. “Where in the name of Merlin are you taking me?”

Shopfronts began moving past them in a blur: the post office, its red brick exterior sun-dappled beneath the large beech tree that grew beside it; Campbell and Sons, its display window impressively arrayed with wands and staffs imported from the furthest reaches of the globe; The Third Eye, source of divination essentials of every imaginable sort.

Suddenly, Hermione stopped short, slightly out of breath but looking every bit as pleased with herself as the cat that swallowed the canary. They were standing directly in front of Flights of Fancy,
Brooms and Quidditch Supplies.

Right. A Quidditch-related present, then. Excellent. He gave her hand a squeeze and grinned, pleased.

“Nice one, love. I like it.”

He took a step towards the front door of the shop. When Hermione didn’t move, he turned back, surprised.

“Come on, then! My present, woman!”

Hermione shook her head slyly. “Not so fast, Malfoy. It isn’t exactly what you think. Don’t move. Oh, and…” She brought her mouth very close to his ear, so that her breath tickled the sensitive skin of his neck, lightly ruffling his hair. “Close your eyes.”

Interesting. He could certainly manage standing still with his eyes shut. Well, for a minute anyway. He could hear Hermione’s footsteps moving away from him and up the walk to the shop door, and stealthily, he opened his lids a slit and peeked through his lashes. She was just disappearing inside the shop, the door swinging shut behind her.

The sun was lower in the sky now, spinning threads of rose and peach into the light-suffused horizon. Draco checked his watch. Half eight. Suddenly his stomach let out a demanding growl, and he realised he hadn’t eaten in hours, not since a hasty and unsatisfying sandwich at one that afternoon.

A sudden noise from the direction of the shop drew his attention away from his hunger pangs, and hastily, Draco squeezed his eyes shut again. He could hear Hermione hurrying towards him, her shoes beating a briskly staccato rhythm on the pavement as she approached.

She took a steadying breath. “All right, love. Open your eyes!”

In her hand was a broomstick. Not surprising, really, considering that broomsticks made up a good portion of the merchandise of this particular shop. But this wasn’t just any broomstick.

“Fucking hell, Hermione!” Draco breathed. “That’s a… a…”

“Pegasus 2600. Yes. I know.” There was that pleased smile again, only now it seemed almost shy. “Do you… do you like it?”

She looked, Draco thought, like a little girl in her excitement. It was absolutely endearing. He sucked in an amazed breath. “This is… Gods, Hermione, it’s fantastic! But how the hell did you afford it? One of these things costs a bloody fortune, and I know you didn’t… you couldn’t have…”

Hermione grinned, colouring slightly. “Well, if you must know, Mister Nosy-Parker Malfoy, I had a bit of help. Your mum sent me an Owl a couple of weeks ago, asking what I thought you’d like, but it wasn’t till a few days ago that I had the idea. I wrote and asked if she and your dad would like to chip in a bit, and she said yes. Same with my parents. They’re sending me a cheque. So… well… it’s from all of us, really. I hope that’s okay. I mean…” She darted a glance at him that was suddenly anxious.

Pulling her closer, Draco dropped a light kiss on the tip of her nose, and then rubbed his own nose against hers. “Of course it is, you silly girl. Now come here and let me thank you properly.”

He bent his head so that his mouth hovered a hairsbreadth from hers, the warm mingling of her
breath and his fanning their lips. He could smell peppermint. Kissing Hermione was quite possibly one of his favourite things in the world, and now he pressed his mouth to hers—so soft and pliant!—closing his eyes as that familiar, breathless sensation of falling and losing himself in her engulfed him once again.

“Oh…” she sighed weakly, pressing her forehead to his chest as they broke apart to catch a breath.

Head cocked to one side, he flashed her a smug grin. “Well?”

“Hmm,” she began, her breath and wits recovered at last. “Your gratitude was quite nicely expressed. But I think I might need additional proof of your appreciation a bit later. At home.”

“I believe that can be arranged,” Draco chuckled. He gazed longingly at the broomstick then, all sorts of impossible thoughts racing through his mind. No. He wouldn’t even think about it, much less ask. Shouldering the broom resolutely, he smiled at Hermione. “Feel like getting something to eat? I’m absolutely famished. What about dinner at the Damselfly? I know we’re not exactly dressed for it, but we can—”

Hermione waved her hand in an airy gesture of dismissal. “Sounds wonderful, but I’ve something else planned for you tonight, husband.” Husband. Lovely word. Smiling, she continued. “Fancy trying it out? The Pegasus, I mean?”

“What… now?” Draco’s jaw dropped.

“Right now. The broom has been Charmed for a particular destination tonight.” Hermione slipped her arm through his, tilting her head, gave him a wink. “I’m game if you are.”

He tipped her chin up and studied her anxiously. “Are you sure? I mean—I know you’ve never liked flying. It scares you. You don’t have to do this, Hermione.”

She shook her head stubbornly. “I know that. I want to. Come on, Malfoy. You know you’re not going to talk me out of it! Take me flying.”

Draco didn’t need asking a third time. He hadn’t flown in ages, and he’d missed it keenly the past three years at Oxford, probably more than any other aspect of his life as a wizard. A smashing new broom and the chance to take it up into the clouds on the spot were more than he could have wished for in the wildest of his birthday scenarios. But more than that—so much more—she’d gifted him with her trust.

“Right, then,” he grinned, delighted. “Climb on.” He positioned himself behind her and leaned forward, his voice in her ear. “Don’t be scared. I’ve got you and I promise I won’t let go.”

Hermione leaned back against Draco’s chest, her hands resting against his arms as they circled her waist securely. She closed her eyes, sucking in a deep, slightly ragged breath before nodding. “I know.”

A moment later, they were rising steadily through the cool evening air as the sun dropped nearer the horizon. Deftly, Draco navigated banks of coral and mauve clouds tinged with gold, eventually cresting them to speed along an open channel of deepening, crystalline blue.

“What are we going anyway?” he asked, tightening his arms around her and giving her a quick squeeze.

“You’ll see,” she replied cryptically and then both of them fell silent, and for a time, there was nothing but endless oceans of sky and wind and incredible speed, the earth falling away to
insignificance below them.

Suddenly, Hermione’s arm shot out, and she pointed down. “There! Look!”

He looked.

Below them, through filmy blankets of clouds, was a large lake dotted with tiny green islands and narrow peninsulas, heavily wooded fingers of land that appeared almost black against the dark water. Surrounding the lake were mountains, craggy, age-old “fells” that ringed the water protectively.

The broom began its descent then, its movement true and straight as an arrow as it nosed down through the clouds and headed for land, touching down on a hilltop overlooking the lake.

“Where in the name of all the gods are we?” Draco exclaimed, as they stood for a moment, catching their breaths and regaining their land legs.

“The Lake District,” Hermione announced happily, pointing to the large body of water below. “That’s Derwentwater. Wordsworth and Coleridge lived really close by, you know. We’re going to have a birthday picnic right here and watch the sunset. Hang on, don’t sit down just yet.”

Sliding her wand out from her jeans pocket, she pointed it towards the soft grass of the little clearing in which they stood, surrounded by tall evergreens and birches. Glancing at Draco, she grinned and then her brows furrowed briefly and she cleared her throat.

“Vestis!” she intoned, and then, “Victus natalis!”

Instantly, a soft, woollen blanket appeared on the ground, and atop it, a generous picnic basket.

“Come on, let’s sit down.” Hermione waved her arm in a generous arc over the blanket. “I’m starved, what about you?”

Suddenly, those hunger pangs he had studiously ignored for hours gnawed insistently at his stomach, and happily, Draco sat down, watching as she unpacked cutlery, wine glasses, and a tempting array of foods.

“Hmm…what have we here?” he mused, eagerly examining the feast that was now spread before them. “French bread, very nice… some Brie, love that… And what’s this? Chicken salad with walnuts and grapes… Mmm, very nice indeed, Granger… Fresh strawberries, excellent… Hello, a bottle of some rather good bubbly too!” He nodded his approval. “You really have thought of everything.”

“Naturally,” Hermione tossed off airily. Pointing her wand at the champagne bottle next, she muttered a few words and the cork popped off, inscribing a spectacular arc in the air as a fountain of foam poured down the sides of the bottle. The wine fizzed invitingly as, giggling, she filled two slender glasses, handing one to Draco.

“A toast!” she exclaimed, holding up her glass. “To champagne!”

“To getting well and truly shit-faced on champagne.”

“But no hangover the next morning.”

“Right. To Anti-Hangover Potion, even though the stuff’s bloody vile.”

“To… Wordsworth!”
“And Coleridge.”

“And Coleridge.”

“To birthdays!”

“Especially when they’re mine.” He winked playfully.

There was a pause, then. Hermione’s eyes were amber in the glow of the setting sun.

“To the love of my life,” she said softly. “Happy birthday, Draco.”

The bubbles fizzed and popped beneath their noses as they sipped, and then Draco threaded an arm around Hermione, drawing her closer.

“Do you know,” he whispered, “I believe I love you more now than ever, if that’s possible.”

A curious growling sound erupted suddenly, and Hermione pressed a hand to Draco’s taut belly, laughing as he rolled his eyes, mortified.

“When did you last eat, Malfoy?” she demanded, horrified when he merely shrugged. Immediately, she set about spreading cheese on a bit of the crusty, fragrant bread. “Eat,” she ordered, bringing the bread to his mouth for a bite.

“Bossy, aren’t we. Mmm, delicious,” he murmured, still chewing as she leaned in to brush his lips lightly with her own.

“Yes, you are,” she breathed, pushing him backwards onto the blanket and settling herself on his chest. “More, please.”

For some time after that, the food lay forgotten.

*

The sun had just slid below the surface of the lake in a molten blaze that briefly lit the entire sky and the waters beneath. Now the moon took its place, a slender crescent of silver set in its own burnished halo against the deepening blue. Its mirror image shone, fragmented, in the small wavelets of the night-dark lake.

Hermione lay cradled in Draco’s arms, leaning back comfortably against his chest. “Oh!” she exclaimed suddenly. “Draco, look!”

The first star of the evening had materialised between two cloud masses just overhead. It winked at them, huge and brilliant and seemingly close enough to touch.

“You really should make a wish,” she told him matter-of-factly. “It is your birthday, after all.”

“Okay. I’m thinking…” Draco paused, dipping his head and nudging her curls aside so that he spoke directly into her ear. “Right. Got it. Shall I tell you what it is?” he teased. “Because--”

“No!”

He grinned. It was exactly the answer he’d expected. The night she’d told him about her habit of wishing on the first star of the evening had been in the autumn of first year, their fragile new
friendship only three weeks old. An attack of the insomnia that plagued him from time to time had driven him to wake her and invite her outside in the dead of a late-October night. She’d thought him a bit mad, but she had pulled on her clothes nevertheless, joining him for a walk through the silent streets. He remembered how unexpectedly moved he’d been at that.

*Starlight, star bright, first star I see tonight...* The familiar old rhyme danced through his head. She’d explained that she’d learnt it as a child and had never outgrown the wishing habit. And now? His own wish was the same one he’d secretly been making for ages, it seemed. Except now it was slightly altered. No sense in taking anything for granted, he reckoned, even when it seemed your heart’s desire was already in the palm of your hand.

“You’re a nutter, you know that, Granger? Does anybody else know that you still go round at the ripe old age of twenty-two, making wishes on shiny balls of plasma in space that probably burnt out millions of light years ago?” he asked her fondly, bringing her hand to his lips and planting a warm kiss on its palm. Turning her head slightly to catch his eye, the corners of her mouth lifted in a tiny smile and she snuggled closer.

“I don’t care if anybody knows,” she declared, rubbing her nose against his soft t-shirt, which smelled of him and was so very nice. “It works.”

“You reckon?” he laughed softly, resting his chin on the top of her head and tightening his arms around her.

Hermione heaved an exaggerated sigh, stretching out her left arm and waving her hand like a small flag. Moonlight glinted off the rings on her fingers. “No-brainer, Malfoy.”

*Oh.* The familiar kernel of warmth that had begun growing in the centre of his chest blossomed suddenly, threatening to unravel him. He blinked hard several times before speaking, and then gave a light, careless little laugh.

“So that’s how it happened between us. Damned useful, this wishing business. What about a few requests, then? Acing our exams? Straight A’s on our essays?”

Hermione twisted around to face him fully then, her eyes glinting with mischief. “Sorry, can’t do requests. It doesn’t work. I am wishing for something, though. Can you guess what it is?”

He looked at her blankly for a moment, and then a slow, rather wolfish smile spread across his face. “You naughty girl. I like the way you think. It’s...”

Hermione smiled back serenely, twining her arms around his neck. “Shut up and kiss me, Malfoy.”

TBC
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to my fabulous betas, kazfeist and mister_otter.

*Vestis*: Latin for “blanket.”

*Victus Natalis*: Latin for “birthday meal.”

William Wordsworth lived in Grasmere, not far from Keswick, the village nearest to Derwentwater where his friend and fellow Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, lived for a time. Together with Robert Southey, they are known as the Lake Poets.
Whatever tomorrow brings, I'll be there
with open arms and open eyes, yeah.
Whatever tomorrow brings, I'll be there.
I'll be there.
--“Drive”
Brandon Boyd, Incubus

Wednesday, early evening
19 June 2002

The book of matches bearing the elegantly etched “Malmaison Brasserie” rested atop a small pile of its fellows inside a pint glass Draco had pinched from the Hertford College bar two years earlier. It
had been pleasantly balmy that evening as well, he remembered, and he had been quite thoroughly and blissfully drunk, along with four of his friends. Acquiring a free set of commemorative barware seemed the logical and quite sensible thing to do, they all agreed, shoving empty glasses inside the folds of their hooded fleeces with all the discretion of a bunch of giddy six-year-olds nicking chocolates from a sweet shop.

Draco idly fingered the matchbook, its forest-green lettering a fine, swirling scrawl over a matte cream field, and then flipped it back into the glass. Sighing, he turned his gaze to the sitting room window, where the threat of a shower had turned the fading, early-evening light to a wan, rather morose grey. The weather had chosen to mimic his mood rather too accurately today, he reflected, one corner of his mouth turning up slightly in a faint suggestion of a grin.

Drawing his gaze back once again to the coffee table where the pint glass stood with its rainbow collection of matchbooks, the cardboard cartons standing like a small army around the room were unavoidable. All were open and filled to varying degrees. Hermione had taken to labelling theirs in large black lettering: “GRANGER-MALFOY.”

Draco let out a small snort of laughter. Granger-Malfoy. It was her latest campaign. However, he had absolutely no intention, now or in future, of changing his surname to such a hyphenated mouthful, no matter how determined or persuasive Granger was. If she really wanted to call herself Hermione Granger-Malfoy, he wouldn’t attempt to dissuade her. But this was one politically correct Muggle practise he could live nicely without, thanks. Not to mention the fact that such a thing would probably be the final nail in the coffin for his parents, his mother as much as his father in this case. He could just imagine their reaction if he had announced, three days earlier at lunch, that he would be going through the rest of his life as Draco Granger-Malfoy. They’d likely have had matching coronaries in the middle of that very elegant soup course.

Ah yes. Sunday lunch. At the Malmaison Brasserie, in fact, together with Richard and Claire Granger, the six of them ostensibly celebrating the successful conclusion of Hermione’s and Draco’s three years at Oxford but all of them keenly aware of other agendas lurking insidiously beneath the surface of the festive, congratulatory conversation.

That there would be tensions was a given from the moment that invitations issued from both sets of parents. The first involved the choice of restaurant. Narcissa had suggested a celebratory dinner at the Damselfly in Bellewether Crescent, or possibly a fine restaurant in wizarding London. The Grangers had phoned shortly afterwards with a similar idea in mind, Claire enthusiastically suggesting a number of possibilities in Muggle Oxford, including the excellent Thai restaurant to which they had taken Draco and Hermione that first time they had met him two and a half years earlier. Claire had waxed sentimental, declaring that such a choice would be particularly meaningful. However, Draco wasn’t at all certain his parents would take to Thai food, nor did he feel comfortable having a public meal with his parents in such close quarters. Any oddities of theirs, even small ones, would stand out all the more sharply to observant Muggle eyes in a setting as intimate as the Chiang Mai Kitchen.

In the end, it was left to Hermione and Draco themselves to choose the restaurant.

“I know!” Hermione had exclaimed suddenly from the small, spare room where she was busy loading books from the shelves into a carton two days before the proposed gathering.

Draco glanced away from the open kitchen cupboard, where he had been rooting about for that last bottle of nut brown ale he had been sure was still squirreled away somewhere in the back.

“Kirman, you plonker, that was my Samuel Smith!” he muttered, vainly pushing aside bottles of HP Sauce and mustard, and then he straightened, twisting his head in the general direction of the spare room. “Hang on, Granger, did you say something?”
A moment later, Hermione appeared, a Cheshire-cat grin on her face. Folding her arms across her chest, she lounged against the doorframe, reminding Draco rather eerily of himself in his more charmingly smug moments.

“Yes, I did,” she announced airily. “I’ve just had a perfectly brilliant idea for where we can go with the families. For lunch, I mean. On Sunday.”

Draco shut the cupboard door and leaned back against it, crossing his own arms and raising a sceptical eyebrow. “Oh yeah? And where is that? Left it rather late, haven’t we?”

“I suppose we have, yes,” she replied tartly. “Not a problem, though. I’ve just rung and booked a table for one o’clock…”

She paused dramatically with a mischievous grin as Draco rolled his eyes.

“Okay, okay, you’ve got my attention. Don’t keep me hanging, woman! Where?”

“At the Malmaison!” At Draco’s blank expression, she sighed. “Oh, you know! That posh hotel in Oxford Castle, near the railway station.”

Draco snorted. “Right, yeah. I know the place. Used to be a gaol, didn’t it, till pretty recently. Bet it’s haunted.” He let out a small snicker. “Perfect. I love it. The ghosts of convicted murderers and rapists will be rattling their chains whilst we sip our wine and make polite chitchat with our parents.”

His tone took on a faintly bitter edge. “Father will probably find the whole thing fascinating. Historically speaking. You know, the Muggle approach to incarceration and torture in the last thousand or so years compared to Azkaban, from an insider’s perspective. No doubt it will be quite instructive.”

Hermione blanched, her hands flying to her face in dismay. “Oh, Draco! I’m sorry. I didn’t think. It just seemed like a fun idea, something a bit different.”

Crossing to her swiftly, he pulled her hands from her face and brought them to his mouth for a quick kiss.

“Look,” he told her firmly, “Father’s past is not our problem. I refuse to let it interfere. I think the Malmaison is a great idea. One o’clock, you say?”

She nodded, her brows still knit in consternation. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. We just need to let them know. S’pose we should all meet here and then--” His eyes opened wide suddenly and vainly, he fought down a smirk. “What?”

“Your parents will expect to drive everyone, won’t they. Mine have never been in a car before. Should be… interesting.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow and one hand went to her hip, but she couldn’t help smiling. “You’re enjoying this, Draco Malfoy! You are, I can tell!”

Draco grinned down at her, shrugging lightly. “Now whatever gave you that idea, darling?” Pulling her close, he wrapped a curl around one finger and then idly watched it unravel. “I simply appreciate life’s little ironies. Father used to vow that he would never be caught dead in a Muggle ‘conveyance.’ This was usually either right before or right after one of his rants about Arthur Weasley and his ‘damnably idiotic fascination’ for Muggle things. Reckon he’ll have to eat those words along with whatever’s on the menu at the Mal.” He chuckled softly. “Sweet.”
The second minor skirmish involved which meal they would have together. The Malfoys had simply assumed they would all meet for dinner, whereas the Grangers had hoped to make it lunch, as they had early surgery hours the next morning and the drive back from Oxford to Watford was so often clogged with traffic on a Sunday night. Draco intervened quickly on the side of lunch before his mother could object—one could hardly argue, Narcissa found, when a ten-second journey home by Apparation was being compared to ninety minutes in a car, crawling along a Muggle motorway. He earned brownie points from both his in-laws when they heard about it, and from his wife as well. Of course, as he happily discovered later that night, appreciation from Hermione could be expressed in a multitude of original and highly creative ways. Draco Malfoy was nothing if not a quick study. Delighted, he resolved to be on the receiving end of his wife’s gratitude as often as possible.

Sunday had arrived with the uneasy inevitability of a visit to the dentist. It was one thing to have both sets of parents to the flat for a meal or tea, or to disappear into the elegant maelstrom of one of the Malfoys’ gala parties. Today’s little outing would be something else altogether. Why, Hermione had wondered idly as she and Draco waited for everyone to arrive, did the very idea of dining with Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy in a busy, very public Muggle restaurant seem so much more daunting than the notion of her parents having to blend in and become comfortable with a large party of witches and wizards, all of whom were acutely aware of the pair of Muggles in their midst. After all, nobody at the Malmaison would know, unless the Malfoys said or did something outlandish, that they were anything other than a rather well-heeled couple out for a meal with members of their family. Given the demographics of the student population, there was certainly no shortage of such types. It was down to attitude, she decided finally. Hermione knew that her parents were the more flexible by far, both of them motivated to make it work by the desire to make their child happy. The Malfoys? A different kettle of fish.

One of them, anyway.

A light drumming on the coffee table drew her attention to the long fingers that were creating the insistent sound, and she glanced quickly at Draco. His face was mask-like, his grey eyes cloudy and inscrutable.

Hermione got up from her chair and, sighing, plopped down next to him on the sofa. Covering his fingers with her own, she drew his hand into her lap.

“Hey, fancy a drink? I could definitely do with one,” she said brightly.

Draco seemed to rouse himself from something like a waking sleep. Shaking his head slightly, he flashed her a rueful grin. “Yeah, good idea. Let’s get pissed. That way, I won’t have to be conscious.”


“Fuck, Hermione,” Draco groaned, flopping back against the sofa pillows. “Forget the drink. Just Obliviate me now, why don’t you?”

In response, Hermione giggled evilly, grabbing one of the smaller throw pillow and giving him an
unceremonious whack on the side of the head.

There was a pause of about ten seconds, during which Draco—his hair sticking up comically just above the ear where the pillow had made contact—regarded Hermione with utter calm.

“Not exactly,” he murmured, his tone dangerously soft, “what I had in mind.”

Then, slowly and with complete deliberation, his eyes never leaving hers, he plucked another pillow from behind him, took careful aim, and delivered a swift clout to her mid-section.

Her high-pitched shriek and breathless laughter could be heard all the way down the stairs and out the door, and Richard and Claire exchanged startled glances as they shut the car doors and turned towards the front entrance.

However, the look that passed between Lucius Malfoy and his wife was beyond classification. They had just materialised in a corner of the sitting room, fully kitted out in acceptable Muggle attire, Narcissa having remembered only just in time their first experience of Oxford two years earlier and how inappropriately they’d come dressed for it. Today, they had Apparated with the assurance that this would be a safe time to arrive in their son’s flat. Apparently, “safe” was a relative term in Draco’s vocabulary. They found him on the floor where Hermione had him pinned, red-faced and teary-eyed with laughter. Her hands were thrust into his armpits, and she was tickling him without mercy.

Lucius’ eyebrows arched upwards in apparent slow motion, and then he inclined his head ever so slightly in Draco and Hermione’s direction and cleared his throat. There was the faintest hint of colour in his face, Narcissa noted, and a tiny muscle pulsed in his jaw.

“Ah… yes… Good afternoon, Draco… Hermione. I trust we have not arrived at an… er… inconvenient moment…”

By this time, a chagrined Draco and Hermione had scrambled to their feet and were dusting themselves down. Blushing furiously, Hermione averted her eyes from the gaze of her in-laws, not ready just yet to find out whether their expressions were reproachful or merely amused. She wasn’t quite sure which one would be worse.

“Come on, Granger, they’re not going to bite,” came a familiar whisper in her ear. “Besides, we’re married. They’re stuck with you now.”

Whipping her head around, Hermione found herself looking at Draco just over her shoulder. He was trying very hard not to laugh.

“Gosh, thanks, Malfoy!” she muttered through the polite smile plastered on her face for her in-laws’ benefit. “That makes me feel ever so much better.”

Giving her hand a fleeting squeeze, he grinned a bit sheepishly at his parents and gestured vaguely in the direction of the sofas. “Hullo, Mother… Father. It’s nice to see you. Sit down.”

“Oh yes,” Hermione hastened to add. “Please! Would you like something to drink? It’s so warm today…” Her voice trailed off and she mentally begged Narcissa to answer in the affirmative just so she could escape to the kitchen and collect herself.

Happily, Narcissa obliged. “Yes, my dear, that would be lovely. Thank you.” Gracefully, she seated herself, crossing her long legs, and patted the sofa cushion for Draco to sit beside her.

“You look well, darling,” she began. “Have you--"
Two brief knocks interrupted her, and Draco rose quickly.

“Excuse me, Mother,” he murmured, making for the door.

“Draco! How are you?”

Hermione could hear the smile in her mother’s voice all the way from the kitchen. It was like a tonic, and she felt herself calming, the embarrassment falling away. *Right.* Giving herself a little shake, she picked up a tray of cold drinks and strode purposefully from the kitchen.

By this time, Lucius had taken Draco’s place on the sofa and the Grangers had seated themselves on its twin.

“Well, well…” Richard began jovially, looking around at everyone. “This is quite an occasion.” He glanced at his wife for support.

“Oh yes,” Claire chimed in, nodding enthusiastically. “I can’t believe the time has passed so quickly. It seems just yesterday that we were helping Hermione move into her room at college.”

*’Hermione, what on earth do you have in this duffel? Boulders?’*

*’No, of course not! Don’t be silly, Daddy! It’s just my books.’*

*’All of them?’*

“And now,” she sighed, glancing fondly at her daughter, who had served the drinks and was now perched on the arm of Draco’s chair. “Now here we are…”

Her voice trailed off and she smiled, ducking her head and taking a quick swallow of the iced lemonade Hermione had served everyone. Richard’s sidelong glance in her direction was shrewd. He knew his wife well, and just now, her sentimental nature had threatened to get the better of her.

“Yes, here we are,” Narcissa said briskly, her own smile brilliant. “This day is certainly something we never could have foreseen.” An obvious weight hung precipitously from that remark, and everyone felt it. Realising her slight gaffe, she hurried on. “How wonderful to be able to celebrate it!” She turned to Draco and Hermione brightly. “Where have you arranged for us to lunch?”

Hermione and Draco caught each other’s eye, and quietly, she slipped her hand into his. Its pressure felt warm and reassuring.

He lifted his chin and smiled. “Well, it was really Hermione’s idea, y’know, but I think she made a brilliant choice.” He slanted a mischievous look at Hermione. “Let’s keep it a surprise, though, yeah? Let them discover it when we get there.”

And then, just as Draco had predicted, Richard offered to drive everyone to the restaurant.

Draco shot a quick, curious glance at his parents to gauge their response. It was precisely what he would have predicted, but no less comical for that. Two sets of eyebrows rose in unison, and Narcissa’s mouth opened in a small, startled “O.” On the other hand, Lucius’ features remained impassive beyond the veiled surprise in his eyes.

“I assume…” he began, his tone measured, “that this is a Muggle establishment?” Any possibility of
Apparition had suddenly vanished.

Draco nodded, barely able to contain his amusement. Again, he contemplated the experience with a certain degree of perverse pleasure, especially where his father was concerned. A sudden, quick squeeze to his hand turned his gaze towards Hermione. Her barely perceptible shake of the head expressed mild disapproval and exasperation, though he could see that her own mouth was twitching just a bit as well. She could read him so well. It was actually disconcerting at times.

“Yes, Father,” he replied, swallowing his laughter. “A rather unique one, though, as you will see. And the only way to get there is by car or by bus.” *Ha. Now wouldn’t that be an experience…* He paused dramatically. “Or we *could* always walk, I suppose. Bit of a trek, though. Probably close to forty-five minutes. Driving really makes much more sense.”

“Well, then!” Richard said heartily, standing and pulling Claire to her feet beside him. “Shall we? Plenty of room for everybody.”

As everyone moved, single file, through the door and down the stairway, Narcissa and Lucius exchanged another look that spoke worlds—apprehension from her and displeasure from him—and then he gave a slight, resigned shrug. Behind them, Draco gave Hermione a wink. This was going to be interesting.

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It was a car ride to remember.

Richard manoeuvred the comfortable estate car through traffic on the High Street with the somewhat misplaced bravado of a retired racing car driver on a particularly challenging obstacle course. One-handed. Periodically, Claire would touch his arm when the scenery began flying past the windows a bit too rapidly. Not that driving fast was really even possible in the traffic that usually clogged the roads in Oxford’s city centre. Still. What was it about cars that seemed to turn most men into adolescents in hormonal overdrive? And in this case, there was the added impetus of impressing the (wizarding) in-laws with one’s adeptness at handling a complex Muggle vehicle. Claire’s mouth lifted in a tiny smirk. Ridiculous.

Nearly as soon as Lucius and Narcissa had settled themselves in the back seat, his curiosity had got the better of him and without thinking, he had leaned forward slightly to have a better look at the dash. The myriad gadgets and panels, lit up and glowing orange on black, were fascinating and mystifying at once. This… vehicle, such as it was, had no equivalent in the wizarding world and although Lucius was certain the magical community would not gain anything by its acquisition, still… Its workings were intriguing. However, it would not do for his curiosity to be so apparent. He glanced about quickly. In the centre seat to his immediate left, Narcissa was busy studying the sights that were flashing past the car windows. To the far left, Draco, with Hermione on his lap, was fidgeting in an attempt to make the cramped ride a bit more comfortable. Reassured, Lucius sank back in his seat, schooling his features once again into their customary inscrutability. Only his eyes moved after that, darting surreptitiously to the busy streets outside and then to Richard’s movements as he navigated the traffic.

“Oh, Daddy,” Hermione piped up suddenly. “Take the next right into St Aldate’s. The way to the restaurant is a bit…”
“Circuitous,” Draco supplied. “Sorry. The roads closest to the Mal… uh, closest to where we’re going are pedestrians only.”

“Not to worry.” Richard turned his head briefly and gave them a wry grin. “Just give me a bit more warning next time, eh, Kitten?” The turn had been just a bit precipitous. “Apologies, everyone.”

The route took them over Folly Bridge and then into Thames Street, which changed names as it wound around in a seemingly endless loop. An ice rink and the buildings of a local college flashed by, and a moment later, the car moved into Hollybush Row, from which point the local railway station could be seen in the distance. All the movement—people on foot, a steady stream of cars, the rather imposing train station just ahead and to the left, with all its attendant traffic—seemed almost to hypnotise both Narcissa and Lucius. They stared, looking for all the world like a pair of deer caught in the headlamps.

“Gracious…” Narcissa murmured. “So very busy! Draco, is it always this way?”

Draco poked his head out from behind Hermione’s curls and nodded. “Mmm. I took the train to Bath from here when I came home on vacations. We’ve taken the train to London from here, too, and it’s generally a mess. You get used to it.”

Narcissa shook her head slowly in disbelief. Why anybody would want to put up with such clamour and congestion was beyond her. Suddenly, she felt a stab of sympathy for Muggles, whose world was so much more limited and pedestrian than her own. She could never get used to something like this, she knew.

Narcissa regarded her son thoughtfully. Somehow, he had gradually managed to forge a successful transition to this other world and find a way to be not just comfortable but happy in it. Even now, after nearly three years, this fact sometimes seemed unbelievable, much more reasonably the stuff of a joke than the reality of her son’s life. Of course, those moments when the turn Draco’s life had taken seemed surreal were fewer and much farther between, and had been for some time. Just now, though, confined in an automobile in the company of his Muggle in-laws, the incongruity of the situation reared its surprising head once again. Just for a moment, and then she shook it off as a far more startling vista presented itself.

Ahead and to the right, there stood a rather imposing stone castle.

Hermione was just directing her father to pull into a car park on the left, but her words faded into obscurity as both Narcissa and Lucius gazed at the ancient Norman stronghold, a proudly defiant anachronism surrounded by the fast-moving trappings of a world one thousand years younger.

In the meantime, Claire was gleeful. “So this is what you had in mind! I have always wanted to have a meal here. What a marvellous choice, Hermione! This will be fun!” She twisted around to smile at Lucius and Narcissa. “You are in for a treat! I think you will find the experience fascinating.”

The walk from the car park to the enclosed courtyard was short. To its right, a towering earthen mound rose implacably alongside a modern structure, which was itself oddly sandwiched between the ancient hill fortification and the Old County Hall. Dining establishments with names like The Living Room and Prezzo beckoned as they moved into the deeper recesses of the courtyard.

“See,” Hermione was saying as they walked. “This is Oxford Castle. What’s left of it is that tower over there.” She pointed to a tall and rather bleak-looking tower that rose up in the distance. “The original motte-and-bailey fortress dates back to the eleventh century,” she continued matter-of-factly and then paused. “Where we’re going, straight ahead, used to be a prison.”
At that, both Lucius and Narcissa swivelled their heads to eye their daughter-in-law. Curious and perhaps telling as well, this particular choice of dining establishment; the intent behind it was as yet unclear. Might this actually have been Draco’s idea? With a wry flash of perverse gallows humour, Lucius found he could appreciate the unique symmetry of the choice, if that were so. Had the Grangers been told about his past? They seemed completely unaware of the possible irony. He smiled grimly to himself. Then again, it might be something as simple and innocuous as an interest in history on Hermione’s part. He shifted his gaze to his wife, who he discovered was already studying him intently. At this, she reached out, her fingers brushing his briefly.

None of this was lost on Draco, who darted quick, discreet glances at his father as they walked along. He could practically hear the wheels turning in his father’s head. Just about now, Lucius would be sifting through the possible reasons that Hermione had decided on this place to dine, turning them over in his mind and examining them in every possible light. His expression at the moment was impenetrable, not surprisingly, but there was something about the way Narcissa had reached for his hand that revealed much to his son. It was a rarity for Lucius Malfoy to be caught off-balance in the slightest. Hermione had managed to do precisely that without even intending it.

“A prison, you say?” Lucius had fully recovered his natural aplomb and now turned to Hermione with a deceptively placid expression. Such quiet control masked the utter acuity of mind and dogged determination with which Lucius pursued a subject. Both Draco and Narcissa knew this only too well and both now turned to Hermione, Draco moving instinctively closer and sliding his arm about her waist.

He needn’t have worried.

“Yes, that’s right,” she smiled. “This building--” she pointed straight ahead as they neared the entrance to the imposing stone structure before them—“was a royal prison from 1888 right up until 1996. But even before that, parts of this site have always been used as a prison, going right back to the eleventh century. I read about it.”

“Indeed,” Lucius mused. “And somehow it has been transformed into…?”

The very idea that a former prison could now be enjoying a successful and apparently profitable resurrection as a place of comfort and luxury was bizarre, at the very least. Very nearly unfathomable, in fact. Muggle enterprise was a decidedly foreign entity, Lucius decided. He would never understand it.

“A world-class hotel, yes,” Claire put in, her smile bright as she hurried to catch up. She had stopped for a moment to catch a glimpse of St George’s Tower in the near distance. “With a lovely restaurant. I take it that’s where you have booked us in for lunch, Hermione?”

“Mmm.” Hermione nodded. “The food at the Brasserie is supposed to be wonderful. And I thought maybe we could take a tour afterwards, if everybody is interested. We could climb the tower, maybe walk to the top of the mound. Oh, and there’s a 900-year-old crypt...”

Richard laughed. “Let’s just start with lunch, Kitten. We’ll worry about the exercise and the history lessons later.”

Quietly, Narcissa let out the breath she’d been holding, and smiled to herself. Draco’s young wife had weathered a small storm she hadn’t even been aware was brewing—or perhaps she had been. More power to her, in that case. She was proving yet again that she could more than hold her own.

Just overhead, The Malmaison Hotel beckoned, lights from chandeliers gleaming through the tall plate-glass window above the double doors.
Truly, the transformation of the former Oxford Prison was remarkable. Now a fashionably posh albeit proudly quirky boutique hotel, it offered guests the chance to stay in former cells that were now luxurious rooms catering to every conceivable need.

The Brasserie, a trendy restaurant in the hotel, was known for its fresh, organic, locally produced foods and creative menus. Brightly colourful groups of plush chairs in vibrant purples and reds were arranged in groups for relaxed conversation and drinks by the bar, strings of tea lights like twinkling constellations on tables and along the bar itself. The dining area featured elegant table settings in creams and peach tones. Dark wood accents and warm lighting blended to create an inviting atmosphere in which to dine. Conversation was a low hum, each table remarkably self-contained.

Hermione breathed a small sigh of relief as they were shown to their table. It was, she knew, the first time Draco’s parents had ever been inside a Muggle restaurant and she was desperately anxious that it pass muster. She had hoped to intrigue and entertain them with the uniqueness of the hotel’s history as much as provide the opportunity for a really good meal. She also knew that if she could pull it off, the conversation would be far more likely to remain fairly relaxed, although the odds of that happening were still long, good meal or no.

“Now isn’t this lovely,” Claire began in an unconscious echo of her husband’s words earlier in the day and then slanted a brief but pointed look in his direction. “Richard…?”

Ah. Yes. Richard smiled round the table at everyone as they settled themselves and began perusing menus. “Lunch today is our treat. Now now, Claire and I insist,” he hastened to add, as Narcissa’s mouth opened slightly in protest. “You and Lucius have been very gracious hosts and we would like to begin to return the favour in some way. Please.”

Narcissa sank back in her chair with an acquiescent shrug and smile of thanks, and opened her menu.
again. Lucius had not made any such effort to protest. Instead, he regarded Richard with a curiously indulgent expression that seemed almost to border on amusement. From his seat across the table from his father, Draco felt his brows drawing down in the beginnings of a frown. What was that look, anyway? He would not have his father patronising Richard. A hand slipped into his under the table and he turned his head just enough to see Hermione smile slightly and shake her head. “It’s okay,” she whispered.

Pursing his lips, Draco leaned back in his seat, continuing to regard his father warily. For his part, Lucius seemed entirely unaware of his son’s scrutiny, instead opening the wine list and knitting his brows together as he scanned the offerings.

“You will permit me to suggest a wine for the table?” he asked suddenly. “I see that this establishment has rather a first-rate selection. A Semillon Blanc, perhaps?”

Richard looked up from his menu, surprise and pleasure in his face. “Do you know, I remember Draco mentioning that you are quite the wine connoisseur, Lucius. He told us some time ago that you have an extensive cellar at the Manor.” He smiled with self-conscious pride. “I know a thing or two about spirits as well, if I do say so myself. An avocation of mine. Semillon Blanc—excellent choice. Which do you prefer?”

“Hmm… ” Lucius’ voice was a hum deep in his throat as he considered. “I recently purchased a case of Domaine de Chevalier Blanc. I have found it quite pleasing. We might also consider the Blanc de Blancs. Quite satisfactory as well.” He looked up suddenly. “You are familiar with both of those, are you not?”

“Yes, certainly.” Richard nodded enthusiastically. “Ah, but have you tried the Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte? It is exceptional.” He was unable to suppress a tiny, satisfied smile as Lucius shook his head.

“No, I do not believe I have,” the latter replied slowly, faint surprise etched in his face.

“Ah. Then you are in for a treat!” Richard grinned, quite clearly pleased with himself and this turn of events. With a quick wave of his hand, he summoned the waiter and then turned back to his dining companions. “Shall we order?”

Lunch and the wine arrived in relatively short order and were served with efficiency and a minimum of conversation from the wait staff, a small blessing for which both Hermione and Draco were grateful. For their parts, both Lucius and Narcissa observed the comings and goings of both waiters and diners with fascination, Lucius attempting to mask his interest with an obvious show of attention to the food and wine in front of him. Only his eyes moved from time to time, flickering stealthily from the plate of roast saddle of rabbit in front of him to assess the scene that surrounded their table.

As Richard had done the ordering, the wine was brought to him first. Passing the glass beneath his nose, he sniffed delicately and then nodded his approval at the waiter, who quickly filled the remaining glasses and then vanished.

For a little while, then, everyone busied themselves tucking into the lovely food in front of them and conversation died back to the occasional small exclamation of enjoyment.

Abruptly, Richard cleared his throat and grinned, setting down his cutlery and raising his glass as he
surveyed the company at table. “Well, now. I believe a toast is in order, don’t you agree?”

Raising her glass, Claire nodded. “Gracious, yes.”

Narcissa looked up from the fragrant grilled fillet of sea bass steaming on her plate and laid down her fork. “Indeed,” she smiled, lifting her own glass. “We have been remiss. To our dear children, Draco and Hermione, of whom we are very proud.” There was a subtle edge to her voice as she spoke those final two words, one eyebrow lifting slightly as she caught her husband’s eye. Aren’t we. He gazed back at her implacably, giving an almost imperceptible nod in return.

“Very proud indeed,” Claire agreed, her eyes suddenly rather bright. The wordless communication between the Malfoys had been completely lost on her. All she could see in that moment was her daughter, shining and beautiful in a field of vision gone abruptly swimmy.

“Draco and Hermione!” echoed around the table as glasses were dutifully raised.

“You know,” Narcissa continued, talking quietly almost as if to herself. “If anyone had told us, three years ago, that our son would go on to study at a Mug—at a university renowned outside of our community,” she corrected herself, glancing around fleetingly at the other diners and then returning her attention to the table, “and take top honours there, I daresay we would have considered such an idea absurd. Not,” she hastened to add, darting a quick look now at Draco, “that we believed him incapable of such a high achievement, of course. But such a thing was simply not done, and never had been. Not in our world,” she finished, sotto voce.

She sighed, settling back a bit in her chair and smiling slightly. “That world is a very different place now, and I expect these changes will continue. We must accept them as best we can, I believe, if we are to carry on and not become obsolete old fossils.” She laughed briefly and shook her head.

Encouraging smiles met her gaze from nearly everyone. Lucius seemed to be studying his glass of wine rather intently, but his eyes flicked to his wife’s face for a moment.

“I don’t believe Claire and I have ever truly understood just how strange all this must have been for the two of you,” Richard mused. “But naturally, it would seem quite alien, wouldn’t it, finding yourselves here as you do. Well,” he amended, “having Draco choose to study and live here as he has done for the past three years…” He trailed off awkwardly.

“Indeed. That is true.”

Lucius’ voice was quiet, his tone dry and clipped. All eyes swivelled in his direction and there was an abrupt silence. Instinctively, Hermione slipped her hand into Draco’s, pulling it into her lap and holding it tightly. A small muscle had begun to pulse in his jaw, she noticed, and his mouth had narrowed to a tight, thin line.

“No matter, however. All that is ultimately of little consequence now that this Oxford business is concluded.” There was a sudden briskness in Lucius’ tone. It was his no-nonsense voice and Draco knew it well. “After all, you have completed your degree, Draco, and I should imagine that by now, you have more than amply satisfied this…” He paused, and then smiled thinly. “…compulsion to live outside of our world.” Lucius sat back with a faint, self-assured smile and added, “Where you belong.”

The uneasy silence blanketing the table deepened as each member of the party sat back in their chairs. Narcissa’s brows were drawn down over blue eyes clouded with anger and mortification. Both of the Grangers were plainly uncomfortable as the implications of Lucius’ remark became all too clear.
The tips of Draco’s fingers pressed hard into Hermione’s knuckles as he fought for control. He opened his mouth, but before he had a chance to say anything, the waiter arrived to ask if anyone cared for a sweet for afters. Richard ordered coffee and a variety of tempting desserts, rattling off the choices quickly, almost mechanically. Then he folded his hands on the table and smiled kindly at his daughter and son-in-law as the waiter disappeared.

“Perhaps we should be asking Draco and Hermione what plans they might be considering, now that they have finished their degrees. So, you two, what’s next on the horizon? Any thoughts?”

“Well, Daddy,” Hermione began, grateful for her father’s quick intervention. She could feel the tension easing slightly as Draco’s fingers slowly fanned out in her palm. “We did think about whether to continue in a post-grad program somewhere, but… see, we’re really ready to be out in the world for a bit. There’s always time to do a master’s later on, if either of us wants that.”

“There’s a pretty decent chance that will happen,” Claire chuckled, “if I know my daughter.”

Draco let out a small explosion of pent-up breath, his face relaxing into a small grin. “Your mum’s got you sussed, Granger.”

“I know,” Hermione laughed. “She always does. Anyway, we thought… that is, we have decided… to find jobs instead.”

“Ah.” Lucius leaned back as the waiter returned and began serving richly aromatic coffee all around from an elegant silver pot. With a nod in the waiter’s direction that was more dismissal than thanks, he stirred the coffee steaming in the china cup before him. “I have just the thing for you, Draco. There is a position at Malfoy Enterprises that would suit admirably, I believe. And…” He regarded Hermione. “If you really feel it necessary to work, my dear, I suppose I can find a place for you as well. Though of course, now that Draco has come into his inheritance, he is quite comfortably situated. There is really no need for you to work. Malfoy women have never done so.”

“Malfoy women were never encouraged to do so,” Narcissa remarked, her tone pleasant but with a hint of steel. “Such antiquated attitudes are changing now, as well they should do.”

Draco dug his fork into the baked chocolate tart he’d been toying with. “Look, Father, I appreciate the offer, but I have no interest in working for Malfoy Enterprises. Thanks just the same. Hermione wants to work, and I support that. It would be a waste of her talents if she didn’t. And as for my so-called ‘compulsion,’ as you put it, I--”

“We’re planning to move to London!” Hermione chimed in, smiling brightly. “Did we mention that?”

“No, you certainly did not,” Claire breathed. “Oh, but Hermione, that’s marvellous! You will be ever so much closer to home! We can see you both much more often.” Her cheeks were flushed with obvious pleasure and she reached a hand out to both Draco and Hermione, giving them an affectionate squeeze.

“London,” Narcissa echoed. “Gracious. I hadn’t considered… but of course, you will want to avail yourselves of the opportunities such a big city has to offer… Where will you live?” She dropped her voice very low before continuing. “There is an extensive wizarding community just outside the city centre, you know. It’s quite nice, I have been told.”

“Actually, Mother, we’ve close friends who are moving there as well. Our flatmates, actually. And they know some neighbourhoods that sound quite fun to live in.” The defining “Muggle” before “neighbourhoods” hadn’t been necessary. Everyone heard it plainly between the lines. Draco smiled
complacently and waited for the inevitable reaction. A rather sizeable lump of salt was quite firmly in
the wound now, and he was going to enjoy it.

It took precisely five seconds.

“Fun.” Lucius’ tone was flatly sardonic. “I see. Is that all you think about? You fail to remember that
you have a position to uphold as my son and heir. You’ve had your ‘fun,’ as you put it, for the past
three years. It is time you grew up and assumed your rightful place in the world to which you were
born.”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten my ‘position,’ Father,” Draco replied pleasantly enough, though his smile
was glacial. “I have simply decided that I would rather define my ‘rightful place,’ as you put it, in my
own way. I have hardly forsaken our world, nor will I. Neither of us has. I have learned that I can be
a part of both worlds without compromising either, or myself.” He glanced over at Hermione,
flashing her a quick, warm smile. “So I choose to make my own way, without your help. No,
Father,” he added, holding up his hand to forestall the response he could see was on Lucius’ lips.
“Don’t try to change my mind. It’s made up.”

* *

Small splashes of rain began to pelt the windowpanes, the heavy, grey skies steeping the sitting room
in gloom. Draco glanced up at the sound and reached to turn on a lamp, then changed his mind.
Hermione was out taking care of some necessary errands and had promised she wouldn’t be long.
He wondered idly where Danny and Gemma had got to so late. They’d had some last-minute things
to take care of as well, and had left hours earlier. Their own boxes and packing crates, nearly full,
lined the hallway outside the bedrooms. These collective errands were taking longer than he’d
expected, and the silence in the empty flat began to press upon him. Reaching for the knitted throw
draped over the back of the sofa, he pulled it around himself and burrowed meditatively into the
cushions, watching the rain amidst the gathering shadows.

Sunday lunch returned to his thoughts once again. The remainder of the meal, he recalled, had been a
rather more sombre affair, despite Hermione’s valiant attempts at interjecting some levity via
anecdotes about their lives as students. For his part, Draco had remained quiet, sitting back in his
chair with his stomach clenching.

Typical, so bloody typical. They had been getting on a bit better of late, or so it had seemed, and then
Lucius had had to cock it all up—their détente, the potential for a pleasant celebration of the
occasion, the relaxed relations with Hermione’s parents. Sod it all anyway. He ought to have known
better than to believe his father capable of truly respecting his choices. It was pretty plain that Lucius
had merely been humouring his decision to study at Oxford these past three years, barely tolerating
his choice to live in the Muggle world. Very likely, Narcissa had had something to do with that.
Draco smiled grimly as he pictured his mother strong-arming his father into a reluctant acceptance of
sorts. He wondered what her tactics had been, what she’d held over his head. Because such an
approach was the only thing Lucius Malfoy understood. Well, there would be more to accept.
Because both the decision to move to Muggle London and find a job without parental help had been
made. And Draco had no intention of changing these plans just to meet the narrow-minded,
hidebound expectations of his father.

The rain had stopped by now, and he bestirred himself at last, stretching and pushing the tousled
fringe of blond hair out of his eyes. The flat was shrouded in gloomy shadows, the many packing
cartons standing like intractable reminders of the end of something that he was not ready to leave behind just yet.

With a soft grunt, he leaned over and switched on a lamp, which cast a warm circle of yellow light over the table, a portion of the sofa, and the rug. Suddenly, he knew what he needed: light, noise, a way to celebrate everything the last three years had meant for him-- this flat, his life as a student here, and beautiful Oxford itself, centuries of quirky, arcane traditions standing stolidly amidst the electric energy of modern life flowing insistently around its ancient stones and spires.

Just one more precious parcel of unremarkable time in which he was simply Draco Malfoy of Hertford College.

Jumping up from the sofa, he went quickly to the phone in the kitchen. Punching in numbers that he knew as well, by now, as his own name, he waited, shifting his weight from one foot to the other excitedly.
“Oi! Over here, Malfoy! Sorry, I meant Malf...”

The back garden of The Turf, sheltered under the canopy of a large, forest-green, canvas umbrella, was humming with activity. Exams were done and people were more than ready to relax and party. Draco spotted a hand high in the air, beckoning vigorously. It was Tony Spencer, and he had a happy, beer-fuelled grin on his face. His girlfriend Susan sat next to him. She caught Hermione’s eye and waved excitedly.

“Come on, Granger,” Draco urged, grabbing Hermione’s hand and pulling her forward. “Reckon we’re nearly the last ones here!”

“Which is ridiculous, considering this whole thing was your idea,” she huffed, but she couldn’t help grinning.

Somewhat squished but no worse for wear, Tony and Susan were at a wooden picnic table at the far end of the patio. Alongside them were Gillian Marks and her boyfriend, Steve Holdstock. Mark Applegate and Maggie Stewart sat in chairs wedged into a small space at the far end of the table. On the other side, equally crowded but not seeming to mind much, were Gemma and Danny, and next to them, Chris Pullman and his girlfriend Fiona Holroyd. The table was already littered with pint glasses that were nearly empty.

Draco commandeered an empty chair and plopped down, pulling Hermione into his lap. He surveyed the table and smirked. “Right, you lot seem well on your way.”

“Nice of you to make an appearance, Malfoy old cock,” Danny slurred amiably, raising his glass in Draco’s direction. “This shindig was your idea, after all.” He tossed back the remains of his ale with a sigh. “I could do with another of those. Expect you’ll be paying tonight, yeah?” He winked.

“You wish,” Draco snorted. “I will stand the next round, though.”

He got up, tipping Hermione rather unceremoniously off his lap, and headed over to the bar to order the drinks. Flushing, she laughed and sat down again.

“My chair now,” she announced airily, as Draco returned with a full tray.

He set the tray down and, with a smug grin, proceeded to seat himself on Hermione’s lap. “Nice,” he
murmured, wiggling a bit. “Quite comfy.” Pausing, he twisted his head around to peer at his wife with an expression of wide-eyed innocence. “Have you gained weight, Granger? Your lap’s grown.”

“Yes, well, I meant to tell you, Draco,” Hermione sighed, poker-faced. “I’m pregnant.”

There was dead silence for several seconds as everybody stopped virtually mid-gulp to goggle at her. Hermione rolled her eyes and snorted. “A degree from Oxford and still, you lot are totally gullible! And you,” she said, fixing Draco with a stern look, although her mouth was twitching. “I’ll deal with you later. ‘Have you gained weight.’ Huh! Find your own chair!”

Bumping him off her lap, she turned and took a delicate sip of her drink. “Much better.”

Amidst a chorus of jeers, mostly to do with the joys of married life, Draco dragged over another chair from a nearby table and dropped into it, laughing and shrugging haplessly. Taking a long pull from his drink, he leaned back, the chair tilting precariously on its two back legs.

“So. What’s everybody up to for the summer hols?” Mark asked presently, glancing around the table.

“Working for my dad again.” Danny popped a peanut into his mouth, his expression doleful.

“You sound dead chuffed,” Steve teased. “Come on, Kirman, it can’t be that bad, can it?”

“It can,” Danny muttered darkly. “You don’t know my dad. Just for a few months, though, and then I’m out of there. Gem and I are moving to London soon as we’ve got enough saved.”

Hermione’s eyes met Draco’s for a fraction of a moment. There was a sort of grim empathy there, laced with relief that he’d managed to evade the same fate. Once again, he silently thanked the gods that he’d come of age and into his inheritance nearly three years earlier. Money and the values that had been tied to it in the wizarding upper class had poisoned his childhood in some fundamental ways, but it could also be incredibly liberating. Now, it allowed him and Hermione to find a flat in London without depending on anyone else’s help or having to work long enough to scrape together enough for a security deposit and the first two months’ rent. He could live with dipping into it now and then for a good cause, and he’d managed, eventually, to persuade Hermione of the sense of this as well.

“London!” Susan clapped her hands together excitedly. “That’s fantastic. What will you do? D’you know where you want to live?”

“Yeah, actually, we’re thinking about Bloomsbury. Well, Bloomsbury-ish. It’s such a cool area,” Gemma said matter-of-factly. “Near Covent Garden and The British Museum, my most favourite museum in the entire world, and simply loads of great little shops.” She paused for a beat and then added, her tone offhand, “Oh, and the University of London too. I’ve, um… been accepted into their masters’ programme in art history.”

“Gemma, you sly thing! You didn’t say a word!” Maggie exclaimed. “That’s fantastic! Hey!” She turned suddenly to Hermione. “Did you know about this?”

Hermione looked up from the plate of chips she was in the middle of slathering with ketchup. “What? Oh. Yeah, actually. I did. I mean, we did. See, we… well, we’ve decided to move to London too. We’ve been—”

Before she could finish her sentence, there was a second volley of surprised reactions.

“Steady on! You two are moving to London as well? S’pose you’ve got so used to sharing digs the last couple of years, you just can’t live without each other now, yeah?” Tony let out a snicker.
“Mmm,” Draco grinned, lazily flipping a peanut into his mouth. “It’s great. Wouldn’t want to live any other way now, what d’you reckon, Dan? We share everything, and I mean… everything.”

Danny was working on a mouthful of chips, but he nodded earnestly. “Mmm, yeah, absolutely,” he muttered thickly, and then grinned, a blot of ketchup lingering at the corner of his mouth.

“You are a pig, Daniel.” Reaching over with the tip of one finger, Gemma wiped the offending ketchup away. “And you too, Draco. Don’t listen to them, you lot. We plan to look for flats in the same area, that’s all. We’ll be neighbours. It’ll be fun.”

“I’m so jealous,” Fiona sighed. “I’ll still be here, slaving away. Fellowship,” she confided, with a small, pleased grin. “I mean, I love it here and all, and of course, Chris will be here too…” She gave her boyfriend a fond smile. “But gosh, London…”

“Come visit us, Fee,” Hermione said heartily. “All of you, please! It'll be great.”

“Okay, okay, this is turning disgustingly heartfelt and we are all of us entirely too sober,” Tony announced, pulling a face. “I do believe…” He reached into a pocket and drew out a penny, suspending it over Mark’s pint glass with an evil smile and then letting it fall into the dark brown ale with a plop. “… there appears to be something in your drink, Applegate.”

“He’s from Hertford, he’s true blue…” somebody at the other end of the table began, and everybody else took up the chant:

“He’s a pisshead through and through. He’s a mate of everyone, but he can’t down that shit in one. Down it! Down it! Down it! Down it! Down it…”

*

So come outside and walk with me.
We’ll try each other on to see if we fit.
And with our roots become a tree,
To shade what we make under it.
---“Southern Girl”
Brandon Boyd, Incubus

Friday evening
21 June 2002

The flat stood silent and empty of any personal reminders of the two boys and two girls who had made it their home the past two years. The furnishings stood exactly as Hermione and Draco had found them the day the estate agent had brought them round to view the flat. Everything had been carefully scrubbed and swept till the whole place gleamed, awaiting the new tenants.

In the sitting room, the large cardboard boxes were now all sealed and ready to go. They would be collected for shipping the following day. Suitcases and duffels were packed and awaiting only a few
last-minute items. Danny and Gemma had left the afternoon before, both of them catching trains out of Oxford to their respective homes. They would be in touch, of course, but it had been a rather emotional goodbye.

“Don’t be a stranger, yeah?” Danny stuck out his hand and then changed his mind, pulling Draco into a hug. The two of them clapped each other on the back, Danny muttering into Draco’s ear, “I’m likely to go mad at home!”

“No worries. You can’t get rid of me that easily,” Draco laughed, stepping back to look at his friend. “And we won’t be all that far from you two.”

“Before you know it, we’ll all be in London,” Hermione told them cheerfully. “But we’ll see each other soon. You’re not the only ones moving home for a bit. We’ll be at my parents’ until we find a flat.” She rolled her eyes. Living at home again after being on her own, especially now that she was married, would be strange to say the least. “Hope it won’t take too long.”

“Too right,” Danny nodded. “And in the meantime, you lot can pop down from Watford…” Suddenly, he found himself startled into silence by the image his own words presented to him, now that he knew how very literally such an expression could apply to Draco and Hermione. Even now, the knowledge of their true identities and powers was something of a shock when he remembered about it.

They all laughed, and then Gemma and Hermione embraced, hugging tightly.

“Uh-oh,” Draco teased, leaning over Hermione’s shoulder. “Come on, Miss Waterworks, you’ll ruin your makeup!”

“Don’t care!” Hermione’s voice was muffled. Sniffling, she pulled away, wiping her eyes roughly with the back of her hand.

Gemma’s face was blotchy with sudden tears as well. She gave everyone a shaky grin. “Right. This isn’t goodbye. So no more blubbing. We’ll see you lot in a couple of weeks, yeah? One way or another. Promise.”

Their taxi had arrived a few minutes later and then they were gone. Draco and Hermione found themselves alone in a flat that suddenly seemed bigger and missing a limb. Or part of its heart.

Now Draco wandered through the rooms, wondering suddenly where Hermione had got to. She hadn’t gone out, he knew, or she’d have said something. And yet, the flat was far too quiet. All of a suddenly, he missed her keenly.

Circling back from the bedroom, he came into the kitchen and automatically found himself by the window overlooking the back garden. Below, in the half light, he could see her crouching on the paved patio near the garden they had planted two years earlier. Beds of annuals and perennials had exploded in a riot of blossoms under Hermione’s tender care, overspilling their borders. The colours were vivid in the softly dying light: bright yellow black-eyed Susans, purple cones, sunny coreopsis, snow-white daisies, and orange and black daylilies stood tall, encircled by lush impatiens in white, salmon, coral, and baby pink.

Draco hurried down the stairs and around to the back of the house. When he reached her, he found her curled into a ball, hugging her knees and crying softly. He crouched by her side, putting a gentle
hand on her back.

“What’s wrong, Hermione?”

At first, she didn’t answer, but he could feel her shoulders shaking as she fought for control. Swallowing finally, she turned a tear-stained face towards him.

“We planted this garden two years ago today. Did you know that?”

He shook his head. He had forgotten. But of course, it was Midsummer, the Solstice. They had been so busy packing, it had nearly slipped past them this year.

“Course we did,” he said softly. “I forgot. But why are you crying?”

“Be-because it’s our garden, Draco! And we’re leaving it. To… to somebody else who won’t take care of it. I just know they won’t!” Hermione’s voice was thick with tears. “They’ll forget to water it, they won’t mulch it in the autumn or cut it back or weed it or anything. It’ll die, that’s all!”

Dropping down to a sitting position, Draco pulled Hermione back against him, holding her close. “Look, love. We planted this garden knowing we wouldn’t be here forever, you know that. Come on, Hermione, you know it’s true,” he said firmly, as she opened her mouth to object. Nodding sadly, she closed her mouth and turned her gaze back to the garden.

“But so much of what’s here will come back again on its own. We just have to believe that others will love it as much as we have. And we have to let go. There will be another garden someday, you’ll see.”

She managed a tiny, somewhat shaky smile. “When did you get to be so wise, Malfoy?”

Draco’s grin was cocky. “It’s all in the genes, darling. Our children are going to be brilliant.”

Planting a kiss on her cheek, he settled her back against him again, threading his arms securely around her. “Remember the first time we made love out here? We were under a blanket on the chaise right over there.”

Hermione giggled. She certainly did remember. They had nearly burst, trying to stifle their laughter and the other, more primal sounds of need and desire they couldn’t hold back. It had been the first of quite a number of such risky encounters in the back garden, an element of the deliciously forbidden inviting them to do it again.

“Oh! Remember the barbeque we had, right after we moved in? When Danny and Gemma and Mark and Mags walked in on all of us?” Hermione gave a snort of laughter. “Did I ever tell you how absolutely brilliant you were, going along with Danny when he pulled out his stash of weed? I thought you were quite mad at the time, but…”

Draco nodded, chuckling as he recalled that night. It had been bizarre in the extreme—first, having their Hogwarts friends in the same room as their Oxford friends, and then getting high with all of them. Bizarre and in the end, incredibly fun. Absolutely hilarious, in fact. And the inevitable effects of the weed had proven a very effective smokescreen, masking the few small magical slips that had been made. Fortunately, none of their Muggle friends had wound up the wiser, though their wizarding friends had had their eyes opened quite dramatically.

They sat quietly, both of them smiling as the memories returned to warm them.

“Draco, remember the first time you did magic right here in the garden? Oh my gosh, I’ve just realised, it was two years ago tonight, right after we did our Solstice ceremony! I swear, I thought
“somebody would see!”

“Huh. I do remember that.” There was a pause and then he laughed quietly. “I was just thinking…”

“About what?”

“Well,” he continued, “That first time I did magic in the flat.”

Hermione giggled. It had been a Saturday not long after they’d moved in, the day devoted to chores and errands. “Right. I remember. What complete bollocks, all that stuff about wearing your fingers to the bone from mopping the floor!” Her mouth quirked as she remembered something else. “You did look awfully cute scrubbing the shower tiles in just your underpants, though.”

Draco grinned lazily, remembering the absurd array of cleaning products he’d happily retired to the cupboard soon afterwards. “All that Mr. Muscle! Reckon you bought out Tesco’s entire supply!”

“Don’t know why I bothered, seeing as how you gave up mopping and used your wand! How long did it take?” she teased. “Say, about five minutes?”

“Are you insinuating, wife, that I am incapable of getting a floor really clean without magic?” He drew himself up, feigning insult.

“Well, he’d walked right into that one and no mistake.” They laughed, and then he thought of something else.

“Merlin, remember Hallowe’en, second year? The party at the Magic, my first time seeing ‘Rocky Horror’ and--”

“That crazy pumpkin-carving contest! Which Gemma and I won, quite handily I might add…” Hermione gave Draco a cheeky grin, anticipating his response.

“Okay, okay. You ladies bested us, no question. I believe I held up my end of the bargain, though.”

Hermione sighed happily as she reflected back. Oh yes, it had been lovely, five whole days having Draco completely at her beck and call. He had executed certain of his tasks as contest loser with considerable flair and imagination, even relish. She wondered if Danny had proven to be quite as… creative.

“D’you still have that fairy costume?” Draco asked abruptly, a faraway look in his eyes. It seemed he had been recalling the occasion with considerable pleasure as well.

She nodded. “It’s packed away, but yeah, I do. You still have your pirate costume, right?”

He’d looked amazing in it, she remembered. Sexy as fuck. She resolved then and there that no matter what else they ended up doing this coming Hallowe’en, she would make him put it on, if only just for her.

There was another ruminative silence for a few minutes. The light had gone almost completely by then, the fiery orange of sunset flaring low on the horizon.

“Remember the first time we made love in the flat?” Draco asked softly. “We hadn’t even moved in yet, not properly. I thought… gods, I thought I’d lost you, Hermione!”

Turning in his arms, she flung her own around his neck as the painful memory of what had preceded
that day came flooding back. In truth, she had been afraid of the very same thing, and the fear had been like a knife.

“I was so scared, Draco. I was sure I’d driven you away.” Her words were a whispered confessional against the soft, warm skin of his neck. “Thank you.”

“For what?” he asked in a low voice. The recollection was almost as raw as the day itself had been, two years before.

“For giving me,” she said simply. “I’m not sure I deserved it. But I don’t know what I’d have done if you hadn’t.”

“I love you, Hermione. I had no choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” she murmured, and then her chin came up and she laughed, her voice still breaking just a little bit. “No, I do know what I’d have done. I’d have stalked you till you forgave me!”

He laughed then, too, and relaxed the hold he had on her, his arms slipping down around her waist. “Wow, pretty scary stuff, Granger. Good thing I’m a spineless coward at heart, yeah?” Beneath the levity, the spectre of bitter irony haunted his words.

Tipping his chin up, she fixed him with a fierce look. “Stop it! You’ve come so far and faced so much, being here the last three years and in so many other ways as well. You’ve stood up to your father. That’s huge. And you’ve owned up to a lot—with me, with Harry, even…” She paused and then went on, her voice softer now. “It kills me to see how much the past still hurts you. But I am so proud of you, because you don’t run away from the memories. You face them time after time. You are the best and bravest man I know, Draco Malfoy, and I love you with all my heart!”

She paused, peering at her husband of three months in the dim light.

He made no sound and stood so still that he appeared not to breathe. All she could see were his eyes, luminous in the gathering dark. He was weeping.

Silently, Hermione took his hands in hers. They stood that way for several long moments until at last, he took a small, shuddering breath and braved a smile.

Returning it, she gave his hands a firm squeeze. “Come on, love, let’s go inside. I’m famished, what about you?”

Resolutely, she took a single step towards the house, then turned back to find him still rooted to the spot.

“Don’t you want to make a wish our last night here?” he asked suddenly. “The first stars are out now, see?”

And indeed, a scattering of stars winked like tiny diamond chips in the field of deepening blue overhead.

“Yes, absolutely.” Hermione smiled. “You too, okay?”

It had been three years of wishes, some coming to fruition and others surprising them by yielding something on the unspoken fringes of the wish instead, something altogether unexpected.

Now Hermione laced the fingers of her right hand through those of Draco’s left, and closed her eyes
“Say it,” she heard him murmur close to her ear. “Say the rhyme.”

And so she began. “Starlight, star bright, first star I see tonight…”

Squeezing her eyes shut for a moment longer as silently she articulated her wish, she opened them at last to find Draco looking at her steadily, an enigmatic, little smile on his face.

“Did you make a wish?” Hermione asked.

He shook his head, still smiling.

Hermione was confused. “But… why ever not? It was your idea!”

And then, there it was, the familiar, brashly cocksure grin she had seen so often over the years, his Master of the Universe grin. He shrugged carelessly. “Decided I didn’t need to after all. I’ve already got what I want most. Don’t want to be greedy.”

She thought for a moment and then it hit her, a blush warming her cheeks. “Oh.”

“‘Oh.’” He laughed softly, leaning closer. “Do you know, Granger, that you are utterly adorable when you’re embarrassed?”

Swiftly, he caught her mouth in a tender kiss, which deepened as they revelled in its sweet sensations. They stood that way for some moments before separating at last, each of them slightly breathless. Suddenly, Draco took her hand, turning towards the garden gate.

“Look,” he said as they walked, all business now. “I’ve been thinking. We’ve a long day ahead of us tomorrow. Let’s get a pizza or some take-away Thai food, yeah? There’s a good film on the telly in a bit. We can eat in bed.” He paused and his smile turned feral. “I’m certain an early night will do us both a lot of good.”

“Prat!” Hermione giggled, and then let out a small sigh. “That does sound very nice.” She gave his hand a quick, grateful squeeze, and came to a decision as they closed the gate behind them.

Tomorrow—before they loaded up the car they’d hired, before they drove away from this house, away from Oxford and these precious years all too soon to be consigned to memory—she would put trowel to earth in this garden one last time. And she would carry away with her tangible reminders of their lives in this place, safely potted in clay. They would be a living bridge between the now and the unknown, what was as yet undefined and without form or substance. No matter where they ended up, there would be a garden, she knew, even if only a window box in a city street. It would be a start.

Hermione turned to look at Draco, tall and graceful as he walked beside her, his hair like moonlight. There was a resolute set to his jaw and a certain serenity in his expression that seemed new, somehow. He was the boy she’d been shocked to find at Oxford nearly three years before, but he was more now, ever so much more. And she knew, even if he didn’t, that these changes were only the beginning.

As they neared the threshold with its familiar red door, she took a last look up at the sky. The star she’d wished on winked down at her reassuringly. London and the life they would make there together awaited. The seeds of the adventure were already in their hands.
Oxford Castle and The Malmaison Hotel

Modern map of Oxford Castle, The Mal, and environs
Walkway leading to The Malmaison Hotel

Views of the bar at The Brasserie

Dining area, The Brasserie
Former jail cells, now luxury hotel rooms, The Malmaison

Ancient rendering of Oxford Castle
St George’s Tower and the later prison
St George’s Tower

Underground catacombs
Catacombs and excavated bones of prisoners

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I make no money from this story. Only the original characters and settings belong to me. Oxford belongs to the ages!

Following this are several photo album chapters with pics from a recent trip to England, specifically Oxford and London, including many of the locales in the story.

This story was just over two years in the writing, and it was a very rich experience for me. It is the most ambitious piece of writing I have ever done, thus far. A fellow fic writer I respect very much once said that fanfic is like a graduate program in creative writing, and I think that this is true. I have learned so much about the process of crafting a long piece of fiction over the course of writing this story and others.

I want to thank all the marvelous readers who have stayed with this fic as it was being written and new friends as well. Many who have reviewed regularly and prolifically did so at Coloured Grey. I regret profoundly that I have lost all their wonderful comments because of CG’s disappearance. To those of you who were readers of mine there, you know who you are. Thank you so much and big hugs!!!

My thanks and love and unending gratitude go to my two betas, mister_otter and kazfeist. They have seen this project through with me from the start, being always a source of incredible support and help whenever I have needed it, and two wonderful
shoulders to lean on when I’ve felt at my wit’s end after inspiration has gone dry or I’ve written myself into an impossible corner. Carol and Karen, you are THE BEST, bar none!

The lyrics introducing the two main sections of the chapter are from songs by Brandon Boyd, brilliant songwriter and frontman for the band Incubus.
In the summer of 2008, I spent close to two weeks in England with my family, our time divided equally between Oxford and London. My time there, in Oxford particularly of course, was an amazing and quite eerie journey straight into the pages of AWOF. So strange to finally find myself in the very places I’d been imagining, researching, digging up photos of, and then writing about-- and to find that even though I’d never before set foot in Oxford, I totally knew my way around! A very bizarre case of déjà vu. And in some cases, I discovered small details about certain locales that I would never have been able to uncover simply via research. That was a lot of fun too, many small revelations within the larger familiarity.

Anyway, I thought it would be fun to take you on a visit, now that I’ve finally seen it all for myself.

So here goes!

We’ll begin with Iffley Road, where Draco and Hermione share a flat with Danny and Gemma at number 236. As it happened, the bed and breakfast we stayed in was only a few doors down from Draco and Hermione’s flat (no accident, of course!), and so we walked up and down Iffley Road every single day, to get to the city centre. In the course of that, I got to know their neighbourhood very well indeed. It’s a road made up of mostly hundred-year-old Victorian houses like the one their flat is in, some of them slightly seedy now, many quite beautiful, plus quite a few bed and breakfasts in private homes such as the one we stayed in, plus little shops and pubs and such. The university’s sport centre is there too, very close by. It’s very much a student neighbourhood, rather funky and bohemian, and just the sort of place, after all, that I would want them to be living in as students. The Magic Café and the Inner Bookshop, both of which I went to and loved, are a five-minute walk from their flat, down Magdalen Road. More on both below.

236-238 Iffley Road, where Draco and Hermione live. Number 236 is the right half of the house. Their flat is on the first (to Americans, the second) floor.
The lovely tree they look out upon from their front windows.

I discovered that their front outer door is red!
Corner of Iffley Road and Magdalen Road. Here Draco and Hermione can post a letter (the red mailbox built into the brick wall) or catch a bus.

Heading down Magdalen Road a very quick walk from the flat, there are the lovely Magic Café, where the food is amazing and the good folk are really friendly and laid back, and the wonderful Inner Bookshop, where I spent a LOT of money and had a very good time! Both are throwbacks to very hippie-ish sorts of ‘70s places. Very much the sort of thing one would find in a student neighbourhood.
The Swift Shop, the little corner supermarket a short distance from the flat at the corner of Iffley and Howard. Much closer than Tesco, as it turns out!
Where they can get take-away Chinese and necessaries of all sorts until 11 pm, after the supermarket closes at ten.

Oxford Blue in Marston Street, just off Iffley Road, where Draco and Danny like to go and watch rugby matches whilst having a pint!

Corner of Iffley and Cowley Roads, at the roundabout.
The roundabout at the juncture of Iffley and Cowley Roads and St Clement's Street, heading towards the Magdalen Bridge and the city centre.

On the bridge itself, which spans both the River Cherwell and the Angel and Greyhound Meadow.
Views from the bridge, where Hermione and Draco finally reconcile after the terrible misunderstanding that takes place following his 20th-birthday celebration.

Exiting the bridge and entering the High Street

Views along the High Street:

You’re in the High Street, once you cross Magdalen Bridge.
The gargoyles all over Oxford are incredible!
The Rose, Hermione and Draco’s special place for coffee and chilling. (The cappuccino and lemon cake are delicious!)
Interior shots. Lovely atmosphere!
Across from the Rose, you’ll find Oxford Holographics and Hoyle’s, shops that fascinated Harry, Ron, Ginny, Luna, and all the other Hogwarts friends.

Sanders, where Lucius bought the map of Wiltshire that he later gave Draco for his 20th birthday.
The Exam Schools and students in sub-fusc, *sans* carnations. Exams were going on while we were there.

Exam schedules and notices
Carfax Tower, at the corner of the High and Cornmarket
Chiang Mai Kitchen
The superb Thai restaurant in the High Street where Draco has lunch for the first time with Hermione and her parents. The food is sensational! Best Pad Thai ever!

Catte Street, which leads from the High into Radcliffe Square and Hertford College, where Hermione and Draco are students

The Radcliffe Camera, Radcliffe Square off Catte Street
The Bridge of Sighs, Catte Street and New College Lane. One entrance to Hertford College.

View from under the Bridge of Sighs looking out at the Bodleian Library on the left, the Sheldonian Theatre in the centre, and the Clarendon Building on the right

Hertford College
The Porter's Lodge, complete with shared “pigeon holes”

Entering Old Quad

Old Quad, Hertford
Where Hermione was sitting, the first time Draco spotted her in the Quad at the beginning of first year.

Hertford Chapel

Chapel window view and looking out into the quad from inside the chapel
The Dining Hall, Hertford
AWOF Travelogue, Part Two

The Bodleian Library

Exterior shot, and the passage leading to the inner quad

The inner quad and detail at the Bodleian
The Divinity School at the Bodleian, where the hospital wing scenes of the HP films are shot
Christ Church College
There are cows in Christ Church Meadow! Pic #2 is of the River Isis and the Hertford Graduate Centre, near Folly Bridge, which is where the walk along Christ Church Meadow takes you eventually.

Broad Street
Blackwell’s, where Hermione and Draco have summer jobs.

One small portion of the vast Norrington Room downstairs at Blackwell’s. It’s amazing!

One of the stone heads mounted outside the Museum of the History of Science.
The Eagle and Child, where for many years, JRR Tolkien, CS Lewis and their colleagues, known as “the Inklings,” met every Tuesday to drink and discuss their work. They met in the “Rabbit Room,” a tiny and very cozy room in the back of the pub. This is where Hermione and Draco had a very revealing conversation in December of their first year at Oxford, after finishing their Beowulf project.
The Chequers in the High, a venerable pub and the portal to wizarding Oxford!
The upstairs room features ceiling beams dating back hundreds of years, as well as a portrait of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who may well have frequented the Chequers when he was a student at Oxford.
The courtyard, which you have to cross in order to get to the Ladies and Gents. I was amazed to discover that there actually are doors in between the loos, as I’d written! (Though two, where I’d imagined only one.) I’ve decided that the one on the left is the magical one that leads, with a tap of one’s wand, to Bellewether Crescent.

The King’s Arms
Where Hermione, Draco and their friends went out drinking one February night following the day’s big snowball fight, and got pennied.
Bath Place, where the Turf is tucked away. Scene of Draco’s surprise birthday bash and the awful misunderstanding that ensues.

George and Danver, aka G&D’s, in St Aldates
Where Draco and Hermione took their friends from Hogwarts, following the barbecue and a raging case of the munchies.
The question of the day, for which a correct answer will win you a free ice cream!

Clever signs pointing the way to…well…you know…
Not far from G&Ds is the post office, and outside it, this distinctive and rather elegant receptacle for posting one’s letters.

The Covered Market

The shop where Hermione found plants for her garden
The Portobello Road, Notting Hill, London
On Saturdays, the Portobello Road is crowded for blocks and blocks with all sorts of colourful stalls selling everything you can imagine.

The Electric Cinema, where Draco and Hermione enjoyed a film, a meal…and more…
In the very back, the bar and food are to the left, and to the right, there are huge leather sofas you can stretch out on. In the rows between the leather chairs, there are small tables where you can put your food and drinks.
A gorgeous sunset over the Portobello Road!

The Globe Theatre, Bankside, Southwark, London, where I saw a magical production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” This is the play that is featured in *Pas De Deux*. At the Globe, there is a fantastic museum exhibit in addition to the actual theatre itself.

Photo by Kieran Lynam
Elizabethan undergarments, such as Hermione had to struggle into beneath her frock, before she took the stage as Hermia.

The sort of clothing Queen Elizabeth I would have worn, and a typical courtier’s outfit.
A recreation of the hearthside where washing, fine stitchery, ironing and mending would have taken place in the 16th century.

We saw the play as “groundlings,” meaning we stood in the yard very close to the stage and saw everything up close. Very much the original Elizabethan audience experience, complete with cheers, boos, and lots of other interaction between the audience and the actors. As I watched, I couldn’t help picturing Hermione, Draco, Ron, Harry, Lavender, Blaise, Luna, Neville, and the others doing those same lines.

Views of the Globe’s ornate painted interiors: the murals in the balconies, the ceiling above the stage, and the roof and the upper portion of a column.
The “moon,” as it was recreated for this fanciful play
A Visit to Malfoy Manor, Part One

The house that I’ve chosen to stand for Malfoy Manor in AWOF and the Baby Days series is Broughton Castle, in Banbury, Oxfordshire, which has been in the Fiennes family for centuries. If the name “Fiennes” strikes a bell, it should: of course, Ralph Fiennes, a cousin of the family, plays Voldemort in the HP films, and his brother, Joseph, played Will Shakespeare in “Shakespeare in Love,” amongst other films he’s done. That movie was actually filmed in part at Broughton Castle, incidentally, and as a family member, he got to stay in the castle, unlike the rest of the cast!

If Banbury itself sounds familiar, it’s because it’s in the old Mother Goose rhyme which goes:

“Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross
To see a fine lady upon a white horse.
With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,
She shall have music wherever she goes.”

In the centre of the charming village of Banbury, which we reached from Oxford via a quick train ride, there is indeed a statue of the lady on the horse. Not far from the village is Broughton Castle itself.

The taxi dropped us off at the bottom of the long road leading from the car park into the grounds. One follows the road across the bridge and through the enclosed gatehouse, which takes you over the moat, and then there it is: this huge, magnificent, 500-year-old house (the original section where the Great Hall is located is even older, dating back to 1300!) standing all on its own against the open sky and surrounded by trees and lush, green lawns, a walled garden in the back and the moat going all around in a silver stream. Beyond, there are hills where sheep graze, and copses and a larger surrounding wood. Geese, swans and ducks swim in the moat. It is completely idyllic!

My first thought was, “I can’t believe I’m actually here at last, seeing all this for myself!”

We spent hours there, wandering about the house and its beautiful grounds, and I took a zillion photos. Serendipitously, I even had a chance to speak with Lady Saye and Sele, aka Mariette Fiennes, the very gracious and warm lady of the manor. I was on my way out the front door to head over to the gift shop, housed in the nearby carriage house, and she was there, all on her own. I realised who she was immediately, and we talked for a few minutes, during which I told her that her lovely home was the model for a very important location in a piece of fiction I was writing. She was very excited to hear it, and really couldn’t have been nicer.
The gatehouse and bridge over the moat
The front entrance to the Manor

The oldest part of the house goes back 700 years, and contains a series of vaulted, connected passageways and narrow, winding stairways.

The stonework and the hearth date to the 14th century, the windows to the 16th, and the firebuckets to the 18th!
Groined Passages, containing distinctive corbel heads at the base of the arches
The ceiling of the room that served as an undercroft in the mediaeval section of the house. It was used for storage in the Middle Ages.
The Gallery, off which there are several guest bedrooms

This is where Hermione sleeps when she is a guest at Malfoy Manor on New Year’s Eve, except that her bed is canopied. The wallpaper is 18th-C. Chinese, hand painted. It is otherwise known as the King’s Chamber. James I slept here in 1604, and Edward VII slept here in 1901, though not in this bed, of course!
The chimneypiece in this bedroom is French and similar to ones made for Henry VIII at Nonsuch Palace.
A dollhouse in a stairway landing
Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy’s bedroom, aka Queen Anne’s Room. Queen Anne, Danish wife of James I, slept here in 1604.

Detail of the stone chimneypiece, which dates to 1551
Hearth in Lucius Malfoy’s study
A Visit to Malfoy Manor, Part Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Various views of the Blue Drawing Room in Malfoy Manor, aka the Oak Room
The adjacent Blue Parlour as the Malfoys call it, smaller and more intimate
Narcissa’s treasured Lady Garden
Note the small, decorative bird cage hanging from the railings in the upper right window!
Chapter End Notes

Please go right on to **Second Chapter**!

End Notes

A/N: The unofficial title for this fic is “The Anti-Epilogue.” I think it’s self-explanatory!

Thanks, as always, to my marvelous beta, Kazfeist! You are my rock! No more need be said!
Thanks, too, to Floorcoaster, who was a great sounding board for the initial idea when there were only a couple of tentative paragraphs in writing. Thanks, finally, to my other wonderful beta, Mister_Otter, who took the time to listen to me whinge when I wasn’t sure where I was going with this fic and needed a shoulder and some excellent feedback, and for turning me on to the wonderful song whose lyrics begin the chapter and have given me the story’s title.

I must thank the fantastic respondents at HP Britglish who have been so amazingly forthcoming with information about Oxford! I have picked their brains mercilessly and they’ve been and continue to be really super!

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